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The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People's Republic of China, 1949-2009

by

Emily Elissa Wilcox

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with the University of California, San Francisco

in

Medical Anthropology

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Xin Liu, Chair
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Professor Shannon Jackson

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Abstract

The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People's Republic of China, 1949-2009

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University of California, Berkeley

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Under state socialism in the People's Republic of China, dancers' bodies became important sites for the ongoing negotiation of two paradoxes at the heart of the socialist project, both in China and globally. The first is the valorization of physical labor as a path to positive social reform and personal enlightenment. The second is a dialectical approach to epistemology, in which world-knowing is connected to world-making. In both cases, dancers in China found themselves, their bodies, and their work at the center of conflicting ideals, often in which the state upheld, through its policies and standards, what seemed to be conflicting points of view and directions of action. Since they occupy the unusual position of being cultural workers who labor with their bodies, dancers were successively the heroes and the victims in an ever unresolved national debate over the value of mental versus physical labor. In the case of socialist realist epistemology, dancers were called upon to use their bodies and their experiences to generate realistic depictions of a world that was, according to official ideology, always in a process of being formed. In their embodied expressions of regional, cultural, and national identities in the making of new "Chinese" dance forms, dancers contributed to the affective and aesthetic strength of state-supported worldviews, even while recognizing that these views were often "real" and "true" only because they were politically correct.

The understanding of "Chinese traditional culture" applied by dance practitioners in the making of Chinese dance forms in the People's Republic of China applies a dialectical epistemology drawn from Chinese socialist realism, Chinese postcolonial nationalism, and indigenous Chinese aesthetic theory. In this dialectical epistemology, Chinese traditional culture is understood as something that can be investigated, inherited, and remade through dance practice envisioned as a form of cultural research.



Courses in *Gudianwu* at the Beijing Dance Academy, Beijing. 2008-09.

To my parents,

my teachers,

and the dancers who opened their lives to me for this research.

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Dance students practicing in a courtyard in Wanyuan, Sichuan. 1970s.
Photo courtesy of Wang Chaoying.

Preface

Under state socialism in the People's Republic of China, dancers' bodies became important sites for the ongoing negotiation of two paradoxes at the heart of the socialist project, both in China and globally. The first is the valorization of physical labor as a path to positive social reform and personal enlightenment. The second is a dialectical approach to epistemology, in which world-knowing is connected to world-making. In both cases, dancers in China found themselves, their bodies, and their work at the center of conflicting ideals, often in which the state upheld, through its policies and standards, what seemed to be conflicting points of view and directions of action. Since they occupy the unusual position of being cultural workers who labor with their bodies, dancers were successively the heroes and the victims in an ever unresolved national debate over the value of mental versus physical labor. In the case of socialist realist epistemology, dancers were called upon to use their bodies and their experiences to generate realistic depictions of a world that was, according to official ideology, always in a process of being formed. In their embodied expressions of regional, cultural, and national identities in the making of new "Chinese" dance forms, dancers contributed to the affective and aesthetic strength of state-supported worldviews, even while recognizing that these views were often "real" and "true" only because they were politically correct.

The work of dance was recognized as essential to socialist nation building in China because it offered spaces for the realization of the paradoxes of Chinese socialism. In their cultivation of virtuoso bodies, dancers became physical embodiments of the unification of physical labor with ideological and moral goodness seen as instrumental in socialist China to the formation of healthy individuals and healthy societies. Likewise, by formulating a creative process that seeks cultural inheritance through the reconstitution of culture, dancers engaged in modes of knowing and representing both the present and the past that helped to remake Chinese culture according to a new vision of the future, which was promoted by the new socialist state. Although it shares many features with other socialist projects, Chinese socialism also has its own historical and cultural particularities. For example, Chinese Confucian and Taoist traditions of aesthetic and moral self-cultivation contributed to the adoption of a particularly aesthetic approach in socialist China to the Marxist notion that physical labor leads to personal enlightenment and social reform. Moreover, due to China's post-colonial relationship to the West, including the nationalistic resistance to Western cultural imperialism professed by many early twentieth-century Chinese revolutionaries, the assertion of Chinese cultural identity took on particular importance in the building of the Chinese socialist state. In offering an aesthetic approach to the ideal socialist subject formed through physical labor, while also providing dialectical epistemology through forms of expression thought to be essentially "Chinese," dance work in the PRC became an exemplary site of Chinese socialist political praxis.

Socialist ideology calls for a vision of life in which the concrete and the virtual are constantly foregrounded and connected. Since it enacts the constant and dynamic merging of the concrete and the virtual, the dancer's body is a useful site for examining socialist creative practice. The "concrete" here refers to the material reality of things as physical objects and their relationships to one another in time, space, and bodily experience. Though limited, the concrete is inherently malleable in the socialist vision of the world, and it is the order of being in which one exerts influence on the world through embodied practice. The "virtual" here refers to that

which exists in a realm of creativity and immanence, as the potential, the possible, or the information. The virtual occupies a space of experience that is often preliminary to or outside of the physical, but that is nevertheless real. In the dancer's body the concrete and the virtual come together in a single creative activity. The dancer's body is a space of dialectical exchange and virtuosity in which the virtual is made concrete and the concrete virtual. The dancer's body thus offers human form to the socialist vision of a utopian, revolutionary social project grounded in dynamic notions of social life, political praxis, and labor as work on the self, the material world, and society.

In this dissertation, I examine the lives and works of dancers in the People's Republic of China during a sixty-year period marked by unprecedented activity, creation, contestation, and reform in the field of dance. During this period, important changes have taken place in the social value, nature, and experience of dance work that reflect fundamental transformations in the nature of Chinese society and Chinese socialism. At the start of this period, during the decade immediately following the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, China established a nationwide system of dance training, creation, and research that became the largest and most extensive of its kind in the world. Completely new dance genres were developed, along with new repertoires and new ways of engaging the body for artistic and cultural expression. At the end of this period, in the early twenty-first century, China began the process of privatizing dance work. What was previously a state-managed and state-funded dance industry became increasingly commercialized, causing changes in the ways dancers live and work, and the types of dance they produce. While this trend toward privatization offers new avenues for the production and funding of dance work, it also requires significant compromises from dancers and their ways of life.

In early twenty-first-century China, dance work increasingly engages forms of market valuation, artistic tastes, and styles of cultural production that call into question the bodily practices of virtuosity and dialectics developed under state socialism. The extreme physical cultivation characterizing dancers' bodies increasingly marks them not as embodiments of ideological goodness and social potentiality, but rather as social outcasts with limited capacity for generating cultural or economic value. Whereas socialist ideology once encouraged dancers to pursue their work as a dialectical process of world-making, the creative capacities of dance have become limited in an increasingly market-oriented dance industry. These changes reflect not only changes in China but also the global fate of a particular kind of human cultivation and creative practice that could be called the "socialist body." The socialist body fosters and represents forms of human capacity and creativity that are often not found in the social fields engendered by the spread of global capitalism. Through an investigation of the lived experiences and social-political-economic-aesthetic transformations of dance practice in socialist China, this work seeks to understand the making and unmaking of this socialist body as a broader category of socialist practice, and as a distinctive approach to human achievement and realization.

Although this work locates the socialist body in the example of the Chinese dancer, the socialist body can also be found in a range of other places. Athletes, musicians, and military personnel from socialist states such as China, North Korea, and the former Soviet Union -- to name only a few -- all serve as examples of the socialist body. Like China's dancers, these other socialist bodies possess extreme capacities for bodily performance and creativity, forged in assemblages of ideology, institution, and techniques of practice that are particular to socialist states. Also like Chinese dancers, these other incarnations of the socialist body are historical artifacts of the global spread of socialism in the twentieth century, and thus they are subject to

the political and cultural prejudices of the Cold War. Depending on one's positioning (personal, historical, political, cultural), the socialist body in the midst of virtuoso performance and dialectical world-making may evoke a sense of humanity's creative liberation and potential. Alternatively, it may suggest torture, oppression, and tyranny. In examining the socialist body, this project takes as its subject the different understandings of human potentiality that the socialist body represents and evokes, as well as the social processes by which these different bodies and their understandings come into being.

As a starting point for anthropological inquiry, the concept of the socialist body helps launch a broader set of questions related to the socialist project specifically -- including China's particular and multiple versions of it -- and to human existence more generally. Investigating the socialist body enables one to explore the relationships between physical labor and moral cultivation, and between discipline, freedom, and creativity, as well as the nature of human potentiality. In the context of the early twentieth century, as the Cold War moves further into the past, the socialist body and its multiple interpretations serve as reminders of an age of multiplicity, in which radically different visions of human and social possibility coexisted and remained vital even as they opposed one another. In exploring the socialist body, this work seeks to understand human existence across lines of political, as well as cultural, difference. In doing so, it seeks to document, explore, and remember a perspective on human freedom and realization that in the post-Cold War era faces a persistent misunderstanding, if not systematic forgetting and disavowal.

At the same time that this work seeks to understand and even at times to celebrate the creative potential of the socialist body, it also acknowledges and explores the undeniable ways in which the socialist body serves as a key site for political discipline and the shaping of socialist subjectivities. In their professional and personal lives, dancers participate in everyday processes of physical and mental discipline that instill in them, in very visceral ways, patterns of thought, feelings, and behavior that induce complicity with state policies and power. As I show in this dissertation, dancers are often personally transformed in their professional training and work, and through this process of transformation they learn to experience the world in new ways. Over the course of PRC history, dancers continuously developed new and innovative artistic practices and strategies such as field research methods, experimental choreographic and performance techniques, and classroom training methods as part of their active engagement in seeking to produce social reform through the arts. While many of these artistic approaches began as critical, progressive, and even avant-garde, they were also often directly subordinated to the demands of the state, a situation that eventually limited their ability to enact direct social or political critique. By examining these artistic practices and the types of subjectivities they engendered, this project seeks to answer the question of what happens when the artistic strategies of the avant-garde are co-opted and supported by the state.

Dancers in the People's Republic of China become socialist bodies through their engagement with China's professional institutions of dance training and production. Thus, Chapter One begins with an examination of dance training in the PRC, including the various rituals and techniques of professional selection, training, discipline and rehearsal that mold dancers into socialist bodies and model citizens. Chapters Two and Three discuss the changing conditions of dance employment, including the practical realities of life in the state-sponsored dance troupe, as well as the ethical formations through which dancers interpret value and achieve fulfillment. Throughout Chapters One, Two, and Three the focus of inquiry is dancers' lives and

their transformation in the context of socio-economic, political, and institutional change, with particular attention to changes in China's worlds of education, the arts, and the culture industries. By showing the new sacrifices and difficulties faced by dancers in the Reform Era, this section challenges the notion that economic liberalization benefits the arts. Rather, economic liberalization introduces new problems, which, in the context of a society still very much shaped by Mao era ideals and institutions, serve in many ways to undermine the creative potentialities unleashed in the socialist era.

Beginning with Chapter Four, the discussion moves to a closer investigation of specific dance forms produced in China during the socialist era, including their historical development, their aesthetic logics, and their representative works and movement styles. Chapter Four uses the dance competition as a point of departure for examining the epistemological paradox of socialist realism employed in Chinese dance. Chapters Five and Six address the two most important genres of Chinese dance produced in the twentieth century -- *gudianwu* or "classical dance" and *minzu minjian wu* or "folk and ethnic dance" -- examining the ways in which the virtuosic and dialectical socialist body becomes a tool for embodying Chinese ethnic and cultural identities. Throughout the making of new nationalized dance forms, China's dancers develop and apply a dialectical practice of artistic creation that includes fieldwork, visualization, and the inheritance of Chinese ethnic and cultural traditions through ongoing revision and innovation. Through the merging of the concrete and the virtual in their own bodies, dancers create new and diverse national bodies and corporeal nationalisms that are themselves innovative inheritors of both Chinese and socialist cultural traditions.

Throughout more than two and a half years of fieldwork among professional dancers in the People's Republic of China, physical participation in dance practice and training formed an important part of my research methodology. I took classes, participated in performances, and taught dance throughout my time in the field, engaging first-hand in dance work and training at a range of different institutions, both state-run and private. As a practitioner of competitive ballroom dance, I worked on and off over a period of four years in three privately-run dance studios located in Beijing and Liaoning Province, where I taught dance classes and represented the studios with Chinese dance partners in local competitions and performances. In Liaoning Province, I lived with my dance partner in his family's small apartment, where I observed and took part in their daily life and the planning, management, and work of their dance school. During an intensive period of fieldwork between June, 2008, and December, 2009, I lived and studied as a full-time student at the Beijing Dance Academy, China's premier national conservatory for dance study, research and creation. While living at the dance academy, I engaged in intensive physical dance training for approximately 6 hours per day, both at the Dance Academy and at the many studios and classes located nearby. I trained in eleven different dance genres, including competitive Latin dance, hip-hop, and ten different types of Chinese dance (classical - *shenyun*, classical - sleeve, classical - sword, classical - Han-Tang, classical - *Dunhuang*, *xiqu* dance, folk - Mongolian, folk - Korean, folk - Han, folk - Uygur). Renowned professors of Chinese dance with whom I studied at the Dance Academy include: Jia Meina, He Yanyun, Shao Weiqiu, Su Ya, Peng Alan, Xiong Jiatai, Yang Ou, and Zhang Jun.

Apart from participation in dance practice and training, the material for this work comes from a wide range of additional ethnographic and historical sources. Using the Beijing Dance Academy library, book and video stores specializing in dance materials around China, and the personal archives of individual dancers and dance researchers, I amassed a large collection of

documentary materials that include video and text archives, memoirs, textbooks, and secondary literature. Traveling around China to state-sponsored dance schools, dance troupes, and dance competitions and festivals I conducted oral histories with over 170 professional dancers ranging in age from 18 to 92 and in birthplace from over 20 provinces. While the life stories of these individuals reflect certain shared features common to the experiences of the professional dancers in China between 1949-2009, they also demonstrate the regional diversity of dance practice in China. As a participant observer throughout my fieldwork experiences, I engaged in the live unfolding of hundreds of dance-related events, including performances, talks, conferences, competitions, festivals, workshops, and formal and informal social gatherings at which dancers made up the primary participants and contributors. Between May and November, 2009, I served as head interpreter for the Danscross International Choreography Research Collaboration held at the Beijing Dance Academy. Additionally, between January, 2008, and July, 2009, I engaged in short-term field research at dance organizations in Inner Mongolia, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangzhou, and Fujian.

Despite its broad scope, historically, spatially, and methodologically, this project remains focused on a single central figure, that of the professional dancer in socialist China. As cultural workers who rely on the physical knowledge and labor of their bodies to generate economic and artistic value, dancers lie at the intersection of the paradoxes of body, value, and culture in contemporary China. In their displays of physical virtuosity and consciously invented cultural traditions, dancers make visible the creative potential embedded in some forms of state authoritarianism under socialism. Likewise, they reveal the immense depth and complexity of the human body in its concreteness and virtuality as a tool for cultural production and meaning-making. This work draws on a wide range of research materials, engaging a variety of theoretical and personal perspectives, as well as multiple different dance genres. The time period covered is longer than most anthropology research projects, since it combines ethnographic with historical research to understand the entire sixty-year period of Communist Party leadership in China. The central focus of this work remains, however, on understanding, through the particular examples of the Chinese dancers, the socialist body and its implications: for China, for socialism, and for the interdisciplinary, transnational exploration of human creative practice.



The author conducting fieldwork. Beijing. 2009.

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The Beijing Dance Academy (北京舞蹈学院) served as my primary institutional affiliation during two years of field research for this project. I will be forever indebted to Yuan He and He Qun of the Beijing Dance Academy Department of Graduate Studies, who took a risk and allowed me to join their program as a “special visiting graduate student” (a title that had to be invented for my special situation) in 2008-09. The leadership, faculty, staff, and students of the Academy opened up an entire world to me, and I am changed because of it.

To all of my dance teachers, especially Deborah Shiposh, Julius Kaiser, Shi Lin and Zou Yang, Chen Jie, Shao Weiqiu, Zhang Jun, Su Ya, Xiong Jiatai, Yang Ou, Li Mei, and Surongna: your passion, dedication, and wisdom lives in this work.

The faculty and staff of the University of California, Berkeley, have provided continued support and guidance during this research. I would especially like to thank the Departments of Anthropology, Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, History, Chinese Languages and Literatures, and Rhetoric, as well as the Center for Chinese Studies and the Townsend Center Dance Studies Working Group. My dissertation committee members Xin Liu, Vincanne Adams, Alexei Yurchak, Michael Nylan, and Shannon Jackson were with me through this project from the beginning to the end. Their brilliance, generosity, and commitment to the pursuit of scholarly understanding are an endless source of inspiration to me. I am particularly grateful to Xin Liu, who first encouraged me to conduct research on Chinese dance.

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Chapter One

“Molian” (磨练), “To Temper Oneself”: Virtuosity and the Socialist Subject



Ballet class, Beijing Dance Academy Attached Middle School, Beijing. 2009.

“Life taught me with rifle and oar
lashed with wild winds against
my back like knotted cords
Life made me calm and capable
simple -- like nails of iron.”

-Nikolai Tikhonov, cited in Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the “New Man”:
From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities*.

“As dancers, we have endured every kind of hardship, and this makes us stronger
than other people.”¹

-Wang Zhuorao (b. circa 1988), female professional dancer in China.

¹ All translations from Chinese are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

Thirty seconds into her award-winning 2001 fan dance solo work *Shan Wu Dan Qing* (《扇舞丹青》)², Beijing Dance Academy star of the moment Wang Yabin turns away from the audience and raises her leg into a near vertical extension above her head. With this movement, she performs her identity as a professional dancer, using the single movement most synonymous with the professional dancer's body in the People's Republic of China. The vertical leg lift, known among Chinese dancers as “*bantui*” (搬腿), is a hybrid movement created out of a mixing of basic training techniques from Chinese indigenous theater (*xiqu* 戏曲) and Western ballet. It is part of “*yaotui gong*” (腰腿功), or “back and leg work,” the basic training regimen used to train all dance students in all periods and all regions throughout socialist China. To perform the vertical leg lift requires extreme flexibility and strength that can only be developed through disciplined training from a young age. Thus, it serves as proof that a dancer has endured the hardships of professional dance training and has mastered the self-discipline required of it. Maintaining perfect balance on one leg, while extending the other, controlled, high into the air, the dancer demonstrates control of her own physical body, as well as a particular personal history, which is inherently connected to both artistic accomplishment and moral tempering.

Not all dancers perform *bantui* in the same way, yet the movement serves, for all of them, as a ritualized marker of professional accomplishment. Wang Yabin, in the piece described above, performs a playful circle with her free ankle and then rises into a partial relevée on her standing leg before sweeping down into the next action. Sun Rui, a classmate and colleague of Wang Yabin's, and a graduate of the same dance school and program (the Beijing Dance Academy program in *gudianwu*, or Chinese classical dance), demonstrates similar leg lift actions in his award-winning dances *Bamboo Dream* (《竹梦》)³ and *Die Lian Hua* 《蝶恋花》.⁴ In *Bamboo Dream*, Sun extends his leg directly behind his body, forming a completely vertical extension with his torso upright. In *Die Lian Hua*, Sun completes multiple spins with his leg held in the vertical side extension, pulls the extension further until it forms an obtuse angle past his head, then releases his hands and holds his leg freely in place. The subject of much envy by his fellow dancers, Sun's demonstration shows a level of control, strength, and flexibility in the leg and the back that stands out even among the exceptionally well-trained. Liu Yan, showing an even more intense level of bodily control than Sun and Wang, executes the *bantui* action directly from other leg lifts, without the aid of her arm. In both *Chinese Knot*⁵ and *Rouge Button*,⁶ she executes the vertical leg lift directly out of arabesque actions, holding it in extension for several seconds in each position. After she was tragically paralyzed in an accident during rehearsals for the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremonies, Liu stated in an interview: “When I think about my situation, I feel worse knowing that it was my legs and back that were injured. It was really my back and my legs that were always my strongest.”

² To watch a video recording of the work, see <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/w2YK7IKiwok/>. All Internet sources last accessed 5-13-2011, unless otherwise noted.

³ See a video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yB_IP04YMc

⁴ See a video at <http://xiyou.cntv.cn/v-a4f9afd0-a54b-11df-bdae-001e4f1f5c05.html>

⁵ See a video at http://www.56.com/u84/v_MTkzNjM5NDU.html

⁶ See video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xIv9jbVsWM>

By showing off their backbends and leg lifts in dance performances, dancers in socialist China perform a particular kind of virtuosity that, under socialist notions of artistic practice, demonstrate their cultivation as socialist bodies possessing moral and artistic, as well as physical, superiority. In her book *Anthropology and the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Anya Peterson Royce (2004) defines “virtuosity” as the demonstration of technical ability that does not necessarily equate to artistic distinction. Royce’s definition of virtuosity builds on a tradition in the Western performing arts since the early twentieth century in which technical ability is seen as necessary to but not sufficient for artistic accomplishment.⁷ Though once a sign of moral virtue and artistic cultivation, technical ability developed to an extreme degree, as in the case of virtuoso musicians and performers, came to be seen in the modern West as potentially inhibiting to the moral and artistic cultivation of the performer.⁸ Dancers in socialist China, however, have a different understanding of virtuosity and its relationship to artistry and moral virtue. In contrast to Royce’s notion of virtuosity as a kind of technical ability separate from, and potentially limiting to artistic and moral cultivation, dancers in socialist China treat virtuosity as a means to personal enlightenment and artistic greatness.

One indication that dancers in socialist China value technical ability as a means to and sign of artistic and moral cultivation is the positive manner in which they assess and reflect upon such ability. Dancers in socialist China make significant sacrifices of time and educational opportunity to engage in professional dance training. Because of its focus on developing technical skill, this training requires dancers to endure physical pain, boredom, and potential injury. Despite the sacrifices they make, however, dancers argue almost universally that such experiences are the source of great artistic potential and moral growth.

Wang Zhuorao, a professional dancer in her early twenties, left her home in northeast China at age nine to attend professional dance middle school in Beijing, at the Central University of Nationalities. She attended dance school full-time for ten years, a period she says was spent largely “in the dance classroom, repeating the same movements over and over again everyday, until all we knew was sweat, fatigue, and monotony.” Often, Wang explains, she remained in a continual state of starvation to achieve what was considered an acceptably thin physique. When

⁷ This distinction between technical ability and artistic accomplishment can be traced in Western history, according to Raymond Williams, to the late eighteenth century split between the artist and the artisan, which later resulted in the emergence of the modern notion of the “fine arts” and of “Art” as a special realm of activity distinct from the development of technical skill (Williams 1976: 41-42)

⁸ For an overview of this debate in the field of classical music, see Bernstein (1998), Burk (1918), Pichel (1952), and Pincherle (1949). Expressing a negative view of virtuosity Burk writes: “If the acrobat of vaudeville is, in his street clothes, a crabbed, stuffy, and freakish individual, the musical acrobat is in most cases all this and more. Where the first has had to spend some eight hours a day in the confinement of practice and abnormal development, the second has had to spend nine or ten hours a day in the attainment of a far more exacting skill... The victim of the custom is narrow, unintelligent, and unhuman (musically speaking at least) because, whereas the art of music demands first of all breadth of mind and heart for its realization and communication, the virtuoso is steeped in technicalities and choked by them.” (283-4)

her body ached and she had no energy, she nevertheless continued to exert herself, developing what she and many other dancers call “*yizhi*” (毅志 willpower, stamina). Although she recognizes, and at times harshly laments, her lack of a broad educational background, Wang argues that the dance training she received gave her a special kind of moral strength that makes her in some ways superior to what she calls “*changren*” (常人), or “ordinary people.” “In studying dance we learn two things: to have *yizhi* and to endure *chiku* (吃苦 to eat bitterness, to endure hardship). As dancers, we have endured every kind of hardship, and this makes us stronger than regular people.” Through dieting, physical pain, and the monotony of dance training, Wang argues, she became not only a better artist but also a stronger person, physically as well as emotionally.

The idea that endurance of physical hardship gives dancers a kind of superiority over others reflects larger valorization of physical labor in socialist societies. Yinghong Cheng (2009) argues that a socialist ideal of the “New Man” that was common to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba recommended the endurance of physical hardship as a means to moral and ideological cultivation. Cheng writes that the term “tempering” -- the finishing process of forging steel -- was invoked by socialist revolutionary writers as a metaphor to describe the process of cultivating revolutionary consciousness through physical hardship. Citing lines of poetry from Nikolai Tikhonov (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), as well as important works of Soviet literature such as Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky’s (1861) *What Is To Be Done* and Nikolai Ostrovsky’s (1935) *That Is How Steel Was Tempered*, Cheng shows that the capacity for physical endurance became a required quality of the socialist New Man. To develop his “iron will,” for example, Rakhmetov, the model of the New Man in *What Is To Be Done*, practiced forms of extreme physical deprivation and labor. Cheng writes,

In order to make himself more familiar with the people and their suffering, [Rakhmetov] has measured the whole of Russia on foot and has worked at cutting timber, quarrying stone, and hauling riverboats with laborers. More than that, he disciplines himself and toughens his will through self-denial or even self-torture. For instance, he forces himself to stay up for days by drinking strong coffee, sleeps on a bed of nails, and takes cold-water baths. (Cheng 2009: 17)

According to Cheng, the models of physical endurance depicted in revolutionary Russian literature inspired socialist revolutionaries in China. “Mao and his friends intentionally hardened themselves through Spartan methods such as ‘living in the mountains on a minimum of food, sleeping in the open, bathing in cold streams in November [and] going shirtless and shoeless’”(Cheng 2009: 53).

In China, as in the Soviet Union, socialist leaders treated physical endurance as a means to the development of correct ideology, as well as revolutionary spirit. In the Yan’an era ideological writings of Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi, for example, both called for the use of education, combined with heavy physical labor, to re-educate and rehabilitate people of bourgeois and petit bourgeois backgrounds. “Physical labor,” Cheng writes, “which was regarded as characteristic of a lifestyle belonging solely to workers and peasants, would have a mystical quality in redeeming people of non-proletarian origin” (2009: 57). According to this idea, individuals thought to have been corrupted or weakened by unfortunate class backgrounds or experiences could, through “constant education and reeducation,” including physical labor, participate in a process of “uplifting oneself” (57). As Wendy Larson (1991) shows in *Literary*

Authority and the Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography, even those typically opposed to physical labor -- writers and intellectuals -- espoused, during this era, the view that physical work was a more effective form of social action than literary interventions. Many, she argues, even turned away from writing altogether to pursue forms of revolutionary work that they saw as, because of their physicality, more “productive.”

Adopting much of the metaphorical language Cheng outlines in his discussion of the socialist New Man, dancers in socialist China, like the revolutionary poets and writers of the Soviet Union, liken their training regimens to a process of tempering steel. The term “to temper,” or “*molian*” (磨练), appears frequently in dancer’s descriptions of classroom experiences and of their own personal struggle for artistic greatness. Wang Lei, for example, a thirty-year-old dancer whose experiences are discussed at more length below, describes his rehearsal process for a major university dance competition as a personal journey of “*molian*.” What seems even more important than the pervasive use of the word *molian* is the use of the image of manufacturing and material process that it evokes. Dancers often describe themselves and are described by others as “raw materials” (*cailiao* 材料) that need to be worked and polished until they become like “refined stuff” (*jinghua* 精华). Just as the process of tempering turns brittle, low quality steel into pliable, useful material, dance training turns the budding dance student (often known as a “dance seedling” or “*wudao miaozi*” 舞蹈苗子) into a useful “person of talent” (*rencai* 人才). It is through the process of dance training, therefore, that dancers are transformed into virtuosic socialist bodies -- technically skillful, ideologically good, and useful to society. Like the famous revolutionaries of Soviet literature and Maoist mythology, dancers endure physical hardship to become virtuous.

That is How Steel Was Tempered: Four Steps to Becoming a Dancer in the PRC

Step One -- Selection

The life of the professional dancer in China begins with the experience of being measured. Before a student can be admitted to a professional dance school, to begin the path of exiting the regular education system and becoming a professional dance student, he or she must be screened for the correct biological prerequisites, or what are known colloquially as “*tiaojian*” (条件 “qualifications”). “In China, you cannot become a dancer unless you have the *tiaojian*,” explains Zhan Fengzhu (b. 1981), a female dance teacher at Beijing Normal University and graduate of a well-known professional dance school. Zhan looks at me for a moment, does some mental calculations and says, “You have a long neck and long legs, so maybe you could be a ballet dancer.” As Zhan’s comments suggest, proportions between various body parts (leg to torso, arm to torso, neck to head, etc.) are one of the most important standards for selection into dance schools. “‘Three longs and one small,’ that’s what we call it for short,” Zhan explains, summarizing the three primary requirements: long arms, long legs, long neck and a small head. In general, the longer a prospective student’s limbs are compared to the length of his or her torso (these two together make up the all-important “limb-ratio”), the higher chance the student has of being selected, provided that everything else is also in order. Many dance students can recite their starting proportions upon entry to dance school. “I was a 1.2!” a dancer once told me, proudly, referencing his starting leg to torso ratio.

Apart from ratios, other body features are also carefully examined as part of the physical exam for dance school. Low arches, inflexible joints, protruding knees, asymmetric facial features, dark skin, small eyes, bowed legs or other “deformities” could all be considered legitimate reasons to reject a potential student from dance school. Before one can be trained to be

a dancer, it is often said, one must be identified as having the correct physical qualifications, which include the “look.” A result of this rule is that in dance schools of the highest caliber, such as the Beijing Dance Academy, students in the most selective programs often look very similar. When I saw my Academy classmates from behind or from a distance, I often had trouble identifying them. Likewise, when I visited schools of lower reputation, whose standards were more lax, I was struck by the sudden diversity of bodies and looks. The longer I stayed in the dance school environment, the more I was aware of people’s physical appearance, and this awareness -- the technology of measuring -- is the first feature that identifies the dancer’s experience.

Many dancers describe their first encounters with the technology of measurement as shocking or strange. Apart from producing a critical awareness of the objective limitations or strengths of one’s physical “qualifications,” the measurement process often produces feelings of forced exposure, as well as disappointment (in the case of rejection), or of being fated to dance (in the case of acceptance). Shao Weiqiu (b. circa 1960), a teacher at the Beijing Dance Academy, remembers vividly the sense of rejection she felt when she was turned away the first time she auditioned for the school in the 1970s: “I remember the exact words they used in the rejection letter. ‘Denied admittance due to physical shortcomings.’ They said my face was too large.” As she says this, I look at her face, and she smiles and looks down at the table. Jiang Chun (b. 1943), now a teacher at the PLA Arts Academy Dance School, was one of many children from peasant families admitted to the Beijing Dance Academy in the 1950s. Jiang remembers, more than fifty years later, the embarrassment he felt when, standing in line for auditions, the city students laughed at his dark skin. “They looked at me and snickered, saying that I was too ugly to be admitted,” Jiang recalls. He said he was so embarrassed and angry that he got into a fight with the other students. When he was accepted a few weeks later, however, he felt a sense of pride. “When they found out that I got admitted and they didn’t, boy were they steaming,” he recalls, beaming with satisfaction.

The audition process is, for many dancers, an experience of intense emotional provocation and excitement that, for those selected, serves as a rite of passage. Through the combined experiences of embarrassment, admiration, and self-examination, the admitted student often develops a new sense of belonging, personal fate, and life purpose all organized around a new sense of the hidden possibility of his or her physical body. Often the only candidate selected out of hundreds of applicants, the admitted dancer sees himself as possessing a biological capacity for dance that others do not possess. He sees himself as physically suited to dance, possessing the raw materials that, through dedicated effort, can be made into useful product. This sense of self-recognition is the first step to committing oneself to the life of the dancer, including its hardships and sacrifices, as well as to seeing oneself as destined to serve the field of dance as with a sense of emotional commitment and conviction.

Bao Zhana (b. 1949), a child of Mongolian ethnicity born and raised in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, was one of many dancers to tell me the story of their selection into dance school. In 1962, Bao auditioned for a place at the Inner Mongolia Arts Academy Dance Middle School. Sitting in a restaurant in Hohhot nearly fifty years later, he remembered the experience vividly and recounted it as follows:

As we waited in line, we saw other people go in and come out of the audition room. “Come in,” they would say, and someone would go in. They’d take one

look and in less than a minute they would say, “Ok, get out.” Just like that, one after another. We didn’t know what was going on.

Bao recreates the sense of suspense, confusion and judgment that he felt standing in line. With his facial expression and tone of voice, he reenacts the scene as if he were once again a frightened thirteen-year-old.

Then it got to me. I went in. It was a teacher named Hua Jinshi.

Bao looks at me with widened eyes to mimic the surprise he felt when he entered the room.

Do you know who it was? Teacher Hua, the award-winning soloist in [the dance work] “Milkmaids”! You know, “Milkmaids” [he starts to hum]. The HEAD SOLOIST! Oh my! And do you know what she was wearing? A perfectly white dance suit with a high collar and blue running pants, this wide. Wow. Someone like me, what I had I ever seen before? I thought, “This is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen!”

Bao indicates his sense of his own inferiority upon seeing the beautiful Milkmaid performer.

I went dumb immediately. I was still a male, you know, even if I was a little kid. I just stood there. The first words out of her mouth were, “This child is pretty!” That was the first sentence. And the second sentence was, “Take off your pants!”

Bao lets out an explosion of laughter, apparently indicating the absurdity of the situation.

Why did I have to take off my pants for a dance exam? Because they had to measure. They had to take a ruler and measure my legs, back, neck, hands, etc. Everything needed to be measured. And when that was done each bone needed to be tested. How? Like this [he imitates the physical exam]. So, [Teacher Hua said] “Take off your pants!” But, I was a poor kid, all over my legs I had dirty sores. I didn’t have any socks. It was all black, this thick, black pimples! How could I take my pants off? Such a beautiful teacher asks me to take my pants off. I felt shamed to death. I never took a shower, when did we have showers? How could I take my pants off? Fuck! So I just stood there and said, “I’m not taking them off.”

The idea of exposing his dirty body to the Milkmaid goddess was simply too embarrassing.

“This kid’s got some nerve. TAKE THEM OFF!” [they said]. Shamed to death I was. It’s not that there was anything wrong with my legs, but they were just so dirty. To this day I don’t know how I took them off. But I did. And then [they examined for a while].

Once the measuring is complete, and Bao’s body is deemed suitable, his tone changes. Embarrassment turns to confidence.

“JUMP!” [they said]. My jumps were especially good, you know that? I liked to play basketball back then. I jumped so high that - WHAM! -- I hit the fabric on the top of the tent and it folded back!

He gives me a giant grin.

“GOOD! Ok, now sing a song.” Remember I just told you that my dad and brother-in-law were renown local singers? Yes, so I sang “Nonchya.”

At this point, Bao has transformed completely from the nervous student to the charismatic performer. He closes his eyes and begins to sing a Mongolian folk song, with lyrics in Mongolian. Then, partway through the song he shifts to Chinese (for my benefit?) and continues singing:

*“A mighty steed at one side, pulling along a home a beautiful young lady,
Nonchyaaaaaaah, marrying into a far away place....”*

When the song finishes, Bao pauses for dramatic effect, then opens his eyes wide with excitement.

“WAHHH!!!” They burst into applause for me. I sang it then even better than I do now. They said, “Wow, this child’s really good -- his appearance, his physical condition, his musical sense.”

At this point, Bao was apparently very happy with his performance. He continued with pride,

“OK, IT’S DECIDED! In two weeks you’ll receive a notice” [they said]. They told me right there in the testing room! Sure enough, two weeks later the Inner Mongolia Art School sent out a notification stating that out of 1,500 people, they only chose one person, me! And so, I came to the Inner Mongolia Art School and began studying dance.

With this, Bao recounts, in a performance likely well-rehearsed from having told the story many times, his entrance into the profession of dance. Through the process of exposure, embarrassment, evaluation, and confirmation, Bao emerged as a dancer-to-be, equipped with the rare but valuable personal qualities that will make him, if he puts for the correct effort, a true person of talent.

Bao’s story demonstrates several elements that are generally characteristic of the dance audition experience. The audition begins with an assessment of physical appearance as the first and most important standard for selection, which is followed, in order, by physical ability and artistic talent. Bao, like many others I interviewed, describes feelings of embarrassment produced by forced exposure and scrutiny of his physical body, which is compounded by a lack of knowledge about or preparation for the exam, as well as a sense of absurdity. For Bao, as for many others dancers, the personal beauty, fame, and charisma of the examiners inspired both a sense of admiration and intimidation. In this moment, the student is impressed by the dance teacher and, perhaps for the first time, wishes to become like her. Once Bao receives signals that

he possesses some of the requisite qualities for becoming a dancer, he expresses a sense of pride, accomplishment, and even personal destiny. The experience of receiving the admittance letter and entering dance school seems collapsed into a single moment, as if the two are part of a single event. Having been selected as one out of 1,500 applicants destines Bao to be a dancer. Indeed, it is from this important turning point that his life as a dancer begins.

Step Two -- Training

Once a student enters professional dance training, his or her life is forever changed. The dance student leaves regular school, and after this it is extremely difficult to return to a “normal life path.” The institutional structure of professional dance training in the People’s Republic of China is a combination of two models, the so-called “*tuan dai ban*” (团代班 “troupe leads class”) model of indigenous Chinese theater troupes and the so-called “*zaoqi zhuan ye*” (早期专业 “early stage professional”) model of professional physical education with specialized professional schools that was adopted largely from the Soviet Union. Both the *tuan dai ban* and the *zaoqi zhuan ye* models existed in China throughout the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, until the troupe-led classes were converted completely, by around the 1990s, to professional schools. While the two models are somewhat different in the overall experience for the young dancer (the *tuan dai ban* model integrates the student more quickly into actual performance productions, more like an internship than a school), the impact on the student’s life is quite similar. In both cases, the student enters the program sometime between the ages of nine and twelve, usually moving onto the premises to live there and study full time. In both cases, the student engages in intensive vocational training in which the primary focus is on developing the student’s body, including flexibility, strength, and the acquisition of specific dance skills.

In the dance school, the dance student belongs to a new world in which life as a whole revolves around one thing: physical activity and the perfectibility of the dancer’s bodily capacities. At a typical dance school, physical training begins each day at 6:30am and ends around 9pm. Bodily experiences such as exhaustion, pain, and the ongoing battle for physical dexterity dominate this period of most dancers’ lives. Ying Lingyi (b. circa 1988), a female student from Guangzhou who studied in a dance school in Hangzhou from the age of nine, remembers: “When we were little in dance school, we used to cry when the teachers made us stretch. It hurt! We would sit there together with our legs outstretched and watch our tears puddle on the floor.” The image of sitting in one’s own puddles of tears came up several times during my interviews. “I think every dancer has that experience.” Zhao Yuewei (b. 1987), a male student from Liaoning Province who entered dance school in Shenyang around the same time Ying started school in Hangzhou, recalls, “At that time, it was like every day was a nightmare. You really cannot imagine what it was like if you didn’t go through it. Sometimes, I actually wanted to die.” Zhao tells me about a teacher he had when he first entered school at age 11 who took a special liking to him and was thus particularly strict. “Even if you started your splits two feet off the ground on the first day, he would have you flat on the floor by the end of the week,” Zhao says, indicating the teacher’s harsh teaching methods. One day after class, Zhao says, his body was so tired that he crumpled to the floor and couldn’t move. “I sat on the ground with my legs and arms outstretched and my classmates had to carry me back to the dormitory. It was that bad.” According to Zhao this happened to everyone in the dance school, and it was considered normal.

Physical forms of punishment were acceptable in dance schools until very recently, and Zhao is one of many dancers I spoke with who remembers receiving physical punishment for a poor performance as a matter of course. Citing idiomatic expressions such as “harsh teachers

produce talented students” and “the responsibility of the teacher is not to ruin the children of others,” dancers repeatedly told me that, especially in the past, corporeal punishment was considered necessary for effective dance training. “If a teacher is soft on you when you are young, you will never develop the right abilities to be a person of talent,” dancers often explained. “And later you will definitely suffer for it.” Many dancers told me that the teachers they hated most in their youth were the ones they thanked later, after they had become successful dancers. In their view, it was a good teacher’s responsibility to make sure each student develops the necessary skills for success, through whatever means necessary. Because dance students leave the regular educational path to enter dance school, cutting off other opportunities for professional development, they often see dance training as their only path to a successful future. “If I don’t become a good dancer, what else can I do?” was the common refrain. In this situation, developing a skilled body was a matter not only of becoming a virtuous “person of talent,” capable of contributing to society; it was also a matter of personal livelihood.

Specific methods for achieving the desired physical molding of students’ bodies were relatively consistent around the country, both in troupe-led training and in professional schools. Dancers from north, south and west China, from urban and rural schools alike, all recall, for example, sleeping in a bunk bed or a train with one foot pulled up and hooked onto the bed frame just above one’s head or next to one’s ear. Dancers commonly laughed when they were telling this story and remarked, “When you woke up the next morning, your leg would be numb, but after a while it would be just normal.” In classrooms, I witnessed students using walls, benches and barres, as well as other students, to provide added resistance in flexibility training. It was common for a teacher or other student to sit or stand on the shoulders, legs, or backs of students to force them into deeper splits or backbends. In one exercise, a student would wedge his or her entire body into the space between the barre and the wall, push one leg up against the wall, and pressing outward against the barre until both legs extended straight. In another common exercise, a dancer would sit on the ground in a forward-back split, then, keeping her hips on the ground, lift the front leg onto a higher surface, such as a bench or chair. Before and after class, students would often get into these positions and sit or stand in them at length, talking with friends or looking into the mirror. The single most important early class in all Chinese dance training curricula is known as “*tanzi gong*” (毯子功), meaning “rug work” or “mat work.” This class starts with flexibility exercises such as the ones described above, then includes basic tumbling. The flexibility developed in *tanzi gong* class becomes the basis for a dancer’s professional ability for the rest of his or her life. Along with the innate physical qualities that were the basis for the student’s selection to dance school, these skills come to replace inherent qualities as the most important determining factors in the dancer’s overall “*tiaojian*” (qualifications).

An important part of cultivating high *tiaojian* is developing a combination of flexibility, physical endurance, and strength, which together is known as a dancer’s “*shenti suzhi*” (身体素质) or “bodily quality.” Bodily quality is developed through physical drills similar to military training, which are usually done at the beginning of each day, during “basic training class.” A class of one-year male ballet students in the Beijing Dance Academy Middle School Program carried out the following exercises as part of their morning quality training:

Warm up:

- Run in a circle, then run across the floor with hands on hips, heels hitting butt;
- Jump across the floor on two feet, with hands up;
- Run to one knee lift, run to turning knee lift, second position jumps;

- Fast grapevine sideways with arms out to side,
- Run and jump to lunge, run and leap with arms in jogging position;
- Leap frog jumps with knees together and hands pushing off the floor;
- Jumping forward with one leg in the air and two hands on the ground;
- Walk around to cool off, relax, and be calm, then find place at barre;

Flexibility Exercises:

- One foot placed on the barre, move arms from above head to grabbing feet several times, then hold in forward stretch;
- Repeat with both feet forward on barre, then with both feet to the side and in side position stretch head looks up;
- 180 degree splits on floor both sideways and forward-back, torso flat to floor;
- Stand with both hands on barre and stretch back horizontally to reverse arch (teacher pushes down on each student's back to loosen the muscles and spine);
- Hang in backward arch suspended over barre, feet on one side, head on other;
- Backbends held in position, then reverse by hugging knees and rocking on back;
- Alternate quickly backbend to standing, standing to backbend in succession;
- High kicks forward and back at barre, first with partner holding free hand, then both hands on barre kicking back and up;
- High kicks walking forward with hands outstretched to side;
- Free-standing high kicks to side, opposite hand above head to grab foot;
- Circling kicks from front to side, then side to front, foot smacking raised hand;
- Kicking combo: smack front knee with hand, then lift opposite leg to forehead, hit back knee, kick, and jump to high front kick;
- Run and leap to high kick, foot hitting hand above head;
- Lower head and circle kick from back to front;
- Rotating jump with body diagonal to floor in spread eagle with legs bent, three in succession without stopping;
- Hand stands against the wall, followed by long repetition of cartwheels;
- Sit ups front and back with legs straight and partner sitting on feet;

Basic training usually starts between 7:00am and 7:15, and before that many classes congregate on the outdoor track to run laps or to practice difficult movements they haven't mastered from the previous day. Morning drills are the start to an entire day of dance classes in specific genres and styles, and they are considered essential for developing and maintaining a body fit to dance.

Basic training drills like the ones described above are a regular part of every dancer's morning routines, and because they must be repeated daily to be effective, they remain a constant in the dancer's daily life. During my first week of full-time study at the Beijing Dance Academy, in the fall of 2008, I observed the morning basic training for a class of female college seniors in Chinese classical dance beginning their final year at the Academy. They had just spent the summer participating in the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremonies, and their teacher noted that they had lost much of their physical stamina and strength from participating in what she described as the "lax" environment of the Olympics rehearsals. To get their bodies back into "an acceptable condition," they began class with the following exercises:

- Run in circle, then leapfrog jumps with hands behind the back, one leg jumps;
- Jump combination: jump up into cannon ball position hugging knees to chest, then upon landing go immediately to a push-up on the floor, repeat in succession;
- Vertical jumps in place; vertical jumps to 180-degree sideways splits in mid-air;
- Jumps to splits using barre;
- Leg and back stretches at the barre: side leg lift grabbing foot with opposite hand over head; vertical leg lift to side, arms on floor; leg pulled to vertical extension behind the torso and head;
- Controlled leg lifts front, side, back at barre;
- Backbends;
- Full body sit-ups with legs extending and contracting;

Throughout the class, the teacher directed the students with harsh, encouraging commands, as if she were their drill sergeant. “Weak! You want to be a dancer with flabby legs like that? Push harder! Harder! More! Higher! HIGHER! MORE!” The single most constant refrain throughout a dancer’s training is this command for more. First it is in the voice of the teacher, and eventually it becomes a silent voice in the dancer’s own mind. Looking into the mirror, seeing sweat run down one’s face and body, the dancer pushes her body continuously for more. Feeling the pain and fatigue of her body screaming to stop, she pushes forward and continues, because this is what she has learned to do her whole life, and because this is what dancers do.

Physical abilities developed through strict training become, for most dancers, an important source of pride, as well as a measurement of success and even self-worth. Leg stretches like the ones described at the beginning of this chapter, along with high difficulty flips, turns, and jumps, make up collectively what are known as “technique tricks” (*jiqiao* 技巧), the ultimate measure of the dancer’s ability. Technique tricks represent, to an intensity unmatched by other dance movements, the fetishization of super-human bodily ability in the dance world, and they are usually the examples of choice when dancers boast about their own abilities or the abilities of others. “All of that training made me a really great dancer,” says Zhao Yuewei, the student who remembers being carried upstairs by his classmates during middle school.

I could put my leg up to here [he motions to his shoulder] and just hold it there for 20 minutes without using my hands. In class we used to do forward flips, back flips and aerials around the room one after another -- pew pew pew pew, as if it were nothing! I used to be able to do the splits and extend my leg even beyond 180 degrees, most of us could do that. When I started I was naturally pretty stiff, but by the end [of the first two years] I could hold my leg up or do the splits or whatever with absolutely no feeling at all.

For Zhao Yuewei, as for most other dancers who have gone through the Chinese professional dance training system, the ability to execute difficult bodily movements such as flips and stretches becomes the most important marker of one’s identity as a dancer. Even in their advanced age, older interviewees who had spent their lives as dancers and had since retired would take out pictures of themselves in mid-leap or mid-stretch to show me the dancers they had once been. “You’d never believe it, but even after I gave birth to three children I was still

able to perform more than ten consecutive flips in place,” said one interviewee, a woman born in southern China in 1947 who had studied in a theater troupe. These feats of extreme bodily skill encapsulated, for the dancers who mastered them, years of devoted struggle and self-discipline. They were proof of what one had endured, and, even more than demonstrating the quality of one’s body, they served as evidence of one’s professional dedication and iron will.

A specific kind of performance demonstration, what is known as the “technique trick routine” (*jiqiao zuhe* 技巧组合), serves as the culmination of a dancer’s accomplishments in what amounts to approximately ten years of basic training for dancers who complete both the middle school and college components of professional dance training. The technique trick routine appears almost ubiquitously in official forms of dance performance in China -- television gala performances, live shows by professional dance schools or army performance troupes, and even end-of-semester class exams at dance schools. In end-of-semester class performances at the Dance Academy, the technique trick routine is usually the last item in a grand finale when the dancers exert all of their final energy and strength. Common elements of technique trick routines include the following:

- “*shuang fei yan*” (双飞燕 “double flying swallow“): jump to high 180-degree splits in place, usually done in succession in place;
- “*zijinguan tiao*” (紫金冠跳) (“gold crown jump”): leap on one foot in which the torso arches back in mid-air and the back foot kicks up to touch a hand placed above the head, usually done at the end of a sequence of leaps;
- “*xuanzi*” (旋子) (“cyclone”): sideways somersault with legs bent and body axis tilted relative to the floor, usually done in succession in a circular path;
- “*fanshen*” (翻身) (“turning over”): turn executed with head bent down and arms outstretched vertically perpendicular to the floor, usually done in succession in a straight line, creating a “pinwheel” action.

Backflips, successive turns on one foot, and movements requiring extreme balance are all frequently used in technique trick routines. When performing technique trick routines, dancers achieve an explosive and radiant quality that rarely appears in other demonstrations. Unlike the rest of the demonstration, which is usually accompanied by live piano, the technique routine is set to recorded music with a strong percussive beat. As the dancers run out onto the stage, one by one, performing their twirls and leaps, the music builds in tension and excitement, usually inspiring the audience to clap and cheer for their favorite performers. Unlike the regular demonstrations, in which dancers execute class routines in unison, in groups of three, four, or as a whole class, the technique routine features individual students performing distinctive sequences of movements. Rather than emphasizing conformity, the technique routine encourages individual expression and ingenuity. During basic training classes, students are instructed to develop their own “signature” technique tricks, selecting those that suit their particular physical characteristics, personal style, and special skills. Some students develop their own variations on popular tricks, which in some cases become associated with them personally. Although in rare cases a student will develop a new trick that no one else is able to copy, in most cases new tricks become part of the established repertoire, and they are passed on to later generations. The atmosphere of the entire performance space during the technique trick routine is always the most lively of any type of dance show. This is the time when dancers receive praise from the audience directly through cheering and applause, and it is the time when the audience shares most in the feelings of danger,

struggle, elation, concentration, and accomplishment that characterize the dancer's daily experience.

Step Three -- Discipline

A form of daily discipline perhaps more extreme even than training, and which shapes dancers' everyday lives and subjective lived experience, is the discipline of hunger. Xiong Jiatai (b. 1938), one of the only first-generation teachers still actively teaching at the Dance Academy, told me that dancers were thin primarily because they were selected for their slender bone structure and body type and that therefore they did not need to diet. While hereditary thinness is one characteristic for which dancers are selected into dance schools at age 10-12, this does not guarantee a thin body for life. Given the aesthetic standards for thinness in the Chinese dance world, it would be nearly impossible for anyone to physically maintain the desired body type without some management of food intake.

In daily observation and conversation, I found that most dancers I knew and spent time with, including both men and women, were very concerned about managing their weight. One dancer told me that during ten years in dance school, she never ate real meals during the week, only on the weekends. "I started dieting from the first day I entered dance school," she recounted. "I'm have the type of body that grows flesh really easily, so I had to diet all the time," she said. According to her memories of dance school, she was "hungry all the time," only eating full meals on weekends, when she didn't have to go to class and face her teachers. "I would allow myself to eat on the weekends, but then starting Monday I'd have to stop eating again. Can you imagine exerting yourself the way we did all day and then not eating, one day after another? Well, that's what we did. My dance partner, a six foot tall, twenty-one year old male dancer with a beautiful physique, limited his food intake regularly, even when eating at home with his parents. Each night at dinner, he would ask for one small bowl of rice, which he would eat, slowly, with very small helpings of meat and vegetables. Once the bowl of rice was empty, he would state very matter-of-factly "I'm finished!", put the bowl down, and then move away from the table to sit on the couch. Since I was never full with the same amount of food, I guessed this was one of probably many private strategies he used to maintain his look.

While studying at the Dance Academy, I witnessed teachers impose weight restrictions on their students, requiring body measurements throughout the semester and stating publicly each student's weight-loss requirements, achievements, and failures. One of my classmates was told on the first day of class that she needed to lose a specific amount of weight by the end-of-semester performance. After that, she told me, she had to stop eating dinner. She would still go to the dining hall with her classmates, but she would just sit with them talking, while they, too, nibbled at their food. It was common to see groups of friends sitting with each other in the dining hall but not eating, eating very little, or eating only "safe foods," such as fruit and vegetables. I once commented on the abundance of sweet snacks sold in the convenience stores on campus, and a friend responded, "Good for suppressing the appetite, I guess." During lunch hours, many students walked around the track instead of going to the cafeteria, or they found other activities to occupy the time to make it easier to skip meals. Some students slept during lunch time, or teachers intentionally scheduled rehearsals or classes during that time so that students could more easily push through the day without stopping to get food. Dieting was a frequent topic of conversation, and classmates and friends often poked and grabbed each others' excess flesh, teased each other, and traded secrets for how to maintain their weight.

An excerpt from the book *Shenti Biji* (《身体笔记》 *Body Diary*),⁹ published in 2005 by four female Beijing Dance Academy students, describes vividly the complex practices of self-discipline that surrounds eating for many professional dancers in China. I reproduce a passage from one author's "diary" at length because, like Bao's audition story, it provides insight that can be generalized to the dancer's experience more broadly. Written in the form of a journal entry, it begins:

The hunger of the body 11:30am

The end of class bell sounds, reverberating through the empty hallways, followed by waves of scattered footsteps. Soaked in sweat, I lean against the bar, panting loudly. My four limbs are devoid of strength and my leg warmers are slowly starting to slide down. The joy of the sweating body really is beautiful. My skin has become smooth and elastic, and it is diffused with healthy breath.

I'm hungry, and my stomach lets out a long growl...

If one's hungry, then one should eat, this is the satisfaction of the body's most basic needs. However, for a dancer this kind of basic bodily need must be controlled, controlled, and controlled again, reduced, reduced, and reduced again. At the mention of losing weight and dieting, it is not only the girls who are familiar with it, but it's now slowly becoming popular among the majority of male compatriots too. "Dieting" has resolutely become a project for the entire people! My friends are constantly asking me for dieting tricks. What else can we do? Eat less, exercise more, and, most importantly, persevere. To do something is easy, but to persevere in it is truly difficult. Yet, to make a person persevere in enduring hunger -- that is an unthinkable thing. But dancers have really created the unthinkable -- a simple life of unthinkably controlling of food, unthinkable heavy exercise, unthinkable all-day practice, rehearsal, performance. This is the life that dance performers must face, repeating day after day after day, until youth has gone! (Wang et al. 2005: 13)

After establishing the idea that dieting is a regular part of life for every dancer, the author discusses what she sees as the reasons for this predicament. She argues that because dance uses the body to communicate and entertain, maintenance of a beautiful body is part of one's professional duty. To create any art, she writes, one must have an appropriate tool; in the case of dance this tool is a beautifully slim body, which can only be maintained through constant monitoring and control of one's appetite. Throughout the passage, she blends playful irony into her tone, which is otherwise tremendously melancholic and deliberate. She ends the section by describing what she says is a familiar scene during her life at the Academy:

I put on a giant tee-shirt and a pair of sandals and squeeze my way into the flood for food down in the cafeteria. It's one big hand-to-hand battle after another, shoulder brushing shoulder, backs bumping chests, [everyone] pushing for the lead to reach into the food window, such excitement! But in the doorway of the

⁹ Although the book's official English title is *Body Story*, the literal translation of the Chinese title is "body diary." The book contains personal essays, journal entries, and reflections on life in dance school. See Wang et al (2005).

cafeteria stands a group of people, forming yet another landscape. They pace back and forth [in the doorway], as withstanding the racket inside and the aromas wafting out [from inside the cafeteria] slowly erodes their soft little bodies. At last they go away quietly, providing a backdrop only of helplessness. (Wang et al 2005: 14)

As the above excerpt shows, the dancers' dieting disciplines, like those of training, are at once physically, psychologically and emotionally intense. After a day of long physical exertion, one paces back and forth outside the cafeteria able to enjoy only the fragrance and appearance of the food inside, as a substitute for real satiation. Together, these experiences make up a daily existence in which multiple modes of self-examination and bodily control combine to produce a heightened awareness of physiological abilities and processes, the ultimate goal of which is to fulfill one's professional duty by producing an ever more capable, more beautiful, and more perfect body.

Step Four -- Rehearsal

The capstone experience in becoming an accomplished professional dancer in China, especially after the late 1970s,¹⁰ is participation in a national dance competition. At minimum, most dance students at serious schools (of which there were around one hundred in China when I conducted fieldwork) have the opportunity to participate as a member of a group piece in at least one of several national competitions held every few years. Some students -- usually those at the top of their classes or those with special family financial support -- have the unique opportunity to perform a solo work in a national competition. For such students, the piece they perform in the competition, if successful, becomes their claim to stardom. Often, this work is forever associated with them personally and with the style of dance they represent. The dance pieces mentioned at the beginning of this chapter -- *Shan Wu Dan Qing*, *Bamboo Dream*, and *Chinese Knot* were all created as competition solos works. After performing these pieces successfully in national dance competitions, each of these dancers became celebrities of the dance world, and at times they even crossed over into mainstream celebrity status.¹¹ They appear frequently performing their famous competition works on television and in major national media events, including the annual CCTV New Year gala and other performances with wide popular viewing audiences.

Because of the significance of the competition solo work for launching a dancer's career after dance school, preparation for competition pieces begins far in advance, usually one year or more before the competition for which it is intended. Rehearsal is extremely intensive, and in some cases performers work with their choreographers daily during the year leading up to a competition. This commitment of time and energy is especially significant considering that such

¹⁰ Dance competitions became an important part of dance life after the beginning of China's era of reform and opening up, which began after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The first national dance competitions were held in the early 1980s [verify]. Before this, however, China had a form of national showcase known as the "huiyan" (汇演), which served a similar role in the training of young dancers.

¹¹ Wang Yabin used her celebrity status in the dance world to launch a career in television acting. She is now widely known outside the world of dance, and she is frequently seen performing at major CCTV media events and national performances.

pieces are ordinarily only 5 to 8 minutes in length. The process of preparing a piece for competition is likely the most physically and emotionally exhausting, but also the most satisfying, in a dancer's life. The high level of expectations for competition pieces requires that every minute detail of a work be refined and perfected. Many dancers see the process of rehearsing competition solos as their training for the most important work they will do as dance stars -- dancing the solos in lead roles in major full-length dance dramas.¹² The process of "*lian jing*" (练精), or "practicing to perfection," that is required in preparation for a new competition piece is said to be the final step in the making of a mature dancer.

Wang Lei is a graduate of the Beijing Dance Academy program in Chinese classical dance and longtime member of the elite Beijing Dance Academy Youth Dance Troupe. Along with Wang Yabin, Sun Rui, and Liu Yan, whose exquisite leg extensions I describe above, Wang Lei is a nationally renowned dancer who is frequently sought after to play lead roles in dance dramas and to perform in major gala events and television celebrations. Like each of his colleagues, Wang Lei participated in several national competitions during his final years as an undergraduate at the Beijing Dance Academy, including the prestigious *Taoli Bei* (Peach and Plum Cup), the Lotus Flower Cup, and the China National Dance Competition. His 5-minute classical Chinese dance solo piece *Shu Yun* (《书韵》),¹³ won numerous national first place awards for solo Chinese classical dance performance, and it became his most famous work, which he still performs regularly, seven years after its debut. In the piece, Wang plays the role of an ancient Chinese scholar. He wears a white robe and long wig, and he holds in his hand a giant calligraphy brush. The title of the piece *Shu Yun* can be literally translated as "the rhyme of the book," or "rhythm of calligraphy." It suggests the poetic spirit and bodily expression of Chinese calligraphic practice, as well as what Wang calls the "refined essence" of the art of calligraphy.

As Wang dances, his movements are meant to enact the creative process of a calligraphy master working on a piece that drives him to extremes of artistic and spiritual transcendence. The dancers' movements start out full of concentration and breath, and they develop into a flow of virtuosic splendor, which climaxes in a difficult sequence of technical tricks.¹⁴ As I discuss in Chapter Six, since it was created in 2004, Wang's piece, like Wang Yabin's *Shan Wu Dan Qing*, has since become a canonical work of the genre of Chinese classical dance. Although he is now nearing the age of retirement for a professional dancer of his caliber, Wang still frequently performs *Shu Yun* in both domestic and international company tours. In 2009, when Wang was selected to participate in the Danscross International Choreography Research Project and was asked to show a short piece of his personal repertoire for the British choreographer he would be working with in the Project, Wang performed a segment of this piece. As much a part of the

¹² Since the 1950s, the genre of the "dance drama" (*wuju* 舞剧), or narrative dance theater, was adopted from ballet and became the primary genre of full-length dance performance in China. Dancers who play lead roles in Chinese-style dance dramas are equivalent to soloists in ballet companies.

¹³ The word "*yun*," which can also be translated as "vital essence," is discussed at length in Chapter Six. It is the most important principle of movement in China's national classical dance genre *gudianwu*, which is the genre of Wang's piece. The work "*shu*," or "book," refers to calligraphy.

¹⁴ To view a video excerpt of the work, see http://www.56.com/u50/v_OTgyMjk1.html.

classical dance canon, *Shu Yun* is also the work that defines Wang Lei most as a performer, and it is, in his words, the work that made him the dancer he is today.

As he tells me about the process of making *Shu Yun*, two terms have special prominence in his narrative. One is “*molian*” (磨练), “to temper oneself,” the term discussed earlier in this chapter as a metaphor for bodily and moral cultivation that is based on the image of tempering steel. The other is “*hao*” (耗) a colloquial term used for passing time, usually in a boring, monotonous, or excessively deliberate way. *Hao* literally means “to take, consume or cost,” and I frequently heard dancers use this term to refer to the process of spending time repeating drills in the classroom or rehearsal space. Because of the repetitive nature of dance training, dancers explained, their work required them to “*hao shijian*,” or “to spend time.” Sitting or standing in various stretching positions, repeating the same exercises day after day, reviewing one’s movements over and over in front of the mirror, or waiting for others during long group rehearsals could all be described as activities that “*hao shijian*.”

In his use of the terms “to temper oneself” and “to spend time,” Wang Lei stresses the basic importance of careful, focused, repeated practice over long periods of time, which he regards as the heart of the rehearsal process.

Preparing for a competition like the Peach and Plum Cup is what tempers (*molian*) a performer. You really have to spend time (*hao shijian*) if you want to get better, you have to put in the time and the concentration; that’s how dancing is. Before I went through this process, my dancing was hard and stiff, and there were problems in my understanding of dance. But, after spending (*hao*) that year, together with my choreographer -- you know an entire *year* of time -- and after that, in terms of cultivation, quality, and feeling, I had an enormous improvement.

Throughout his discussion of the research process, Wang emphasizes the importance of sustained practice through time. It is this significant input of time, Wang argues, that helped him develop a softer, more appealing type of movement.

Apart from more mature, fluid movement, Wang argues that the rehearsal process also gave him an additional ability, what he calls the capacity to “glow” (*faguang* 发光) on stage. Wang explains,

Before I was just a regular dance student, you know like all the others. But after that year, I learned how to glow (*faguang*) on stage. You know, it’s almost like your eyes start to emit light or something. It’s this special stage presence you create [He looks at me with an intense stare]. If you want to be a really amazing performer, you have to have the ability to glow; it’s part of being a performer. In a solo, you are the only person on that entire stage, and you have to make everyone’s attention focus on you, on your body, you have to make it so that they can’t take their eyes off you. That takes a lot of training and a lot of work. It’s not easy.

Wang Lei’s notion of learning to glow suggests almost a religious connotation, as if a type of spiritual essence is produced through the yearlong process of refining one’s movements and tempering oneself in preparation for the big competition. Almost like a sage or an immortal,

Wang describes himself as learning, through slow, rigorous daily cultivation, to attain a special state of being, one that, in his view, even seems to transcend regular human existence.

During the process of tempering and spending time that is an inherent part of every dancer's rehearsal experience, physical struggle is also inevitable. For the entire year leading up to the competition, Wang says, he spent ten to twelve hours each day in the rehearsal studio, working on his solo. He calls this "devil training." "When I got out of bed in the morning, my feet couldn't touch the ground," he says, "because they were too sore. I'm not joking; it was very bitter." For Wang, recounting the bitterness of his rehearsals is a testimony to his sense of professional and artistic commitment. "Every morning I would get up and my feet would be so swollen. I'd have to rub them for a little while before I could stand up. After a little while I would very slowly walk over to the bathroom. But each day I still had to go to class and rehearse, each day from morning to night." After school let out in July, and there was one month left until the competition, Wang reports that he was in the studio "all the time," from eight o'clock in the morning until after eleven in the evening, everyday. This kind of practice was necessary, Wang says, to get his bodily quality up to standard, but also so that every detail, "every breath" as he says, could be carefully crafted and refined. "In truth, dance is even more tiring than acting, you know. It's the most difficult of all the performing arts. Why? Because we cannot speak words. We have to use our bodies to express everything."

The four steps outlined here -- selection, training, discipline, and rehearsal -- form the core experience of every dancer's professional development in China since the founding of the PRC. In the early 1950s, leaders in the Chinese Communist Party initiated a nationwide reform of the Chinese education system, the most important effects of which were increased specialization and increased professionalization (Gu 2004). In *Radicalism and Education Reform in Twentieth-Century China*, Suzanne Pepper (1999) argues that a focus on practical, specialized education had been a concern of left-leaning and communist Chinese education reformers since the early twentieth century. Between 1916 and 1920, while working first as a student volunteer and then as a school principle in Hunan, Mao Zedong helped institute education reforms that introduced physical labor into the educational curriculum (96). The trend toward specialization is clearly evident in a nationwide restructuring of higher education that took place in 1952-1953. In this reform, schools that previously focused on general education, such as Tsinghua University, became specialized in a number of various "professional" fields. New specialized schools for industry, agriculture, and teaching were established, as well as technical vocational schools for athletics, art, engineering, etc. (Gu 2004).

In the field of dance, as in nearly all other disciplines and professional fields, training curricula were standardized, new specialized schools were established, and dancers were increasingly seen as one of many specialized groups of skilled workers, trained narrowly in a particular set of skills to fill a particular purpose (Lü 2000). Dancers, like athletes, acrobats, musicians, and skilled workers in a handful of other fields, were seen as requiring highly specialized bodily knowledge that could be developed only through professionalized training begun at an early age. Drawing on traditions of indigenous Chinese theater training, combined with new professional standards designed under the reformed education system, it became understood that to become a professional dancer one must start training between the ages of 10-12, in a professional program either in a school or troupe, and that such training must incorporate much of the specific processes I have just described.

In my interviews with dancers from around China (which include stories from dance schools and troupes in 20 provinces), the commonalities between experiences of early life in

dance schools around the country is striking. While such experiences could never be standardized completely, there is definite evidence of a shared “dance culture” that pervades dance institutions around the country throughout the period from the 1950s to 2000s. Dancers themselves often reflected on this phenomenon, arguing that their experiences in dance training programs distanced them from other people whose lives took place outside what they call the “dance world” (*wudao shijie* 舞蹈世界). Some dancers said that they felt they had more in common with other dancers than with friends or family from their own home towns, because they had lived in the insular environment of the dance school since such a young age. The language, experiences, and sensibilities that they developed as full-time dance students, occupying the world of the dance school, became for them a way of life, and the idea of moving outside it could sometimes be frightening.

There are multiple reasons for the standardization and pervasiveness of a single type of formative experience for dancers in China’s institutions of dance training. One reason is that, in the 1950s, when professional state-sponsored dance schools and performance troupes were being established, they had almost no precedent in China. Dance as an independent field of professional artistic practice had not existed in China for about one thousand years, so the creation of a new field of professional dancers was done largely *ex nihilo*, and it was highly centralized. After the Beijing Dance School was established in 1954, its teaching curricula became the standard for professional dance training in local schools and troupes around the country. Graduates of the School were sent out, using the nationalized work assignment system, to schools and troupes around the country, where they passed along the curricula and training methods they had learned. After a few years, most dance training programs around the country had at least one member from the Beijing Dance School working there, or had teachers who had visited the Beijing Dance School on special training trips and brought back what they learned. The practices of dance education developed in the School thus became models for dance institutions around the country, which then provided similar formative experiences for young dancers over several generations.

Virtuosity and the Socialist Body: Dancer as Model Citizen

As discussed earlier in this chapter, socialist conceptions of revolutionary subjectivity in China drew influences from the Soviet ideal of the “New Man.” In particular, the notion of the New Man as it was developed in China associates physical strength -- especially the capacity to endure bodily hardship -- with ideological or revolutionary commitment. Even technical skill of the kind cultivated by dancers could be seen as evidence of moral rigor, since it demonstrated the transcendence of regular human ability through a process of self-discipline of the physical body. Due to this particular notion of moral cultivation, a “cult of virtuosity” emerged in socialist China, in which demonstrations of exceptional physical ability came to identify people as good socialist subjects. As experts in the art of bodily self-discipline, dancers took on a special status in society as one type of model citizen. They learned to place not only professional value, but also existential meaning, on their experiences of bodily training and self-mastery. Through the cult of virtuosity, dancers saw themselves and were seen by others as valuable members of society whose social value derived directly from their special bodily abilities.

Literature and art from the Mao era in China frequently extols individuals who are willing to endure physical hardship for the betterment of the social good. In her book *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Mao China*, Judith Farquhar (2002) shows how model citizens such as Lei Feng experienced hunger as morally validating. In a frequently told story, Lei Feng is

reprimanded for eating an extra crust of rice in the communal canteen, and after this he realizes his selfishness and henceforth willingly undergoes hunger as proof of his socialist virtue (Farquhar 2002: 37-45). Du Wanxiang, another model citizen discussed in Farquhar's book, is publicly revered for engaging in strenuous physical labor for the betterment of her community, and her ability to endure physical hardship confirms her superior moral quality. In Ding Ling's story of "Du Wanxiang," one scene depicts Du helping a group of girls across a frozen creek by wading through the water in her bare feet with the girls on her back. Later that night, Du's "frozen purple" feet serve as evidence of her moral goodness. Ding writes,

That night, as they lay on the *kang*, [the girls] could not sleep. 'I conceded her superiority when I realized that none of us could have done what she did,' one of them said. 'We middle school students talk a good line,' said another, 'all about how we're going to revolutionize our thoughts by learning from the workers, peasants, and soldiers. But when it comes to practice... we're not so great.' (Ding 1989 [1978]: 350)

In this story, as in many others from the period, the model citizen demonstrates her moral superiority through bodily evidence of revolutionary commitment. "Practice" here means being able to endure, in a highly physical way, what others cannot. To put revolutionary thought into action, in Du's case, is to endure with the physical body.

As Susan Brownell (1995) shows in *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic of China*, physical vigor also took on ideological significance in Mao era China because the strength of the individual body was associated with the strength of the nation. According to the notion of the "Maoist body," Brownell argues, the health and physical strength of individual Chinese citizens was seen as a problem of national significance, such that the state of one's physical body could make one a model citizen, a fit leader, or an anti-revolutionary. She writes,

Mao placed a great deal of importance on the health of the people's bodies as a basis for the health of the nation. In addition, he utilized the health of his own body as a sign of his fitness to rule. In Maoist body culture, *not* engaging in physical training would emulate the privileged exemption from exercise of the feudal elites; thus, people could be under a good deal of ideological pressure to train their bodies. (Brownell 1995: 57-58).

While the idea of the Maoist body in Brownell's formulation refers primarily to mass physical culture, which was not limited to professionals or elite trained practitioners, Brownell argues that elite professionals such as top athletes also participated in the ethics of physical training that promoted the Maoist body. Professional athletes such as those who performed the 1959 National Games, she argues, were "the vanguards of the new culture of the body" (58), whose public performance served to "publicly display the culture of the body promoted by the Party" (59). Therefore, for ordinary citizens and elite athletes alike, the physical condition of one's body was an important matter of political and ideological significance in Mao era China.

Professional dancers, like top athletes, practiced rigorous physical training that made them models for Maoist body culture. In dance, the use of the term "*jiankang*" (健康), meaning "healthy," to describe artistic works is a legacy of this body culture. Healthiness became an

important euphemism for aesthetic, as well as political, correctness in artistic performance in the Mao era. Even in 2007-2009, when I conducted fieldwork, the term was still frequently used to describe work considered both aesthetically pleasing and in keeping with official politics. So-called “healthy” performances dealt with socially acceptable themes (the definition of which changed somewhat over time) and contained vigorous dancing with joyful, determined, and optimistic characters. Liu Qingyi, the Chinese dance scholar quoted above, describes the term *jiankang* as follows:

At that time, we had the idea in our minds that [revolutionary performance] was a kind of healthy thing; we rejected everything unhealthy. But of course, health is an idea that means something different to everyone. So, what is health? Well, first, it is a kind of positive thing. Second, it is confirming. Third, it is upward moving. It certainly isn't anything dispirited or weak; we rejected that kind of thing. And it emphasizes a kind of robustness, yes, it is very robust. Of course, the whole thing pursued the lofty and the sublime, that's really what it was. But, so-called 'graceful beauty,' what we often talk about today, that was not emphasized. What it emphasized, I've realized now, is a kind of robust beauty. It is the robustness of the downtrodden, the working classes, that kind of strength and robustness. Because when the body was strong and sturdy, its movements are full of a kind of sunny quality. They express a generous expansive feeling. And this includes the female physique as well. All of those feminine qualities of 'cuteness,' 'delicacy,' and 'loveliness,' those were all excluded.

Liu's explanation of the idea of health is like a catalogue of the terminology of socialist bodily aesthetics. Positive, confirming, upward moving, robust, lofty, sublime, strong, sunny, and expansive -- these are the characteristics that defined beauty for dancers during the socialist period. As Liu explains, health here indicated a particular kind of beauty that had moral and political significance, since it was not the delicate, graceful beauty of the elite and sophisticated but rather the sturdy and robust beauty of the working classes. Insofar as dancers' bodies demonstrated this kind of healthy vigor, they embodied the qualities associated with correct class status and thus moral loftiness.

In many Mao era dance dramas, the physical virtuosity of dancers' bodies became an important aesthetic and ideological tool for the representation of revolutionary virtue on stage. In the revolutionary ballets of the Cultural Revolution, for example, dancers demonstrated the revolutionary fervor and moral strength of the model heroes and heroines on stage through the use of technically difficult dance routines, in which physical virtuosity became a corporeal expression of ideological virtue. Dance scholar Cheng Dehai (2000) has noted the role that technical displays of dance skill played in the depiction of “model heroes” in revolutionary ballet. Describing Scene Four from the revolutionary ballet *The White-Haired Girl*, Cheng writes,

Music with bright and gallant tones accompanies Wang's vibrant solo. He deftly jumps off the hill and takes a posture of *jin ji du li* (balancing on one leg in turned-in position, a heroic Chinese pose) facing right, then repeats the same stance on the opposite foot, facing left. Adroitly he leaps into a *pas de ciseaux* (scissors step [from ballet]), and performs *temps levé en dedans en a la seconde*

(turns in the air with one leg extending to the side), demonstrating his high-flying power and confident control. Then he assumed another pose of *jin ji du li* before doing an exhilarating *grand jeté* (large leap [from ballet]) high in the air. Finally, he swirls in a series of successive small turns of *tour chaînés* (turns in a chain [from ballet]) and finished his solo in the valiant pose of *jin ji lu li*. (Cheng 2000: 164)

Cheng's description, apart from highlighting the mixing of ballet elements with Chinese movement forms (a topic I address in the second half of this dissertation), draws clear attention to the technical difficulty and bodily virtuosity displayed in the movements of Wang Dachun, the male hero of the piece. Words and phrases such as "adroitly," "high-flying power," "confident control" all indicate Wang's demonstration of physically challenging movements. Cheng describes the final set of movements as an "exhilarating" leap "high in the air," followed by "swirls in a series of successive small turns," and finally a "valiant pose." The qualities of dynamism, courage, heroic spirit, and exceptional human capacity merge in the dancer's body. The virtuoso body of the dancer doubles as both a physical embodiment of vigor and endurance and a moving fictional representation of the Model Hero.

Yang Xi'er, the heroine of *The White-Haired Girl*, demonstrates similarly virtuosic bodily skill in her choreography, and, as in the case with Wang, her bodily demonstrations of strength and vigor are an important part of the expression of revolutionary exuberance. After the emotional reunion between Wang and Yang, which also serves as a celebration of the Communist Victory in the Chinese Civil War according to the work's story line, Yang dances the following solo sequence (Cheng's description), just outside the cave where Yang has been hiding from KMT soldiers and the enemy landlord:

Yang follows with her exquisite solo. She effortlessly executes twelve consecutive *grand fouetté en tournant à la seconde en dedans* (large flipping turns in second position). Then she adroitly does a series of *tour chaînés* (turns in a chain) and leaps into a *saut de basque* ("basque jump"). At this moment Wang runs to Yang and lifts her into a high *grand jeté* (large leap). The duet ends with him supporting her while she executes a triple *pirouette en dehors* (spin outwardly) on pointe.

Yang's solo takes place during what is both the emotional and ideological climax of the piece, because it is the moment both of Yang and Wang's emotional reunion and of Yang's savior by the revolutionary army. As in Wang's sequence, described above, Yang's solo incorporates numerous technically challenging movements, including twelve consecutive *grand fouetté* and numerous turns and leaps. Throughout the work, exceptional bodily feats accompany expressions of revolutionary feeling. For example, at the moment when Yang first recognizes Wang, the following movements take place:

Overwhelmed with insurmountable joy, [Yang] feverishly runs to [Wang] and strikes a *piqué en arabesque penchée* (leaning arabesque with her leg pointing to the sky). Supported by him, her lengthened limbs create a pure, almost vertical line with her leg extended behind. The cave turns bright and warm.

Here, Yang's straight leg extension serves as a bodily expression both of Yang's happiness and of the success of the revolutionary cause, as well as of Yang's personal strength. The leg extension is a product of Yang's "insurmountable joy," both at seeing her loved on and at being saved by the revolutionary army.

When dancers represent revolutionary heroes on stage, they bring together the actual physical qualities of the Maoist body and the New Man, which they have cultivated through rigorous dance training, together with the virtuous qualities of the revolutionary figures they represent. In this way, dancers during the Mao era doubly embodied the notion of the Model Citizen, or the ideal agent of Chinese socialist revolution. In their studies of the aesthetics of Mao era film and model theater, Wang Ban (1997) and Chen Xiaomei (2002) have both noted the significance of emotional or affective appeal as a major tool of ideological discourse. In his discussion of popular revolutionary films such as *Song of Youth* and *Nie Er*, Wang argues that such films enact a "strong affective appeal" to the audience's unconscious, and "reproduce the subject of the state affectively rather than discursively" (13). Rather than "rehearsing indoctrination abstractly," the films employ what Wang calls a "psychic mechanism of sublimation," which operates affectively through the viewer's imaginary identification with ideal cinematic images (13). In addition to this psychic mechanism, I argue that there is also a kinesthetic mechanism in the ideological work of Chinese revolutionary theater. In displays of balletic virtuosity, dancers generated an energetic atmosphere of bodily exhilaration ("the glow"), which heightened the force of the ideological messages being conveyed. Likewise, in their ability to physically demonstrate feats of bodily strength, flexibility, and dexterity that visibly transcend the realm of normal human capacities, dancers embodied the revolutionary notions of physical vigor and endurance that were idealized as necessary features of the revolutionary personality.

Because their performances allowed them to doubly embody Chinese revolutionary heroism -- in both their physical capacities and their depictions of fictional characters -- dancers during the Mao era in China took on a high social status in which they were seen as both charismatic stars and embodiments of revolutionary virtue. Reflecting on the sentiments that led her to decide to study dance, Chinese dance scholar Liu Qingyi recalls the admiration she felt as a child in the 1960s when she watched the female dancers in the People's Liberation Army performance troupes.

Do you know what the [military dance] performers wore in those days? They had those special army outfits, with that kind of belt stuck on, and skirts -- you know, the leotard skirts! And then they had that kind of army hat, and they would wear it just like this [she imitates putting the hat on, and cocking it to one side]. You would think, 'Wow, that is so beautiful!' And they were all done up with make-up too. Think about what it was like in those days for Chinese people to see a military troupe performer like this! It's as if the feeling of beauty and the feeling of revolution were completely melted together in the body of a single person.

In her final statement, "It's as if the feeling of beauty and the feeling of revolution were completely melted together in the body of a single person," Liu encapsulates the dancer's special position as a model citizen. The physical qualities of the dancer's body -- in this case Liu emphasizes their glamorous costumes and beauty, but I would argue that this includes their bodily abilities as exhibited in performance -- combines with a sense of revolutionary heroism in

the single image of the dancer. It is significant in this memory that the dancers Liu describes are dressed in leotards made to look like revolutionary combat clothing. Many dances produced during the Mao era included this effect of military costuming. These aesthetic choices, together with the official art policy of the time, both suggest that dancers, like other cultural workers, were meant to be artists and revolutionaries. And, in the body of the dancer, the artist and the revolutionary are inseparable, both on stage and in life.

According to Liu, average Chinese people living around the country during the Mao era frequently saw dancers or images of dancers. She remembers being strongly influenced by revolutionary films such as *Dang de Nü'er* and *Yingxiong Ernü* in her youth, as they showed often in movie theaters and in outdoor screening areas, usually for free. The adoration of revolutionary performers was, Liu says, “just like the worshipping of pop stars today.” Chen Xiaomei, a Chinese theater scholar in the United States who grew up in China in the 1970s, writes in her book *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (2002) of her own memories of idolizing dance stars. She writes,

I still remember the excitement I felt when, as a sixteen-year-old in the northeast wilderness in Heilongjiang Province, I received from my mother a birthday gift of a photo album with stills from the revolutionary model ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. My mother knew of my desire to possess it before I went to the northeast, but I could not afford it because of its exquisite, expensive design and high-quality paper. I was especially struck by the photos (which had become very popular posters) of Wu Qinghua, the female revolutionary heroine whose long, straight legs and graceful body had resisted a vicious landlord.... [N]ext to the dynamic and heroic image of Hong [the male lead] stands a beautiful Wu Qinghua, poised, balanced, supple, angular, and elegant. Her red costume embraces the ‘red’ culture of the period; it also crosses the boundary of the revolutionary culture of the time, with its flowing and soft silk materials not commonly seen in everyday clothing. For audiences in China in that period, however, these embodiments of youth, beauty, grace, passion, and energy on posters and other art works were among one of the rare decorations to be seen in public spaces and private homes. As such they could be gazed on with the same intensity as images of Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe, accompanied by portraits of an attractive Chairman Mao (Chen 2002: 36-37).

As Chen describes, dancers in socialist China were “gazed on with intensity” and admired as aestheticized embodiments of the political and moral ideals they performed. Adored by fans, their pictures were collected and coveted, and they were an important part of the popular entertainment culture of the period.

He Yanyun (b. 1956), a dancer from the Gansu Provincial Song and Dance Theater who became famous for her lead role in a 1979 dance drama, remembers herself being the target of the kind of adoration and fame that Liu and Chen describe. She performed the female lead role of Ying Niang in the Dunhuang-inspired 1979 Chinese classical style dance drama *Rain and Flowers on the Silk Road* (《思路花雨》), which premiered as part of the national thirty-year celebration of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in that year. The performance earned nation-wide popularity, in large part because it departed from the style of revolutionary ballet popular during the Cultural Revolution. As He’s story shows, although the specific styles

of performance from the Cultural Revolution had largely gone out of fashion, the star quality of leading dance performers was still quite powerful even as late as 1979. She recalls,

I really was like a celebrity then, you would never believe it. On the street someone would say ‘Aren’t you the one who played Ying Niang?’ and people would crowd around me. I remember I came to Beijing to perform, and my face was on every street corner. You know how nowadays on bus stops and storefronts and huge billboards you see the faces of movie stars and famous singers? Well, then it was the same thing, except it was my picture. It was really amazing. At that time being a dancer was like being a movie star.

The role of Ying Niang is not that of a revolutionary hero, and the classical aesthetic in which it was performed departed significantly from that embodied by the military dancers and revolutionary ballet stars described by Liu and Chen. As discussed in Chapter Six, *Rain and Flowers on the Silk Road* is part of the post-Cultural Revolution revival of the “soft beauty” aesthetic of Chinese classical dance, which had been banned since the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Despite these important differences, however, He’s experiences show that dancers embodied a star quality even when they were not performing in military uniforms, depicting revolutionary figures.

During the Mao era, dancers in China enjoyed a high social status, and at times even a star quality, that reflected the special importance that bodily virtuosity held in Chinese socialist body politics, entertainment culture, and political ideology. Dancers were Model Citizens not only because they embodied elements of revolutionary culture and ideology, but also because they inspired people to be like them. Liu says it was largely her admiration for what she saw as the beautiful and virtuous image of the military dancer that drove her to try out for the local military dance troupe in 1970. “I felt an intense hope to one day become a military troupe performer, especially a dance performer,” she says. Chen, too, argues that images of dancers and other performers playing revolutionary roles in revolutionary theater inspired many Chinese to be like the people in the posters and on stage. Chen writes, “The combination of these two kinds of images [the Marilyn Monroe-type images of performers and the “attractive” portraits of Chairman Mao], keeping each other company, enticed countless masses of both men and women to join the Cultural Revolution” (37).

As dual embodiments of the Model Citizen, dancers inspired their audiences to aspire to the type of revolutionary virtue they came to represent, through their personal achievements, their beauty, and the heroic characters they depicted on stage. Liu, in her discussion of the appeal of the PLA dancer, argues that she and others like her admired the dancers not just for their personal qualities as individuals but for a larger sense of yearning or aspiration they embodied. She calls this quality “*xiangwang*” (向往), or a generalized longing for better things. Comparing the feeling she had for the PLA dancer with the idolization of contemporary pop stars, Liu says, “The difference is that instead of worshipping a particular person, we worshipped that kind of longing or yearning (*xiangwang* 想望).” In their spectacularly capable movements and superhuman abilities, dancers embodied a longing for something better, which was one of the most basic ideals of the socialist utopian ideology. As Wang Ban argues, Mao-era Chinese aesthetics were an aesthetics of the sublime, which is:

a process of cultural edification and elevation, a vigorous striving for the lofty heights of personal and political perfection, a psychic defense mechanism designed to ward off dangers and threats, a constantly renewable heroic figure for popular emulation; a grand image of the body, or a crushing and uplifting experience ranging from the lowest depression to the highest rapture. (Wang 1996: 2)

The sublime, Wang argues, figures a heroic subject that transcends ordinary human limitations. “Whatever smacks too much of the human creature -- appetite, feeling, sensibility, sensuality, imagination, fear, passion, lust, self-interest -- is purged and repressed so that the all-too-human is sublimated into the super-human or even inhuman realm.” Dancers embodied the sublime in that they physically transcended boundaries of normal human movement. However, even more significantly, they embodied a sense of longing for the sublime, which as conveyed in the kinetic power of their performance.

Laboring as the (Chinese) Socialist Subject

In his book *Revolution On My Mind: Writing A Diary Under Stalin*, Jochen Hellbeck (2009) sets out a preliminary theory of socialist subjectivity, in which he argues that socialist subjects experienced self-realization and self-affirmation through the work of integrating themselves into collective histories of revolutionary change. In contrast to conventional liberal understandings of Soviet citizens that emphasize a denial selfhood under Stalinist authoritarianism, Hellbeck finds, in Stalin-era diaries from the Soviet Union, extensive evidence that Soviet citizens actively engaged the language and meanings of revolutionary ideology to achieve their own selfhood. Rather than systematically suppressing the self, therefore, Hellbeck argues, socialist and Communist ideology strongly appealed to it, and they provided socialist subjects with the tools to realize their own selfhood, through active processes of transformation and participation. He writes,

Many diarists believed they were living in a historical epoch, and they strove to participate in its unfolding. The unquestioned duty and, for many, desire to become involved in the march of history took hold in equal measure of loyal supporters of the Stalinist regime and of some [of] its vocal critics. These diarists also knew that to participate in a revolutionary politics of transformation they must first transform themselves. They used their diaries to monitor their thoughts and their performance in light of the mandate of ‘social use.’ To be aligned with history required work and struggle. While many authors failed to commune with the revolution consistently and were instead preoccupied with smaller pursuits, ranging from daily chores to matters of the heart, they blamed themselves for their ‘petty’ concerns and insisted that their value as human beings and progressive citizens depended on their ability to serve the wider interests of society. They strove to write themselves into the experience of a larger collectivity, which they imagined as a living organism.... In turn, many of those who were unable or unwilling to think in step with the marching collective felt depressed and useless, and some recorded their wish to die. (Hellbeck 2009: 54-55)

Taking the socialist ideal of the New Man as their model for personal growth, Soviet diarists sought to cultivate in themselves capacities for self-sacrifice, dedication, and physical endurance, so that they could participate in the process of social revolution. It was participation in this process of revolution, envisioned as a “life-giving force,” Hellbeck argues, that produced meaningful personal existence and the realization of socialist selfhood.

To understand the experience of dancers in socialist China during the Mao era, it is essential to consider that they, like the Soviet diarists in Hellbeck’s account, may have seen their dance work and daily lives as involved in a process of self-realization aimed at participation in a larger collective or revolutionary process. Examining the language of early mission statements produced by the Beijing Dance School in 1954, one finds consistent and repeated references to the idea that dancers trained in the School were to meant to serve national needs and national purposes. The 1954 founding Education Plan of the Beijing Dance School states that the School’s official aim was to “adapt to the needs of nation-wide culture construction [by] cultivating dance performers and teachers” (Beijing Wudao Xueyuan Annals 1997: 1). Although specific language changes with shifts in the political terrain, all statements of the School’s mission from 1954 to 2010 repeat the notion that dance talent should be cultivated with the ultimate aim of service to a larger social purpose. The “Introduction to the Academy” published on the Beijing Dance Academy website in 2010 links cultivation of human talent in the field of dance with “doing ever greater service to the great revival of the Chinese nation,” and the Academy’s 2004 Guiding Thought for Education calls for “cultivating human talent” and “working hard to make dance education adapt to [...] the needs of cultural construction” (Beijing Wudao Xueyuan Ten Year Report 2004: 109).

The extent to which dancers truly saw themselves working in service of the nation can be grasped to some extent through interviews. Talking with dancers who entered the Beijing Dance Academy in the 1950s, many describe having had a sense of joining a project larger than themselves, and even of participating directly, through dance labor, in the work of revolution. Lü Yisheng (b. 1937), a member of the first generation of professionally trained dancers in China, recounts his experience as follows:

When I was in fifth grade, some of my teachers received training from the Lu Xun Arts Academy, a Party-sponsored arts school that was established in my hometown near Harbin. I often saw them give theatrical performances, and I even performed in the shows sometimes myself when I was a kid. In May, 1949, they recruited me to the Arts and Culture Team, and that’s when I started arts and cultural work. So, at that time the People’s Republic of China had not yet been founded, but I had already began participating in revolutionary work (*canjia geming gongzuo le* 参加革命工作了). We performed in revolutionary theater pieces like *Xongmei Kaihuang* [*Brother and Sister Pioneers* 《兄妹开荒》], which used local dance forms like *yangge* (秧歌)¹⁵ to tell about peasants joining the revolution. So, that’s why we called it “revolutionary cultural and art work” (*revolutionary cultural and arts work*); it was cultural and art work, but it was revolutionary.

¹⁵ For a historical account of *yangge* dance and its use in early Communist Party political activism, see Hung (2010).

In 1950, shortly after he joined the Art and Culture Team, Lü adopted his current name “Yisheng” (艺生), which means “art student” or “born for art.” During his early years in the Arts and Cultural Team, Lü traveled to Shenyang, where he was exposed to more dance forms, including ballet and modern dance. Like many others I interviewed, in 1954, Lü learned about the opening of the Beijing Dance School through a notice in a newspaper. He was interested in auditioning for the school, and he received permission from his Team leader to go to Beijing to tryout.

So, I got my travel money, packed my bags and headed for Beijing. Taking the train to Beijing was hard then, we had to make stops along the way, including Tianjin. But, when we got to Tianjin, the conductor said the tracks were broken from a flood and we couldn't go any further. Someone said there was a bus to Beijing, so I bought a ticket. Well, it turned out to be a truck. You know, the kind you have to stand in, and there were people all packed in together. We went for about 4 hours, and the road was not very flat. When we got to Beijing, they took us directly to the Qianmen station.

To get there, you go across Chang'an Avenue, past Tian'anmen. Tears just started rushing down my face. I was an orphan from very young, and I started work early, in a troupe supported directly by the Communist Party. I'd basically been raised by the Party. Back then we really admired Chairman Mao, and seeing his portrait hanging right there he seemed like the heart of the whole country. So, tears just fell down my face. There weren't any hotels open, so I just slept under the eave of Qianmen building, on the street. The next day, I found the Dance School. I looked like a vagabond, but I was so happy. I'd come to the heart of the country. You think, then I was only 15 years old, no parents, no brothers or sisters, and I went by myself to Beijing to study. Now, when students come to audition, a whole trail of parents and grandparents come to take care of them. Ha! At that time, the School was in a very small alley called Xiang'er Hutong. I got there, and I told the woman at the door, 'I've come to audition.' She said, 'Why have you come now? The auditions are over. Everyone's already tested!' I saw that the School leader was still there, so I went directly up to him and I asked if there was any way I could still get in. I told him that I had come all the way from Dongbei -- it's not far now but at the time it seemed like a long way -- and that I had come all the way to Beijing. He said as it turned out, the lower grades were all tested full, but the higher grades weren't. So, I was able to take the test, and I ended up joining the fourth-year class.

Lü's story has undoubtedly been shaped by the shifting political and cultural conditions in China and by the politics of personal and collective memory that necessarily impact such accounts of the past.¹⁶ His account nevertheless serves as a helpful indication of the types of experiences dancers of his generation may have had, or, perhaps even more interesting, what dancers like Lü felt their experiences should have been.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the politics of memory and the problems of re-writing revolutionary history through personal accounts in post-revolutionary China, see Lee and Yang (2007).

Lü's account is filled with elements of socialist selfhood. One example is the way in which Lü interjects into his own personal autobiographical account elements of national and Party history. He states, "So, at that time the People's Republic of China had not yet been founded, but I had already begun to participate in revolutionary work." Lü envisions his own life as part of a national narrative, such that events that take place in his own development are necessarily linked to the development of the Party and the nation. Another example is in Lü's reference to "revolutionary work." As I discuss in Chapter Three, the language dancers use to talk about beginning work as a dancer in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s is consistently that of "joining the revolution." This language would never be used by dancers today, and interviewees like Lü often acknowledge this, both by laughing when they use the phrase and by offering additional explanation to provide context in what is now quite a different era. Lü does both in his account. He laughs each time he speaks the phrase "revolutionary work," and he makes a special point to explain why performing in works like *Brother and Sister Pioneer* constituted "participating in revolutionary work." Finally, two other examples of socialist selfhood expressed in Lü's account are his frequent allusions to physical hardship and struggle and a keen emotional connection to symbols of the Communist Party. Lü offers multiple accounts of physical hardship during his journey to Beijing -- the flooded train tracks, standing for four hours packed into the bed of a truck, sleeping outside on the street, being alone without any family members, and nearly getting turned away at the door of the audition room. Each of these setbacks confirms Lü's commitment to his cause, as well as his ability to endure. Symbols of the Communist Party such as Tian'anmen Square and Mao's portrait enter into Lü's account as triggers of poignant personal emotion, and they serve simultaneously as markers in a path of personal ambition and as significant collective symbols. "I'd come to the heart of the country," Lü repeats twice during the narrative. This fact of having arrived at the country's political center, seems, for Lü, to take on as much or more significance as the fact that he is about to embark on an experience, namely entering dance school, that will change the fate of his life.

Numerous scholars have demonstrated the existence of a special political culture in China during the era of socialist revolution and nation-building, in which personal narratives became subsumed in and directed by larger national or Party-centered stories of collective history. In *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic*, Hung Chang-Tai (2010) argues that the cultural transformation that accompanied the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power in China is equally or perhaps even more significant than the organizational and political transformations. Hung shows how language, space, visual media, and public performance all became tools in the building of a new communist political culture that sought, even if it was not always completely successful, to include the entire population. Through its discursive, institutional, and disciplinary power, this political culture reached beyond the realm of state ideology to enter into and become intimately embedded in the private realms of Chinese subjects, their structures of feeling and ways of life, and their personal stories about themselves (Anagnost 1997; Barlow and Zito 1994; Farquhar 2002; Liu 2002; Rofel 1999; Yan 2003). As Farquhar notes, "The extent to which Lei Feng and his like were 'models of and models for' a whole way of life suggest that there are settings in which the state and the people, culture and propaganda, are hard to distinguish" (Farquhar 2002: 37).

What I seek to highlight here is the way in which, in socialist China, dancers engaged in the cultivation of physical virtuosity as a way to create themselves as socialist subjects and socialist selves. Demonstrations of extreme bodily skill are pervasive in Chinese dance developed since the Mao era, not only in the revolutionary ballets of the Cultural Revolution, but

in nearly all forms of Chinese dance. In Chinese Mongolian folk dance created during the Mao era, for example, dancers perform complex movements with stacks of porcelain bowls balanced on their foreheads. In Chinese classical dance, a new genre created in the 1950s that incorporates elements of ballet, Chinese indigenous theater and martial arts, dancers execute breathtaking acrobatic leaps, flips, and turns, often in combination with sword, fan, and sleeve-work that requires years of specialized training to master. Many dance critics and scholars, including Chinese dancers and choreographers themselves, have expressed concern about what they see as an empty pursuit of technical skill in contemporary Chinese dance. Chinese contemporary dance choreographer Wang Mei, in her 2006 piece *Swan Lake Diaries*, caricatures the virtuosic body of Chinese dance using oversized plastic props of giant legs. Managed like puppets by the human dancers, the legs fly through space, leap, and bend backwards, even at one point glowing eerily white, lit in black light against a dark background. When the dancing legs erase the dancers who carry them, the otherwise humorous tenor of the piece becomes more somber, since it suggests Wang's critique of the dance system as a whole as one that subverts dancers under the oppression of virtuosity.

The critiques posed by Wang and others point to valid concerns about the human sacrifice involved in a structure of professionalization that systematically pushes dancers to physical extremes, and I address these concerns at greater length in the following chapter. Nevertheless, in order to assess these sacrifices and their significance to the individuals who participate in them, it is important to first understand the historical and cultural context in which these practices developed, as well as the meanings and significances they once held. When Wang Yabin, Sun Rui, and Liu Yan lift their legs, controlled, long, and beautiful, to find the perfect 180-degree extension, they are citing an entire cultural history of the Chinese socialist body, which cannot be dismissed as a mere fetishization of human conformity or of erasure of the dancing subject. In the extended leg, one sees a reminder of a system of arts training that celebrated human commitment and possibility, in which the dancer used her body to speak to, motivate, and enrapture the nation, and in which the dancer, because of her bodily skill, had the potential to embody the ideals and aspirations of a revolutionary society. The extended leg, even as it borders on the grotesque, because it does so also reaches toward the sublime, referencing a mode of selfhood in which to endure struggle is to gain agency, and to be disciplined is to become relevant. In the extended leg, one sees a statement of professional accomplishment and identity, in which to be a dancer is to be virtuous, to be a contributing member of society, and to be heroic.

Chapter Two

Eating Art After Mao: Paradoxes of Survival and Spirit in the Reform Era



Mao Zedong Thought Performance Troupe, Sichuan, 1970s.
Photo courtesy of Wang Chaoying.

“For in the first place labour, *life-activity, productive life* itself, appears to man merely as a *means* of satisfying a need -- the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species.

--Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.”

“‘Art and culture workers’ (文艺工作者) in China today aren’t like they used to be.”

--Yuan Weixing (b. circa 1960), Sichuanese singer who manages performances at a nightclub in Guanzhou.

Introduction

In her now classic study of gender and family relations in revolutionary China, Kay Ann Johnson (1983) outlines an important paradox of China's socialist project: while the Chinese Communist Party and those who supported it often promoted highly progressive ideals, their efforts did not always succeed in uprooting the elements of "traditional society" against which their ideals were directed, and, in some cases, they further entrenched them. In the case of the Party's promotion of gender equality and attack on traditional family structures, Johnson argues, entrenchment offers the most historically accurate portrayal. "The outcome of nearly a century of upheaval and revolution," she writes, "born partly of widespread 'family crises' among intellectuals and peasants, has done more to restore the traditional role and structure of the family than to fundamentally reform it" (215). Even as the Party attempted to reform the family structure, Johnson argues, the actual effects of its policies and their repercussions led in many ways to the opposite of their stated desired outcome.

In the case of the Party's effort to raise the status of physical labor -- another of its attempts to reform what its representatives saw as the prejudices and inequalities of traditional culture -- a similar outcome has emerged. As discussed in Chapter One, the valorization of physical labor as a means to individual self-realization and social reform was an important part of the Chinese socialist agenda. In China, as in other socialist societies, Communist Party ideology called for a rearrangement of the conventional relationship between physical and mental labor, such that physical labor gained a higher social status than it was traditionally afforded. At times, participation in physical labor was even seen as the only way to engage in revolutionary work and to achieve revolutionary consciousness. For dancers in socialist China, the valorization of physical labor did have a strong and positive impact on their social status, and it provided them with opportunities that otherwise would not have been available. Prior to the establishment of professional performance schools in the 1950s, individuals who made a living performing dance, indigenous theater, acrobatics, and other physically demanding performance forms were considered to be of very low social status, with minimal economic stability, and poor living and work conditions (Mackaras 1975; Zhang et al. 1994). The professionalization and nationalization of performance work as "cultural and art work" (*wenyi gongzuo* 文艺工作) raised the status of performers to equal to or even at times higher than that of writers and intellectuals. However, while dancers did enjoy a higher social status and more work opportunities during the socialist era, the same structures and policies that helped bring them this status during the Mao era paradoxically led, during the post-Mao Reform Era, to the development of a range of new problems.

It was largely due to the intensive professionalization and nationalization of the dance industry during the Mao era that dancers in Reform Era China face increasing challenges both in terms of personal fulfillment and economic survival. Dance is a difficult profession to pursue anywhere in the world, as it requires intensive early training, is highly competitive, can often lead to injury, and usually requires career changes mid-life (Wulff 1998). For dancers in Reform Era China, these problems are exacerbated by a number of factors. First, because dancers during the Mao era were considered important contributors to a national structure of cultural and art work, they enjoyed what was known as a "*tie fanwan*" (铁饭碗) or "iron rice bowl," a stable income that guaranteed their ability to pursue their artistic work without concern for basic economic survival.

With this historical precedent, many dancers in the Reform Era now feel disillusioned they have entered the dance field with the idea that it would provide them with secure economic stability, only to find, after having devoted their youth to dance training, that this is no longer the case. For a number of reasons, including the fact that dance schools required lower test scores to enter than other programs and seemed to provide stable jobs, demand for places in dance schools rose quickly in the 1990s, around the same time that education was beginning to be privatized. New dance schools appeared in large numbers, and existing programs expanded, providing specialized training to a much larger population of dancers than before. While this produced new teaching jobs, contributing to the idea that dance training offered stable employment, it also led to higher levels of competition for other available jobs. Additionally, believing that teaching jobs in the new dance schools would fill and new ones would not open up, many dancers decided to go directly into teaching after graduation, bypassing the stage. This led many dancers and dance instructors to feel that dance training was not being used to its proper end.

While these changes took place in dance education, the dance production industry was also being transformed, by a combination of changes in entertainment media, reform in state cultural policies, and pressures from the state to increase commercial revenue for state-sponsored song and dance companies performances. The funding and attention of government culture bureaus and private entertainment companies moved increasingly away from live performance, so positions in performance companies remained limited, and the relative pay of dancers decreased substantially compared to other types of work. Dance companies experimented with different performance forms, seeking to gain support simultaneously from the state and from commercial entertainment. This led dancers to feel either ill-equipped for the new performance forms, or that they weren't being sufficiently challenged.

Finally, the specialized type of training that dancers received in professional dance schools, with its focus on developing high-level physical virtuosity, reduced dancers' access to forms of "culture" now deemed essential for social advancement in the post-Mao era. These include proficiency in math and science, language ability (both Chinese and English), and familiarity with new technology. The insularity and narrowness of dance training tended to cut dancers off from regular educational opportunities and forms of cultural capital that were important for personal success in the Reform Era, leading to pervasive stereotypes that dancers lacked education, social skills, and culture.

Lü Yisheng, the orphan-turned-dancer whose story of socialist selfhood is discussed in Chapter One, by the end of the 1990s had become a vehement critic of the specialized approach to professional dance training that had developed during the Mao era and was still being used in China at the time. Lü became Director of the Beijing Dance Academy in the late 1980s and he served during an important period of the Academy's expansion and internal reforms. Drawing on a larger national push toward so-called "*suzhi jiaoyu*" (素质教育), or "education for quality," Lü became a firm supporter of a more generalized approach to dance education, as he felt the focus on physical training was no longer appropriate for China's Reform Era society. In his book *Wudao Jiaoyu Xue* 《舞蹈教育学》 (*Studies in Dance Education*), Lü writes,

Our narrow knowledge and circumscribed technical ability really makes it difficult for our human talents to satisfy the current needs. If the dance talents we are cultivating were in the planned economy, they could still put their abilities to good use. However, now that we have arrived at the market economy, many

weaknesses have exposed themselves. The majority [of dancers] are now practically stunted and half-formed human talent. (Lü 2000: 7)

In his discussion of what he sees as the problems of dance education in the Reform Era, Lü uses language that subverts the previous era's elevation of physical skill. When he speaks of the technical skills of dancers, Lü prefers the term "*jineng*" (技能 "technical ability") to "*jiqiao*" (技巧 "technical trick"). *Jiqiao* is the word used for dance movements in "technique routines" (*jiqiao zuhe*) discussed in Chapter One, and it indicates a skillful mastery of bodily movements acquired over time through detailed practice. *Jineng* refers to a more basic kind of physical ability, and the term is often used in the context of vocational occupations such as mechanics and typists. The terms "*ban canfei*" (半残废) and "*ban jiezi*" (半截子), which I have translated as "stunted" and "half-formed," evoke connotations of physical deformity. Turning the language of virtuosity on its head, Lü argues that the dance education cripples dancers, because it focuses attention only on the physical, at the expense of other types of development.

Lü's critique of the professional dance training system in China reflects a new post-Mao cultural regime in which the value previously ascribed to bodily skills and bodily knowledge is now being largely erased. Whereas dance in the Mao era was elevated to the level of a vocation, a type of labor that garnered social status, produced recognized social value, and could be pursued as an artistic calling, dance in the Reform Era is being demoted to a mere livelihood, and one with low social status and unstable economic viability. While successful dancers are still revered as beautiful and accomplished, they have nowhere near the star status of musicians or actors of the same professional accomplishment. In comparison to film actors, who are sometimes denigrated for achieving fame only for their good looks (this happens to women more often than men), dancers receive even greater scorn in public opinion, where they are often described as "*sizhi fada tounao jiandan*" (四肢发达头脑简单), meaning "the 'four limbs,' [i.e. the physical body,] are developed, but the brain is simple."

Dance is increasingly gendered as a profession considered appropriate only for beautiful women or incompetent men. According to the stereotypes, beautiful female dancers will work for a few years and then marry rich based on their refined qualities and good looks, and incompetent men are those who couldn't do well on the exams in school and so were enrolled in a 'technical' profession, and a socially frivolous and 'unmanly' one at that. The low status and low economic value of "body work" in capitalist economies is well-documented (Eagleton 1998; Zandy 2004). This was one of the major observations that drove Marx to devise his theory of communism, which he said would allow "[each] individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions" (Marx and Engels 1978[1932]: 197). In a society increasingly marked by signs of capitalist development, dancers in Reform Era China find the value of their physical labor increasingly effaced, both in economic and cultural terms. Furthermore, their situation is exacerbated by the fact that the institutional and affective structures of their profession maintain strong continuities with the Mao era, a time when dancers and dance labor enjoyed an altogether different relation to arrangements of social production.

In this chapter, I explore the struggles that dancers face in China during the Reform Era, as part of a larger question about the fate of socialist cultural forms and specifically of body culture after Mao.¹⁷ In the title of this chapter, "eating art" has two meanings. First, drawing on

¹⁷ While the post-Mao era shares with post-socialism many important features, it is in many ways not post-socialist. I discuss this problem further in Chapter Three.

the frequently used metaphor of the “rice bowl,” it addresses the problem of artistic survival -- that is, how dancers in the Reform Era struggle to make a living through their artistic practice. Second, the idea of “eating art” suggests a change in the qualitative experience of the dancer’s struggle to reconcile the perceived social value of dance in the Reform Era with its perceived value in an earlier era. “Things are so different now,” states He Qun, a male dancer who worked at a local performance troupe in southern Sichuan in the 1970s. “Before, I used to be proud to walk down the street with my long neck and my turned out feet, because people knew I was a dancer and they admired me for it.” Tracing the terms “*shengcun*” (生存), or “survival,” and “*jingshen*” (精神), or “spirit,” this chapter offers insight into the new ways in which dancers, as artists, see themselves and their relation to a social collective in the post-Mao era. Although struggles for survival and fulfillment are ubiquitous among artists in capitalist societies around the world, this chapter shows the ways in which these struggles for dancers in China are specific to the post-Mao condition and its paradoxes.

Disillusionment

During more than two years conducting fieldwork among professional dancers in China, one of my most remarkable findings was the palpable sense of disillusionment Chinese dancers feel with the post-1978 economic boom. They expressed great concern about the negative consequences of these reforms for the field of dance in China and for artistic work more generally. Despite immense growth in China’s creative and entertainment industries, as well as greater diversification of artistic production (Keane 2004), my informants find, on the whole, that the economic reforms bring major new challenges, some of which attack the very core essence of what they understand to be true artistic practice. Dancers predominantly locate themselves among the losers in China’s “Thirty Years of Opening Up and Reform” -- among those whose lives are increasingly less secure, less fulfilling, and fraught with contradiction. Even as their leaping bodies and glowing smiles are shown rejoicing China’s “glorious development” during official celebrations, in their private reflections these dancers contradict the gleeful images they so often present.

Wu Weifeng, a 30-year-old male dancer who performs frequently in nationally televised dance competitions and galas, is an esteemed young performer. His photos are displayed prominently on the walls of the Beijing Dance Academy, China’s premier dance conservatory, and he is a role model for the young dancers who study there. “I’ve succeeded,” Wu says, “I am one of the lucky few, pursuing the dream.” Despite this success, however, Wu admits that he is unhappy with his career and frequently feels unfulfilled by the work opportunities available to him. Sitting at lunch one day between rehearsals, Wu turned to me, tears welling in his eyes, and said:

You know, I get calls all the time to appear on television or to guest perform in some gala event. I agree but I don’t really want to. Each time I get one of these calls I feel sad, as if it is a death call. Sometimes I feel like I’m no more than a circus bear. They just want me to do flips and jumps and pull my leg up over my ear to impress the audience. These people don’t understand dance at all. Is this really what I worked for my whole life? My teachers used to talk about dance as if it was something more meaningful, and I believed that. I guess the dream I once had is very different from the reality I exist in today, and that makes me sad.

In his comments, Wu expresses a division between the depth of meaning he invests in dance and the shallowness of what is expected of him at television and gala events. The work he envisions for himself is different from what he finds available in daily life. “Of course these jobs pay well, and as a dancer I feel so much financial pressure, because who knows how many more years I’ll be able to perform,” Wu says, explaining what motivates him to accept the jobs. “However, I often find this [sort of activity] contradicts the work I appreciate and want to do.”

Wu’s sense of a disjuncture is more than mere disenchantment with the ideals of youth, or some inevitable conflict between art and economy. Wu’s reference to his teachers in the quote above suggests that his personal view of dance work was passed down to him from an earlier generation. This generation grew up under a very different moral economy of work and fulfillment than the one in which Wu exists today. Thus, his feelings of contradiction reflect not only his own personal conflict but rather a much larger rift between moral worlds and ways of life located in different historical moments in recent Chinese history. A drastic shift from the Mao to post-Mao eras produced tremendous changes over the time of a single generation and in the course of individual lives; it can in no way be called a clean break. Elements of the previous era live on in the present, albeit in altered form, and Wu’s feelings of frustration are a result of this historical continuity amidst change.

Wu’s teachers, who imparted to him their sense of the greater meaning of dance work, developed their values in an era strongly influenced by socialist and Maoist ideals. In their youth, physical labor and cultural work were both considered valorous means of contributing to the larger social cause, and participation in dance work thus entailed political and moral commitments to these ends.¹⁸ Such views, as Wu finds now, are often in conflict with the Reform Era focus on material wealth, entertainment culture, and personal success. The sense of contradiction, disillusionment, and even alienation and anomie that Wu experiences is thus, in part, an expression of the troubled coexistence of the Mao and the post-Mao in the present.

The following story makes the psychological and experiential consequences of the contradiction between socialist and post-socialist moral orders even more apparent. Gao Guoqing, a male dancer born in 1957 in southern China, moved from a military troupe to a municipal-level troupe in 1986. After the move, he felt keenly the effects of market reforms on the dance industry. In a personal reflection written almost two decades later, he describes the experience as follows:

After I got [to the new troupe], I realized how bad things really were. In those years local song and dance companies were in a terrible condition. Performers had no work, they just sat around drinking and playing mahjongg all day and making money performing in nightclubs in the evenings. I would go to work, and since there was nothing to do, I would be the only one practicing in the rehearsal room....

I spent three years hopping nightclubs myself as a singer and back-up dancer, vexed by the realities of being poor and wondering where my next meal would come from and living in a tortured nostalgia for the past....

I remember there was only one bulb still lit in the practice room, and it seemed to be flickering, like my emotions, about to burn out. I swore that if that light burnt out I would stop practicing for good. I stared up at that light

¹⁸ See Chapter One.

for three years, afraid it would stay lit and at the same time afraid it would burn out. I thought of this great vocation I had once struggled and fought for, the arduous years of blood and sweat, of endless jumping and turning. The bar that had turned from yellow to black under my hands, the smooth flat floor that became wavy and cracked under my feet. It seemed I could hear the groans of one pair after another of worn out dance shoes piled before my eyes, as if a battle were going on between flesh and spirit. I felt my soul crying out. In the end I struggled through, and when I left that bulb was still lit.¹⁹

Gao, like many of his generation, remembers the 1980s as a transition between two very different ways of life. The old way of life, for Gao, was characterized by rigorous daily training and commitment to dance as a “great vocation.” The new one meant idling life away drinking and playing mahjongg and working in nightclubs to make ends meet.

Gao’s sense of frustration and loss, which he calls “a battle [...] going on between flesh and spirit,” personified in “the groans of one pair after another of worn out dance shoes,” is a response to changes in the performance art world that came about as part of market reform. His feelings, like Wu’s, are informed by a connection to past experiences and values, in this case Gao’s own. Gao worked for many years as a respected dancer in a troupe with an active performance schedule that received strong state support and provided secure salaries for its members. Like almost all professional dancers in China since the establishment of vocational art schools in the 1950s, Gao trained full-time at a professional school of dance from before age 13. His life was devoted to dance in an institutional and systematic sense as well as a moral one. Younger dancers like Wu, though they grew up completely in the post-Mao era, are products of Mao-era educational planning and development, notably the idea that professional success and fulfillment depends primarily on strong technical skills and ideological clarity. As state performance troupes undergo privatization and the entertainment industry calls for lower wages, shorter contracts, and more commercially oriented work, dancers often feel caught competing systems and values, forced to create their own ways of negotiating between them.

The Post-Mao Condition

To understand the moral experience of dancers and others living in contemporary China, one must consider the distinctly post-Mao nature of their predicament. As post-Mao subjects, dancers’ daily lives are marked by historical peculiarities of temporal proximity to the Mao era. These include, for example, the persistence of ethical sensibilities, discourses of value and meaning-making, professional skills and expectations, bodily habits, and institutional formations from the Mao era, albeit in altered forms, in the present. In addition, dancers and others in post-Mao China are responding to their distinctively post-Mao conditions by producing new forms of life, work, value, and meaning. One such new form is an emerging discourse on “spiritual pursuits,” through which dancers articulate possibilities of personal fulfillment beyond the material. These new forms invoke modes of moral and ideological reasoning in a language that is neither socialist, neoliberal, nor traditionally Chinese, but rather a newly created combination of all three. For dancers, this means redefining what constitutes artistic practice, personal fulfillment, and meaningful work, and finding ways to navigate new institutional formations and social systems.

¹⁹ Text from unpublished autobiographical essay.

Gao's story helps illustrate what I mean here by the post-Mao condition. As one of thousands of dancers in China employed by the state during the Mao era, Gao grew up learning that dance was a "great vocation" aimed at "serving the people" and "contributing to the revolution."²⁰ Like Wu, yet even more directly, Gao's sensibilities were marked by the Mao-era cultural complex Franz Schurmann (1971) calls "Communist ideology and organization," a way of life that developed during the Mao era and included ingrained ways of feeling and thinking, as well as lasting institutional organizational structures. Although Gao no longer sought ideologically committed work in the same sense in the 1980s as he did in the earlier period, he did maintain a desire to do what he considered worthwhile or meaningful work. By this standard, for Gao, dancing in nightclubs doing back-up dancing to make money was not enough to satisfy him either mentally or physically. Since he first entered dance school at age 13, Gao's life was organized around the daily discipline of dance training. Gao references the bodily experience of the studio and its lasting hold on him when he states, "I thought of this great vocation I had once struggled and fought for, the arduous years of blood and sweat, of endless jumping and turning. The barre that had turned from yellow to black under my hands, the smooth flat floor that became wavy and cracked under my feet." Here, Gao suggests a visceral accumulation, gained over years of practice, that generated bodily skills as well as needs. His act of continued practice, even with no one else around and the one light bulb in the studio threatening to burn out, shows that Gao still has a strong inclination to participate in the daily practice of dance, even after changing economic and social conditions have made such desire apparently obsolete.

A growing anthropological literature on post-socialism has shown, both in China (Farquhar 2002; Kipnis 2008) and in the former Soviet Union (Buroway and Verdery 1999; Dunn 2004; Petryna 2002; Yurchak 2006), that the felt existence of the past in the present in post-socialist societies is not limited to personal memory or nostalgia. Industrial, economic and political infrastructures, physical architecture, ways of seeing, thinking, evaluating, sensing, and moving all carry parts of the socialist era into the present. Dance education is one of many examples of institutional continuities between the Mao and the post-Mao eras that impact the lives of dancers. Dancers in the early twentieth century still enter full-time professional training straight out of elementary school as they did in the 1950s and 60s. In these schools, they live disciplined lives of rigorous daily practice pursuing, in bodily form, an aesthetic and physical ideal of human perfectibility. Due to the rising demand for formal education in the Reform Era, and the push for vocational schools to generate additional income by meeting this demand, higher numbers of students are trained in professional dance programs today than were under the planned economy, despite limited opportunities for secure dance-based employment (Lü 2000).

The new forms of life, work, value, and meaning being created by post-Mao dancers as new and distinctly post-socialist formulations of professional fulfillment often themselves contain elements of or references to the socialist era. Through their use of the discourse of "spiritual" and "material" pursuits, for example, dancers find meaning in the present through a retrospective projection of spiritual meaning onto the Mao era, which they then retrieve for new purposes in the present through new interpretations. In their rejection of certain kinds of work they see as merely a "rice bowl," pursued "just to exist," dancers identify and resist what they see as pressures in the Reform Era to seek only personal profit, instead of to create "pure" art that

²⁰ Such phrases were ubiquitous in the arts world in China during Mao's rule, since, as of the famous 1942 Yan'an Forum, the official goal of artists and intellectuals was to contribute to society by promoting the goals of socialist reform.

has value for society, and they compare new kinds of work with those they remember or imagine being available in the past. By opposing ideas such as material and spiritual, or “just work” and “using one’s heart,” Chinese dancers are developing a new language of moral orientation to work, as well as a new and original ethics of art practice, which remake aspects of Mao era morality for use in the present.

Reform Era Chinese dancers, in this paper, are not seen as examples of modern individuals, nor are they thought to be moving away from state oppression toward some universalizing notion of art (Gell 1996; Marcus and Myers 1995). The ethical problem of dancers in Reform Era China, although similar to that faced by a majority of artists living under market capitalism in the West, is not equivalent to it. In the West, artists often use the term “selling out” to describe personal compromise in the face of economic pressures. This notion of selling out, however, is not appropriate in the Chinese context. As it is used in the West, selling out assumes an ideal of an “autonomous” artist who seeks to isolate him or herself from the influences of “hegemonic” economic and political forces (Bourdieu 1985). It is founded in a notion of bourgeois art that arose in Western Europe during the nineteenth century (Williams 1976; Eagleton 1996) and has been shown adequate to describe the values and historical predicament of artists in post-socialist societies (Faraday 2000). In a similar way to artists in the capitalist West, dancers in Reform Era China express concern about compromising their artistic standards in order to make a living. However, rather than seeing such compromise as “selling out” to capitalist enterprises -- or even to the state -- dancers in China draw upon a different set of key concepts and ideas in articulating their position. Rather than seeking to maintain individual autonomy in relation to commercial enterprises or government bodies, dancers in China instead express a concern for meaningful integration into a larger social and economic system, which, since the end of the Mao era, they see as increasingly eluding them. It is precisely the inability of concepts like “selling out” and “autonomous artist” to describe the ethics of work among Chinese dancers that highlights very different nature of artistic practice and ethics of art-making in contexts of post-socialism. Rather than fitting into the established understandings of the artist and artistic practice in modern capitalist societies, dancers in China reveal and create new paths for alternative “other” modern artistic subjectivities and selves (Rofel 1999; Liu 2002).

To sell out for an artist in the West means to betray one’s ideals, to relinquish one’s individuality and succumb to the tastes, desires, or demands of the hegemony of the masses. For the Chinese dancer as post-socialist subject, however, it is precisely the temptation to fulfill individual, rather than social needs, that betrays the artistic ideal. The idea, developed in large part under socialism, that art should benefit society remains an important part of what many dancers consider meaningful work, as will be elucidated in several examples below. This notion of the meaning of artistic work is quite different from pervasive understandings of art in the West since the nineteenth century, and it suggests a need for ethnographic research and theoretical inquiry into the specific problems of art worlds under post-socialism.

Reinventing the Spiritual

A “discourse of the spiritual” pervaded my interactions with post-Mao Chinese dancers as they reflected on questions of artistic practice and fulfillment. Dancers spoke of artistic practice as contributing to “spiritual life” (*jingshen shenghuo* 精神生活), and they insisted that to be fulfilled as an artist, one must pursue spiritual rather than material pursuits. In our discussions, the idea of the spiritual was nearly always contrasted with the material, and it was often given little other definition than the overcoming or rejection of individual material need or desire. The

spiritual, usually expressed as “spiritual pursuits” (*jingshen zhuiqiu* 精神追求), was always defined as something positive and healthy, in contrast to material, or “material pursuits” (*wuzhi zhuiqiu* 物质追求), which were thought to be corrupting and negative. Material pursuits were thought of as mundane and sometimes pernicious desires for individual material comfort and wealth; spiritual pursuits were other forms of wealth or value that could not be measured or achieved in financial terms.

Dancers located spirit in the Mao era and insisted that it had been lost in the present, as a result of growing drive for economic wealth and personal profit and success. Spiritual pursuits were understood as something threatened by the market reforms, and they needed to be rehabilitated in order for society as a whole to improve. Luo Bin, a dance research scholar at the China Academy of Art Research in Beijing offers a fairly typical formulation of the “loss of spirit” narrative. He stated,

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, all of Chinese society began to pursue the satisfaction of material life, yet they didn't pursue the satisfaction of spiritual life. Overall, people's living standards improved, but China suffered in other respects. For example, I feel that as a whole the post-1980s generation, though they feel a great deal of pressure, lacks overall in personal cultivation and drive for excellence. This has a lot to do with the way that education has changed, and the ways people's lives have changed.

Here, Luo uses the discourse of spiritual pursuits, retroactively applied to the Mao era, as a way to describe what he sees as a nation-wide shift after the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s. According to Luo, pursuit of spiritual satisfaction was replaced by individualistic pursuit of material wealth, or what many call “desire for things” (*wuyu* 物欲). While living standards have improved, a measure of material satisfaction, the young generation lacks spiritual satisfaction, exemplified here by what Luo calls “personal cultivation and drive for excellence.”

Apart from statements about the loss of spiritual pursuits in Chinese society at large, a number of my informants spoke of the loss of spiritual pursuits as a problem in the arts in particular. In this way, they explicitly connect spiritual pursuits to ideals of artistic practice, arguing that the loss of spiritual pursuits makes it more difficult to pursue art in China today than it was in the Mao era. In their view, artists who have lost spiritual pursuits are not artists in a true sense, and they tend to be lacking in direction and unfulfilled. When identifying examples of “spirit” in the past, dancers often cited the personal commitment and sacrifice that they and others experienced as part of their work. These sacrifices, they are argued, were motivated by a spiritual feeling that they were really contributing to the revolution. “In those days we didn't call it ‘entering the song and dance troupe,’ we called it ‘participating in the ranks of the revolution’ (参加革命队伍),” says Yuan Luyang, reflecting on his entry into the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe in 1959.

The experiences of dancers like Yuan are quite different from those of dancers in the 1980s and 1990s. Yuan studied, lived and worked in the Troupe from age thirteen to age forty-eight, the majority of his professional life. Having been born in 1945, in the midst of China's decade of war that preceded the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Yuan personally experienced much of the revolution that his dance productions were meant to promote and commemorate. “‘You've come to join the revolution!’ our teachers told us in dance school,” recalls Yuan. “At the time we really believed what our teachers said, that we were joining the

revolution,” Yuan reflects. “In my heart I felt that I was becoming a revolutionary, just like the revolutionary armies of Yan’an in the days before 1949. The Eighth Route Army, the Fourth Route Army, the Liberation Army! We thought we were just like them.” Yuan’s teachers were dancers in the Troupe, and he often saw them perform.

After graduation, when his entire class stayed on to work in the Troupe, Yuan became one of the lead male dancers. Three pieces in which Yuan danced major roles are *Sunflowers* (《向阳花》), *Two Hoes* (《两把锄头》), and *Life Goes On, the Assault is Endless* (《生命不息, 冲锋不止》). Created in 1964, 1964, and 1972, respectively, they represent the kind of dance works created by song and dance troupes around the country during the Mao era. *Sunflowers* was choreographed to a popular song called “Commune Members are Sunflowers,” Yuan recalls. “Everyone in China was singing that song, it went...” [he sings]:

The commune is a long green vine, and commune members are the gourds on the vine. The gourd connects to the vine, the vine pulls the gourd, the fatter the vine, the sweeter the gourd. The stronger the vine the bigger the gourd!

The mood of the piece was happy and joyous, Yuan explains, and the dancers dressed like peasants wearing sickles and straw hats. “The piece was about people having fun as they worked,” he explains. Another piece Yuan performed in the early 1960s was *Two Hoes*, about a landlord who wants to get revenge for having his land and power taken away during the revolution and reforms. In plotting his attack to restore the old order, the landlord hides a dagger inside a hoe. The other characters in the piece, two young students from the Communist Youth League, catch the landlord and thwart his plans at revenge. “At the time, the Communist Party was promoting class struggle,” Yuan explains. “Chairman Mao had a famous saying that went, ‘All class enemies want to get revenge and restore the old order. Therefore, we cannot relax our vigilance toward this group.’ The idea was that old landlords were going to try to revolt against the new order, and Chiang Kai-Shek was going to try come back from Taiwan and try to take over the mainland, so we needed to keep a close eye on so-called ‘class enemies.’” Like most dance works of the time, *Two Hoes* was created to promote a political message.

In addition to glorifying manual labor and class struggle, dance pieces from the 1960s and 1970s also dealt with military and historical themes in Party propaganda. For example, the 1972 work *Life Goes On, the Assault is Endless* commemorates the heroism demonstrated by the China People’s Liberation Army during a famous 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict. “There were a number of works based on this story at the time,” reflects Haiyan Jackson, a contemporary of Yuan’s and a former dancer in the Sichuan Provincial Song and Dance Troupe in the nearby city of Chengdu. “These works were extremely moving, and when we performed them audience members were often brought to tears.”

Although he expressed a nostalgic tone when talking about his own commitment to dance work, Yuan was highly critical when talking about the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a historical era. “Whatever you do, don’t romanticize that era!” says Yuan. “That was one of the darkest times in Chinese history.” However, Yuan argues that artists in the 1960s and 70s nevertheless felt very committed to their work. When asked how he felt personally about doing

such work and whether he could really “throw himself into”²¹ work that had explicitly political themes, Yuan replies,

Of course I threw myself into it! I was young then. I jumped high! I felt this was something worth doing, and I felt I was worthy of it. I stood on the side of China, on the side of the Chinese people, and on the side of the government.
‘Participating in the revolution,’ you know? Of course I was devoted! It’s called ‘devoting one’s life to the Party’s art undertaking’ (献身党的文艺事业).

In his reflections on life as a cultural worker under Mao, Yuan separates the devotion he felt as a dancer to his judgment of the era from a historical perspective. While expressing criticism about the era as a whole, he sees in his own past a sense of devotion to work, and he argues that this sense of devotion was, too, a product of the era. “When everyone in the whole country, all day, every day is doing this kind of work,” Yuan explains, “unless you are really some kind of visionary, you won’t stop producing, stop researching, stop creating, etc., to ask questions about whether you should be doing what you are doing.” Thus, in Yuan’s view, it was natural to feel committed to one’s work as a dancer in the Mao era.

In their stories from the Mao era, dancers often locate “spirit” retrospectively in the past in the type of personal commitment to dance as a vocation that Yuan describes above. Ma Junzhen (b. 1938), a member of the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe from 1957 to 1994, describes her experiences during the Cultural Revolution in this way. In 1968, Ma recounts, she and other older performers were accused of being “seedlings of revisionism” and were forced off the stage and sent to the countryside to do manual labor with the peasants. “My toes were all bloody and my toenails had fallen off from dancing on pointe in *The White-Haired Girl*, but I still practiced,” Ma says. “I still wanted to perform.” The Troupe recruited a new group of younger performers, but many did not possess the professional ability to perform the work. “When you’re dancing Jiang Qing’s Model Dramas, you can’t just go up on pointe and then fall down,” says Ma. “That would be a major problem, and might even be said to be politically suspect.” So, after being in the countryside for only a short while, Ma was sent a notice that she was needed back at the Troupe to perform a special show for some visiting army officers. Ma saw this as an affront to her personal and professional dignity, and she recalls responding in the following way:

I was so angry, and I had a temper. Right in front of the officer, I went ‘ke-cha!’ and cut off my braid! You know, to perform in the Model Dramas you have to have a long braid. So, that meant that I wasn’t going to perform. I took the lotus flowers that I was using to bandage my toes and I bundled them up and threw them into the Yangtze River. ‘Sail away!’ I thought, ‘leave and never come back!’

Here, Ma uses this story of her resistance to the officer as a sign of the spiritual meaning she placed on being a dancer. To her, dancing was a matter of serious commitment, and it could not

²¹ As discussed in the Introduction, the idea of “throwing oneself into” (投入) an activity was a commonly discussed theme among my informants. It was considered highly positive to throw oneself into one’s work, since this indicated state of spiritual devotion to one’s profession that went beyond professional requirements.

be treated lightly. Though she still performed in the show, “with a borrowed braid,” she says, the episode illustrates the significant emotional investment dancers often felt about performing the works, or at least the commitment they imagine having felt when they think of these experiences later in life.

Haiyan Jackson, a dancer in the Sichuan Provincial Song and Dance Troupe during the 1970s, offers a similar account of personal sacrifice and professional commitment from the era of revolutionary performance. Haiyan recalls the terrible work and living conditions in the Troupe, which she sees as a sign of her commitment at the time. She describes,

When we performed for the workers and peasants it was often on temporary stages. Sometimes we would do a big jump and when we landed the stage would break and we’d fall through. Other times we couldn’t see where the edge of the stage was and we’d fall into the audience. These kind of conditions are difficult to imagine now. And, oh, the lice! We often got lice from sleeping on the floor in the peasants’ homes, but that’s where we had to stay when we were on tour.

Material sacrifice was trivial compared to the sense of commitment to the cause she felt at the time, Hai Yan insists. “The professional standards for the Model Dramas were extremely high, and we all wanted to perform the Model Dramas and to do a good job. We felt a drive from within our own hearts.” Haiyan argues that the type of spiritual commitment she felt at the time is hard now for people to relate to. “I remember truly feeling that the revolution had chosen me,” she states. “What mattered to us were the intangibles, things you can’t see or touch, like the cause we were fighting for. Today that kind of inner feeling is hard for people to understand.”

Wang Chaoying and Yuan Weixing, a couple in their early fifties, worked together as performers in a local theatrical troupe in Wanyuan, Sichuan, from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. Wang was a dancer and her husband Yuan a singer. When the troupe underwent major reforms in the late 1980s, returning to a Sichuan indigenous theater troupe, both Wang and Yuan left to pursue other work (Wang is now a dance teacher at a local middle school and Yuan manages the performances at a nightclub). Since their time in the troupe spanned the shift from the end of the Cultural Revolution and beginning of the Reform Era, Wang and Yuan personally experienced the effects of larger social changes on life in the troupe, especially the impact of economic and ideological change. Both feel strongly that a loss of spirit indeed occurred and that artists today continue to suffer from this loss of spirit. The couple’s son, Tengyuan, is a student in his early twenties pursuing a degree in performance at the provincial level art academy in Sichuan. Tengyuan agrees with his parents that young artists lack the spirit of the older generation, and at times he seems sorrowful to have missed out on what he imagines were more real experiences of art in that earlier time.

The following quotations represent a conversation between the three members of this family. I found their views to be typical among many dancers in the Reform Era who describe art as a “lost” spiritual pursuit after the end of the Mao era. Their reflections are filled with a tone of nostalgia that I found common among dancers of different ages from around China:

Yuan (father):

‘Art and culture workers’ (文艺工作者 *wenyi gongzuozhe*) in China today aren’t like they used to be. When my wife and I performed in the troupe during the 1970s, arts and cultural workers had spiritual pursuits, and they had very few

material or economic pursuits. They believed that they were building the ideological superstructure, so in theoretical terms they understood that their work had great importance. The arts and cultural workers of today, in contrast, are individualistic, and they only pursue profit. Now the majority of performers have no guarantee of existence (生存的保证 *shengcun de baozheng*), so they have no choice but to feel that economic gain is more important. Because they do not have spiritual pursuits, today many performers are lacking in direction.

Tengyuan (son):

[In my parents' generation] people used economic support as a basis to create art; economic support was the means but art was the goal. Now, things are the other way around. Many art students my age just want to use art as a way to make money, to support themselves economically. They treat art as just another 'rice bowl' (饭碗 *fanwan*), a means of existence. Sometimes, I feel that way too. When art was linked to politics at least people cared about producing art, and they saw it as a spiritual pursuit. Now, art is connected more with entertainment and it is more focused on the material.

Wang (mother):

There is such an enormous difference between [the 1960s and 70s] and today. Back then our material standards of living were very low, but people's heart/soul (*xinling* 心灵) was pure. People did not pursue the elevation of material aspects of life, and society was more harmonious. Back then, a dancer walking down the street would be respected and admired. Everyone knew who they were and believed that they had this kind of glow (*guang* 光), that made people notice them. [They would think:] 'It's a member of the 'culture and art troupe' (*wengongtuan* 文工团)!' But now, when someone runs into a dancer on the street, they wear an especially scornful look. They say in a hushed voice, 'Oh, it's only a dancer.'

A unifying theme running through each of these comments is a feeling of lament over the present state of artists and art work. For Yuan, the problem with art today is that, due to a loss of the ideological component of cultural work, artists no longer have a clear sense of the larger social value or importance of their work. According to Tengyuan, what is most disappointing about the younger generation of artists is their instrumentalization of art practice. Rather than an end in itself, art is treated today simply as a "rice bowl," just another way to pay the bills. What is lost in the new era, in Wang's view, is the dancer's sense of having status and being admired, once embodied in her "glowing luster," and an inner state of pureness of the heart.

The statements above on the current problems in the art world and their connection to a lost sense of spiritual pursuit are filled with language and ideas from the Mao era. The terms "culture and arts workers" and "cultural work team," for example, which appear in Yuan and Wang's reflections, are products of the particular organization of art work under Mao. "Culture and art workers" is a phrase coined during the Yan'an era to refer to artists and intellectuals who were committed to the cause of advancing socialist revolution through the remaking of culture

and consciousness in art. “Cultural work teams” were theatrical troupes set up beginning in the 1940s to serve Communist Party efforts by teaching principles of class struggle, nationalism, and social reform through public performance. Both of these terms are obsolete in the post-Mao era, and they cannot be understood without explanation of the institutions and ideas of an earlier time.

References to the Mao era, because of their very obsolescence, often serve to highlight what is missing or lost in the present. Beyond language, concrete referents were also used to create this effect. One night Tengyuan asked if I would like to see the theater where his parents used to perform. While hearing the stories from Wang and Yuan as if they were from some far off time and place, it hadn’t crossed my mind that in spatial terms they had all taken place just down the road from their current home. We walked into town until we came to a large building in the center of the old market square. It was covered in off-white marble with a giant facade made of plates of reflective glass and giant gold characters reading “Wanyuan Theater.” It reminded me of a shopping mall. Under the facade a giant metal gate locked off the entrance. “Now that it’s been renovated, you can’t go in anymore,” Tengyuan said, “But I can tell you what it used to look like.” As we stood looking at the building, he described to me the theater of his parents’ memories, the ways they had described it to him.

“It used to be shaped like the character for ‘sun’ (日),” he began, “but with the bottom line removed.” In my mind’s eye, I envisioned the old building as I looked at the new one. The old theater as he described it was completely open on one side, and audience members could enter directly into the open-air seating area, which was flanked on either side by buildings that held offices and dorms. Directly opposite the open wall was the stage, and in front of it stood long benches where audiences sat to watch performances. The building continued behind the stage into a square courtyard with buildings on all four sides, and this is where the troupe members lived and rehearsed. The difference in architectural structures between the old and new theaters reflect the changes that have taken place in the economy of art practice during market reforms. Instead of an open facade that invited guests in from outside, without limiting their entry, the new facade, imposing and gated, seemed constructed in a way to keep guests out. Although I couldn’t be sure, I guessed that the new building no longer had dorms, living spaces, an outdoor rehearsal space, showers, or a cafeteria. Unlike performance troupes of the past, which doubled as both workplaces and living communities, contemporary theatrical troupes tended more now to be simply places to work.

The new theater obscures the old by standing in its place, but nevertheless reminds one of its former existence. It illuminates the structural, systematic, and institutional changes that have corresponded with “loss of spirit” in the post-Mao era. In doing so, it serves to criticize new realities. Luo’s reference to “the way that education has changed,” Yuan’s concern over “guarantee of existence,” Tengyuan’s mention of the “rice bowl,” and Wang’s remark on the “scornful looks” of people on the street -- all point to significant problems in the economic structures of doing art in China today. By locating in the past what is missing in the present, my informants make possible the reinvention of spirit, the mobilization of powerful memories and shared languages of meaning from the Mao era to critique what they see as the problems of the present. For dancers, the most looming of such issues is the problem of existence itself.

The Problem of Existence

“Let’s do the math together,” says Wang Zhuorao, a 20-year-old female who graduated one year before from a ten year full-time professional dance program at the Central University of

Nationalities in Beijing. “I’ve been studying dance since I was nine,” she says, “it’s all I know. But now I don’t want to dance anymore. I wish I had never started.” Wang recites for me the calculations that have filled her head during the past year since graduation. “Say it costs a million RMB (\$150,000) to get an apartment in Beijing, and I can make 3,000 RMB (\$430) per month as a professional dancer in a good state-sponsored company. Even if I become one of the most famous dancers in China, and I continue dancing for my whole life, how many years will it take me to buy an apartment?” Wang says she sees her classmates driving new cars and buying homes, and she wonders where their money comes from. She shakes her head. “If I can’t even support myself with dance then what is the point? I don’t even enjoy dancing. I don’t want this kind of life.”

Wang’s anxiety-ridden comparisons of apartment prices to income and her very serious concern that her chosen career is not economically viable as a way to support oneself, is an expression of what dancers call the “problem of existence” (*shengcun wenti* 生存问题). Worries of this kind are common not just among dancers but of young urbanites in China more generally. In countless conversations with young people in cities around China during my fieldwork, rising housing costs were among the most common topics of conversation and a genuine concern for almost everyone. What makes the situation for dancers different, however, is that the existence of their entire way of life -- a way of life they have been socialized into by increasingly obsolete but nevertheless real Mao-era institutions of professional education -- is what seems to be at stake. One is and can only be a dancer, and yet the possibility of life as a dancer seems less and less economically viable. Wang’s statement that dance is “all [she] know[s],” is not an exaggeration in the context of dance education. Professional dancers in China today spend the majority of their youth in isolating environments in which they interact almost exclusively with other dancers, and their educational opportunities outside of dance are extremely limited (Lü 2000).

As products of China’s professional dance education system, dancers themselves are living referents to the Mao era in the present. In the planned economy of the 1950s, when the basic structure of today’s dance education system in China was constructed, the Stalinist models of practical learning and so-called “early age specialization” (Yu 1999), adopted from the Soviet Union made sense (Pepper 1996). At that time dancers could focus their full heart and energy on the cultivation of dance skill, knowing that such skill would find socially recognized value -- and financial guarantee of existence -- in state-sponsored projects of public art. Today, however, in an increasingly commercialized and market-based art economy, dancers often feel trapped by their education into a way of life that is no longer viable. As one 18-year-old college student at the Beijing Dance Academy put it, “I chose dance when I was too young to know what that meant. Now it’s too late.”

According to most dancers, “loss of spirit” and “the problem of existence” are causally related social phenomena. The problem of existence, they argue, makes it impossible for dancers not to abandon spiritual pursuits in the post-Mao era. Yuan, the nostalgic father quoted above, states, “Now the majority of performers have no guarantee of existence, so they have no choice but to feel that economic gain is more important.” Wu, the dancer who felt like a circus bear quoted in the first section of this paper, offers the same explanation for his own choices. “I feel so much financial pressure,” he says. Yuan, providing a deeper elaboration on the problem of existence, argues that economic reform has made it structurally impossible for dancers to earn back the investment they make in developing artistic skill or creating a work of art. He explained,

Today, there are two kinds of professional performance students: one who just needs to make money, to exist, to earn enough to support themselves in the future; and a second who has a dream but realizes that the competition is extreme. The reality is the same for both kinds of students. After they graduate, the majority of these students go to work in tourist areas, bars, or other commercial venues. The economic and social value they gain from these kinds of work does not equal the amount of long-term training that they have undergone [in professional arts schools]. The amount of money that a [dance] work earns on the entertainment market can never be equal to the amount of time and effort that goes into its making. *The initial investment can never be recouped.* There is no method for determining the value of a piece of performance art that really makes up for its value in time and exertion.

When examined in purely economic terms, Yuan argues, the problem is clear: “The initial investment can never be recouped.” Due to new arrangements of national art markets, as well as the shifting of art practice from the ideological to the entertainment realms, Yuan states, it is now almost inevitable that dancers will fail in their attempt to find work that matches their value in terms of training and work. It is precisely this impossibility of economic fulfillment that makes the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment necessary and meaningful for my informants, both as a critical discourse and as a life project.

Peng Huan, a 28-year-old female dancer uses the discourse of spirit, combined with an arguably Marxist materialist analysis, to explicitly criticize the impact of economic reform on the arts. In her view, artists suffer from a lack of economic support, which leads them to abandon artistic creation. Loss of spirit results because “artistic creation is not connected up with existence.” She explained:

The problem is that right now artistic creation is not connected up with existence. Many people, in order to exist, are forced to totally give up art. They change majors, do completely different lines of work, or take on commercial performances. This is because art is fairly high in the field of the spiritual. If you haven't eaten, you can't go do art. If you are at war, or you have nothing to eat, how can you do art?

In Peng's view, state sponsored performance troupes provided the basic economic support necessary for artistic creation. “Art,” she says is “fairly high in the field of the spiritual.” It requires an economic base in order to exist at all. Without such support, Peng implies, dancers would not have a material basis from which to pursue spirit as artistic practice, because they would “worry about whether they will have food to eat.” She said,

There are many professional performance troupes in which the state provides money for artistic creation. Indeed, these have provided benefits to the country, and they have provided a means of existence for performers, because when they create they don't have to worry about whether they will have food to eat. This is just the reality. However, most of the people are still disconnected.

In Peng's analysis, being "disconnected" means being denied material existence, and therefore deprived of the ability to pursue spirit, by a lack of state support for the arts. Economic reform, in this view, directly causes of lack of spirit in society, because it deprives those who would otherwise seek it of the basic material existence upon which such pursuit relies.

The idea that spirit is something lost or put at risk as a result of economic reform, and that it therefore requires active cultivation in the present, has appeared multiple times in official discourse and policy in China since the 1980s. The "Theory of Spiritual Civilization" (*jingshen wenming lun* 精神文明论), for example, expressed in the 1982 Twelfth Party Congress Report, states, "At the same time that we produce a high-level material civilization, we must work hard to construct a high level socialist spiritual civilization. This is a problem of the strategic policy of building socialism" (Cao and Wei 1992:119). The discourse of spiritual civilization distinguished clearly between spiritual and material aspects of culture; thus, it defined spirit as the immaterial products of human culture. Spiritual civilization includes, for example, "the state of progress of humanity's knowledge and morality," "the civilization of human consciousness, thought, and psychology," and "the entire spiritual wealth created in the process of humanity's social historical development, including education, science, culture, ideals, morality, tradition, custom, etc" (Cao and Wei 1992:220).

The 1983 "Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution" was the most important official post-1978 discourse to criticize the costs of economic reform on explicitly spiritual grounds. Promoted by leftists in the Party apparently concerned with weakening ideological commitment to socialist values, the campaign attacked social problems such as pornography, corruption, and gambling, which were said to be the products of "bourgeois liberalism" and an increased desire to make money. Despite its openly leftist motivations, however, the spiritual pollution campaign avoided criticism of material problems of the economic reforms. As one analyst observes,

According to official announcements, the anti-pollution campaign was to be limited to theoretical, literary, and artistic circles only and it was not to extend to scientific and technological spheres, the economic front, or rural areas, because there is no spiritual pollution in the development of industry, agriculture, and science and technology. In other words, the work of eliminating ideological pollution was to focus only on the opposition of socialism, communism, and party leadership and on pornography in terms of bourgeois liberalism, ultra-individualism, and bourgeois decadence. For example, scientific studies, the import of advanced equipment, enterprise autonomy, success or failure of economic reforms, and attempts to achieve affluence belonged neither to spiritual pollution nor to bourgeois liberalization. (Wang 1986:53-4)

According to the logic of spiritual pollution, costs of economic reform were real and significant, but they lie primarily in the realm of the spiritual, not the material. "Bourgeois liberalism, ultra-individualism, and bourgeois decadence" were, for the promoters of the campaign, primarily ideological problems to be treated through ideological solutions. Rather than attack the economic reforms from the approach of Marxist material economy, they abandoned material analysis for a political position that was leftist in name but ultimately compatible with the economic policies of the new post-1978 regime.

The discourse of the spiritual deployed by my informants, while it builds on earlier conceptions of the spiritual developed in state policies and campaigns, diverges from these

earlier uses in important ways. Most significantly, it locates the ultimate cause of loss of spirit in the material, rather than ideological, costs of market reforms. While the spiritual is conceived as an essentially immaterial component of human life (this is consistent with both the discourses of spiritual civilization and spiritual pollution discussed above), they insist that spiritual life and spiritual pursuits are only possible when provided with a foundation of material existence. By bringing existence into question, market reforms have threatened the existence of spirit as well. What my informants call the problem of existence states that pursuit of spirit is lost in the present, not because people's hearts and consciousness are corrupted by individualism and material desire (although this is a symptom, in their view), but, rather, because they are forced to be so by a threat to their very basic material life.

The use of the Mao era as a reference point in discussions of loss of spirit is particularly interesting in this context, because it turns apparently "healthy" (*jiankang* 健康) nostalgia for Mao-era "socialist spirit" into a biting materialist critique of the present. Here, the term healthy is used as it is in contemporary Chinese socialist discourse, where it means being in harmony with state agendas. By retrospectively projecting spirit onto the Mao period and lamenting its absence in the present, my informants reinvent spirit as a way of articulating their concerns about China's recent economic developments in a language that is both familiar and politically palatable.

I do not mean to imply that my informants are active political dissenters seeking to mask a critical point of view in subversive discourse, or that artists' work during the Mao era was invariably spiritually fulfilling. The extent to which any individual uses the discourse of spirit to intentionally criticize current state policy and action inevitably varies. Likewise, the extent to which descriptions of the Mao era as a time when "people's heart/soul was pure," and "people cared about producing art" actually or truthfully represent that era is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, in dancers' longing for and potentially fictionalized descriptions of the Maoist past, one finds carefully articulated and richly detailed expressions of current ideals and values.

"Pure Art," or Seeking Spirit in the Social

As shown in a recent study of middle-aged "life cultivation" (*yangsheng* 养生) practitioners living in Beijing (Farquhar and Zhang 2005), the active cultivation of spirit is an important part of fulfillment, health, and happiness in contemporary China, and it is both inherently personal and intensely social. Among life cultivation practitioners, spirit is a quality of liveness that goes beyond basic biological or economic life to include positive aspects of health and fulfillment, such as pleasure, energy, and mood. "To have spirit, to be spirited, is to be more than just alive" (Farquhar and Zhang 2005:312). Spirit, in the context of everyday life cultivation in Beijing, is also that which characterizes participation in social life. "Jingshen is that excess that characterizes civilized life" (Farquhar and Zhang 2005:312). Thus, for many in contemporary China, to pursue spirit means to pursue emotional and physical health that goes beyond basic living, and it is to do so by way of cultivation of one's capacity to participate in the social. Within the context of life cultivation, the pursuit of spirit is characterized by an "emphasis on collective practice and friendship" that, in Agamben's (1998) terms, distinguishes bare life (*zōē*) from "the form of life of the citizen" (*bios*) (Farquhar and Zhang 2005:313). This notion of spirit assumes that sociability is a central component of the generation of personal spiritual life.

The importance of the social in spiritual life reflects forms of selfhood and sentiment that are rooted in long histories in both classical and Maoist Chinese culture. To understand the meaning and form of spiritual pursuits in contemporary China thus requires understanding of the

fact that, at least for the life cultivation practitioners Farquhar and Zhang work with and the dancers in my study, the self is conceptualized as being neither fundamentally in opposition to nor located outside the collective -- it is an inherently social self. In this iteration of modernity, “social ties are prior to the individual and constitutive of the self” (Farquhar and Zhang 2005:318). In post-Mao China, spiritual pursuits, selfhood, and fulfillment are not part of individual life as distinguished from collective life, because such a distinction is not particularly meaningful. To speak non-reflexively of the “modern individual” when trying to understand person ethics in post-Mao China imposes categories and ways of thinking that do not fit the ethnographic understandings of either myself or Farquhar.

When dancers in post-Mao China seek fulfillment in the pursuit of spirit as artistic practice, they imagine such artistic practice as oriented toward the fulfillment of the social self. In the logic of spirit that motivates dancers in China, pursuit of material existence is unfulfilling because it meets purely individual needs. My informants referred to this kind of work scornfully as “instrumental” (*gongli* 功利), aimed only at money, fame, or material reward, all of which they saw as belonging only to the individual. The individual here is understood as that which is cut off from the collective and therefore incomplete -- lacking in spirit. Peng Huan, the 28-year-old female dancer quoted above, was one of numerous informants who described a notion of “pure art” (*chun yishu* 纯艺术) as that which is oriented toward social fulfillment. She explained,

Pure art affects people’s hearts/souls. Commercial things are part of the market and, to put it frankly, they are just for existence. They are very shallow. What matters for me personally is pure art. If I wanted to do commercial art, I could easily do that; I have the qualifications and ability. I wouldn’t need to come back to Beijing to study. To pursue art, I left my boyfriend, two of them. Because I feel that romance, having a family, all of that belongs only to you as an individual. But, to create a work of art, that affects the benefit of the masses (*dazhong de liyi*). I want to be able to say, ‘I did it. I took it seriously’ (*wo renzhen le*). I’ll know that what I gave forth is not just the time to create this work, but the entire time I spent living. I used my life to do this thing. I want to do it seriously, you know?

In Peng’s view of meaningful artistic work, “pure art” is different from work that is “just for existence.” Work that is just for existence fulfills only individual life, and it therefore lacks the extra significance, fulfillment, and sense of contribution to the collective that constitutes spiritual life.

I saw Peng leave, frustrated, from a dance company audition in which she was persistently overlooked despite her obvious skill, because, in her words, “she wasn’t close with the right people.” I heard her lament about being forced to change her choreography multiple times for a major dance competition because the themes she chose were deemed morally questionable and “unhealthy.” Despite being a full-time student (she was working to complete the necessary coursework that would turn her two-year credential into a regular bachelor’s degree), Peng spent a great deal of money and time entertaining friends she thought might become helpful clients, connections, or collaborators to link her up with choreography projects. She traveled frequently to take short-term projects in other cities, and she rarely knew in advance what or where her next project would be. For Peng, struggling to work as an independent dancer and choreographer in Beijing is worth it because it has the potential to produce significance and value beyond purely individual life.

At the end of our interview, Peng returned again to the idea of individual fulfillment and its inability to satisfy what for her is an inherently social form of spiritual and artistic work. She said,

This vocation, I really took it seriously, and that's what counts. We are creating things that give people a sense of common feeling (*tonggan* 同感). Otherwise, you do all of those things that only belong to yourself as an individual. I don't think that's worth it.

She describes the three new pieces she was currently creating and explained how each produces common feeling and reflection based on shared social experience. Then she concluded,

Only doing it this way is worth it. If you just naively create a work of art so that you can make a living, well, you move, you dance, but there's no point/meaning/significance (*mei sha yisi* 没啥意思).

In Peng's reflections one sees the emergence of a notion that truly fulfilling art -- "pure art" -- is characterized by a particular kind of personal commitment. She repeats several times the phrase "I took it seriously" (*wo renzhen le* 我认真了), as a way of explaining the difference between doing pure art and doing other things. It is this act of taking it seriously, of treating her work as a vocation, to which she commits her life fully and completely, that Peng sees as the defining feature of doing pure art. Taking art seriously means doing it not just for her own individual gain but rather for its contribution to shared experience, what she calls "the benefit of the masses" and "a sense of common feeling."

In their discussions of the lost spirit of the Mao era, dancers often cited a connection to collective forms of fulfillment and meaning as what they felt was missing in the present. In these discussions, they contrasted the extreme individualism and instrumental attitudes of artists today with the socially-oriented work of artists under Mao. Long Yunna, a 38-year-old female dancer-turned-choreographer in Guangzhou said,

Why do people participate in dance competitions nowadays? They do it to get a prize, because with a prize they can apply for a higher professional status, and with a higher professional status they make more money, get better benefits, and in turn get more fame and more work. In the [Mao era], however, people were really just doing things for revolution and for the nation. Dance teachers trained their students to cultivate more talent for the nation. But now it's not like that. It's two completely different ideas. People in my parents' generation were very pure and simple. Why? Because they were really doing things for the nation. People today, in contrast, only do things for the individual material gain.

Like others who employ the language of spirit to discuss what constitutes fulfilling artistic practice, Long offers a nostalgic vision of the Maoist past as a way to expose the problems of the present. Here, an artistic commitment to support the state agenda is described as fulfilling artistic practice, since it meant "really just doing things for revolution and for the nation," as opposed to seeking "individual material gain." In the discourse of spirit and pure art promoted by a new generation of dancers, the Mao era notion of revolutionary spirit is revised, in the present, into a

call for socially committed art that criticizes economic reform and rejects the dominant logics of market capitalism and their impact on personal lives.

Beyond Autonomy and Individualism

It would be incorrect to see post-Mao Chinese dancers' call for socially committed and spiritually fulfilling art as the emergence of a form of resistant, autonomous, or individualistic art practice equivalent to that found in the modern West. In China, the individual as an independently existing, reflexive, expressive, and self-seeking entity can never be taken for granted, and such an individual is certainly neither natural nor necessarily good. Nor is the autonomy, freedom, or individuality of the artist thought to be the starting point for true art as meaningful creative work.

Dance, because of its particular history in socialist China, is an especially interesting site in which to explore new formations of the social self and its related ethics of fulfillment. Dance brings together two types of work that have had particularly traumatic histories under Chinese socialism: physical labor and cultural work. Physical labor is work associated with the body, rather than with the mind and includes agricultural labor, factory work, and artistic or athletic work such as gymnastics and sports that focus on the development of embodied skill as the primary goal. "Cultural work" refers to work in literature and the arts, including folk arts, that contributes to the spiritual life of a people. Both physical labor and cultural work were attributed especially high ideological and moral significance during the Mao era, which is largely lost in the post-Mao market reform society. Likewise, cultural work was elevated to a high status under the Mao era because it was believed that cultural work helped to carry out the revolution in superstructure which was to accompany and make possible the overall social revolution.²²

The sudden and extreme elevation of physical labor and cultural work from low to high status in the rise of the Communist Party mirrors in reverse the similarly extreme fall of grace experienced by physical laborers and cultural workers in the post-Mao era, as they return, ever unwillingly, to pre-revolution positions of low status, poverty and shame. For dancers, the Mao era was one of the only times in China's history when work as a professional performer was considered respectable and even virtuous. In the Mao era, the physical labor required of dance work made dancers heroic embodiments of the ideal that human will can triumph over physical matter. This physical component of dance, combined with the new significance placed on all cultural work as vital to the revolution, gave dancers an indispensable role in the communists' early rise to power, its consolidation of power during the nation-building period, and its creation of ideological fervor in support of the Party (Wang 1985).

When dancers in the West conceive of meaningful dance work as that which confronts and critiques dominant modes of capitalist value, they do so in a way that responds to local histories and meanings. As one dance scholar writes, reflecting on the significance of stillness as a technique used in works of contemporary dance by choreographers in New York and Paris, "[Stillness resists the] idiotic militarization of subjectivity associated to widespread kinetic performances of Tayloristic efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness" (Lepeki 2006:13). Here

²² At the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Culture and the Arts in 1942, Mao famously identified cultural and arts workers as an essential cog in the revolutionary machine, necessary to the revolution, as important as soldiers and generals. This view of the social significance of cultural work remained a prominent tenant of national Party politics through the end of the Cultural Revolution (Mao 1965).

stillness has meaning because it resists a particular American or French experience of industrial capitalism as enforced kinesis. For dancers in post-Mao China, such use of stillness in a dance work might instead express conformity with, rather than opposition to capitalist values. As we saw in Gao's struggle with the flickering light bulb at the beginning of this paper, what market reform meant for dancers like Gao was that, in his words, "I would be the only one practicing in the rehearsal room." For them, the experience of post-Mao capitalism is one in which market logic, by promoting commercial art and individualism, makes it less and less possible to maintain a form of existence founded in bodily motion.

For dancers in China, making meaningful art is not primarily about finding a position of autonomy outside of or in opposition to hegemonic forces of capitalist society (Bourdieu 1993), even though the discourse of spirit, by exposing the costs of economic reform in material as well as ideological terms, does constitute a site of critical reflection on capitalism in China (Eagleton 1996; Williams 1976). Post-Mao discourses of spirit, though they are often expressed in terms of nostalgia for the Mao era, are not mere continuations of Mao era ideals. While Peng Huan's notion of "pure art" shares some values in common with Mao era notions of socially committed art, most notably a sense of civic duty, they nevertheless constitute a new formulation whose organizing principles and aims reflect contemporary post-Mao constellations of meaning and value.

Insofar as they are concerned with the commercial instrumentalization of artistic practice, my informants are concerned with a kind of "selling out." Unlike selling out in the West, however, which implies negative implications of collusion with the state, the collective, or anything outside the expression of individual meaning, selling out in post-Mao China implies the danger of being radically outside such forces of social cohesion. Dancers, stripped of their position as esteemed contributors to the spiritually fulfilling state project of socialism, feel individualism and autonomy as a condition that denies rather than provides meaningful, healthy, and fulfilling lives. By forcing them to attend only to individual (bare) life -- the trivialities of material existence -- individualism and autonomy threaten to deny them of spiritual and artistic fulfillment understood as inherently collective.

Post-Mao Bodies

Amidst so much discussion about the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and the need for defense against the corrupting individualizing forces of material economic concerns, we should pause to ask: where has the body gone? The feelings of disillusionment expressed by Wu and Gao at the beginning of this chapter were clearly related to the physical body. Wu felt that his body was exploited on stage, when he was asked to perform flips and tricks and to "pull his leg over his ear." Wu was concerned that, though he had been taught to find meaning in dance training and in the types of bodily ability it produces, the wider audiences for whom he was now performing treated his demonstrations of bodily virtuosity only as a form of entertainment, without attributing to them any greater moral or ideological significance. Gao's disillusionment was a visceral aching of the body. Gao felt a bodily sense of loss when, in the context of post-Mao performance work, the dancer's daily bodily practice of intense dance training seemed to be in danger of disappearing. He enjoyed the process of working his body in the studio, and he lamented what seemed, to him, to be its immanent disappearance.

In this chapter, I have shown that the discourse of spirit, which relates to the problem of material existence or survival, emerged among dancers in the post-Mao era as a way of re-articulating a continued desire to be incorporated into the collective social and political polity,

during a period when they felt pushed to use dance as a tool only of personal survival. The discourse of spirit is an important way in which dancers maintain their relevance to the social collective, a relevance they feel is essential to justify their own dedication to the profession even in the context of economic difficulty and personal sacrifice. Apart from this important function, however, the discourse of spirit creates another kind of meaning when it is used by Chinese dancers in the Reform Era: by re-asserting the conventional hierarchy between mental and physical labor, the discourse of the spiritual serves to elide the intensely physical component of dance work.

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, physical labor has become highly devalued in China during the era of market reforms, and it has taken on new gendered and classed meanings, which reflect new hierarchies of human worth. The discourse of spirit has in some ways helped to revitalize and reinforce conservative understandings of “culture” as an exclusive realm belonging to the wealthy, the conventionally educated, and the male in Chinese society. In the context of a new commercial culture that tends increasingly to commodify and sexualize dancer’s bodies, especially the bodies of female dancers, the discourse of spirit seems like a viable alternative to these degrading bodily discourses. At the same time, however, because it shifts the value of dance away from its connection to the physical body, this discourse also contributes, in its own way, to the devaluation of the body as a source of value and meaning.

One way to investigate the relationship between the discourse of spirit and the erasure of the body as a direct source of value and meaning is to look at the places in which a clear focus on the body does persist in Chinese dance culture and to examine its relationship to the discourse of spirit in these contexts. One context in which the body is foregrounded is in recruitment to professional dance companies. Like the process for recruitment to dance schools, the process for recruitment to dance companies places emphasis on the physical characteristics of dancers’ bodies -- height, age, physical attractiveness, flexibility, thinness, etc. Whereas dancers generally accept the idea that children auditioning for dance schools should be screened in large part on physical characteristics (this helps determine their likely success in the field, and it limits undue torment for dancers whose bodies are ill-equipped to provide successful careers, they say), they express wide-spread disdain for such selection practices at the level of the troupe. “Performers should be selected for their abilities as dancers, not for something as superficial as height and appearance,” dancers typically remark about such policies. The fact that companies are recruiting based on height and appearance, dancers argue, shows that they were more concerned with “material issues” and not with producing what they consider to be meaningful dance work through the pursuit of “spiritual pursuits.”

Dancer’s comments about the physical requirements used in recruitment ads for dance companies were often followed with complaints about the increasing use of revealing clothing in commercial dance shows. Dancers argued that such revealing clothing detracted from the cultural and spiritual significance of the dances as works of art, because it implied a sexualized meaning that, in their view, should not be associated with spiritual and cultural pursuits. The use of revealing clothing, dancers often argued, represented another effort by dance companies to seek “material gains” through the explicitly sexual exploitation of dancers’ bodies. Such use of dancers’ bodies, they argued, was antithetical to the true meaning of dance.

By eliding “material issues” with selection based on bodily characteristics, and “spiritual pursuits” with selection based on dance abilities, dancers were trying to carve out a space for thinking about dance ability as separate from a person’s physical characteristics, because in the

context of post-Mao China such focus on the body often leads to commodification and sexualization. One reason that dancers feel compelled to make this distinction, I believe, is that dancer's bodies are increasingly being co-opted into a commercial culture in China that treats the physical body as a sexualized commodity. Such sexualizing commodification is highly gendered, so making the physical body the locus of one's professional value increasingly associates one with the figure of the female sexualized body. In her book *Red Lights: The Lives of Sexual Workers in Post-Socialist China*, Tiantian Zheng (2009) argues that, during the post-Mao era, male businessmen defined themselves as "real men" by positioning themselves against the "foil" of the female karaoke bar hostess (9). While hostesses were seen as morally repugnant in the post-Mao era for using their physical bodies as sources of economic survival (while, Zheng argues, the overall economic system encourages and even exploits this use of the female body), male businessmen constructed and confirmed their place in the social hierarchy by accumulating cultural capital as "entrepreneurial masculinity" through and against their relationship to the sexualized female hostess body.

While female dancers in post-Mao China still retain a level of social status and claim to "culture" that is higher than that of karaoke hostesses (largely to do their possession of diplomas, which is in itself a marker of the reinstatement of traditional educational values, as I discuss), they are often compared to such hostesses, due to their reputation for physical beauty and to their use of their physical bodies for work. For example, when I talked with non-dancers in China about my field research, the following responses, especially among men, were all typical: "Oh, you must know a lot of 'meiniu' (美女 'female beauties'), can you introduce me to them?" "You know, those dance students are a seedy crowd, they are often working in night clubs and are sexually loose" and "There must be a lot of expensive cars in the parking lot at those dance schools, that's where the rich men go to find women these days." I found that dance students I knew worked strongly to resist these stereotypes, by keeping strict schedules and avoiding contact with those outside of their immediate network of friends in the dance community. Many dancers said that they saw themselves as easy targets, since they were known to be physically attractive but socially "naive," having spent so much of their lives living in dance schools, lacking in regular education and isolated from ordinary social life.

Dancers I spent time with often alluded to the fact that they had value as physical, sexualized commodities and that others expected them to use their bodies as tools to personal economic gain. When talking about her parents' objection to her long-time relationship with her boyfriend (an independent musician who came from a poor family background), one young female dancer said to me, "You know, my parents feel that they've invested so much in cultivating me, putting me through so many years of dance school and all; I guess they expect more." This dancer's comment is not out of place in the generally materialistic discourse of marriage choices among young people in China during my fieldwork, and it could easily have been spoken by a female university graduate whose parents saw her "cultural status" as deserving a better male match. Nevertheless, in the context of the post-Mao dance world, in which it is at least perceived to be common for young female dancers to marry older wealthy men, this comment resonated too with the idea that it was my friend's physical cultivation in dance school that made her parents "expect more."

Apart from anxieties about the commodification and sexualization of the physical body in post-Mao entertainment culture, dancers' persistent negation of the physical element of their work in the post-Mao era also reflects their concern about the class profile of dance work. As graduates of vocational schools, dancers hold second-class educational credentials in post-Mao

China, and they are marked as having a lower “cultural level” (*wenhua shuiping* 文化水平) than holders of degrees from non-vocational programs. Although many schools have converted dance degrees from “vocation” to “regular” status degrees, the notion of dance being a vocational diploma is still widespread. Furthermore, by seeking to define themselves as a regular, as opposed to vocational, degree, these schools reinforce the hierarchy between the vocational and the cultural that was explicitly overturned when dance schools, as vocational schools, were created in the 1950s.

Since the 1980s, the ultimate marker of cultural status in education has been the high test score, especially on the college entrance exam. Because dance students are not prepared for and not required to receive high college entrance exam scores, their scores are extremely low compared to graduates of regular high schools. When it was originally created, during the Mao era, the vocational school model explicitly rejected China’s traditional focus on exam-based education; instead it was based on an ideological valuation that places “practical” knowledge on equal or higher status with “theoretical” knowledge (Pepper 1999). In the Reform Era, when dance schools reject the professional school credential in favor of the regular university diploma, they subvert their students and their profession to the standard of the exam score, a measure of culture that fundamentally underscores the values upon which the dance education system was initially founded. Furthermore, in making this change, they doom their students to a competitive field -- namely a book-based understanding of “cultural level” -- in which they cannot, due to the structural organization of the system in which they are trained, succeed.

Dancers who do insist on maintaining a commitment to physical virtuosity as the locus of professional meaning in their lives tend not to employ the “spiritual pursuits” discourse, or they find ways to change the discourse so that it is compatible with their pursuit of physical cultivation. Dancers who practice dance forms coded as “Chinese,” for example, subvert the physical components of their professional practice to what they describe as a pursuit of cultural authenticity. Thus, they justify the cultivation of highly refined physical virtuosity by arguing that it helps inherit and promote Chinese cultural identity and “appreciation for one’s culture.” The pursuit of Chinese cultural essence in dance has become one of the most important sources of personal meaning and professional fulfillment (as well as an intensive site for government and commercial spending and institutional growth) in Chinese dance since the 1980s, and I discuss this phenomenon at greater length in the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

Apart from the pursuit of Chinese ethnic cultural identity through dance, many dancers in China continue to pursue the development of physical virtuosity as the central focus of their careers without subverting their work to a larger discourse of spiritual pursuits. Tao Ye, a contemporary dancer and choreographer and formerly a member of Jin Xing Dance Theater and Beijing Modern Dance Company, is one of a small group of dancers in Beijing who has ventured out on his own to start his own independent contemporary dance company, Tao Body Theater (陶身体剧场). In their promotional materials, the group states, “What we long for is to use ‘the body’ to create. Each body has its unique secrets, and through rigorous, sincere, and exploratory corporal research, we hope to stretch the boundaries of the flesh, and in this process of excavation to discover the body’s unknown possibilities.” In using the language of “corporeal research,” Tao and his collaborators refer to an international discourse of contemporary dance which is largely divorced from that of the Chinese dance establishment. Here, the “body” is understood either as the individual expressive body or the naturalized universal body, both of what belong to the modern Western tradition of what Farquhar and Lock (2007) call “the body proper.” Drawing funding primarily from international sponsorships and fellowships, and

Chinese groups funded by international sponsorships, Tao and his project represent a continued investment in the body in the Chinese dance world which is both integral to Chinese dance and marginal to its most entrenched institutions.

Finally, there is also a large contingent of dancers in post-Mao China whose professional work does revolve around the cultivation of physical virtuosity and whose work is central to the economic and structural “center” of dance work. These are individuals like my dance partner Zhao Yuewei, a twenty-two-year-old practitioner of competitive Latin dance who supports his family on the money earned in his private weekend school for children. Zhao Yuewei spends his weekdays and weeknights at the Dance Academy pouring over dance videos from the Internet, which he studies and imitates with great personal zeal. On the weekends, he takes the train five hours each way to teach his newly learned material to his students at the school. When asked about the motivations for his continued commitment to dance work, Zhao answers, “Dance is my way to support my family. If I can use dance to make enough money to bring a better life to my parents, and to one day support a family of my own, then I will feel fulfilled.” In my personal experiences living with Zhao and his family, I never heard Zhao suggest that his work had any spiritual significance beyond the pursuit of a basic fulfillment of economic needs for his family. For him, this ability to support his family, using his physical body, was the purpose of his pursuit in dance, and he did not aspire to anything more. Zhao saw himself as a blue-collar student coming from a small industrial town, and he saw dance as a skill. He did not see himself as someone who possess “culture,” so for him there was no need to find a discourse of the non-material to justify his work, or to see in his work a larger contribution to society.

Returning to the Amateur Ideal

In the Confucian and Taoist traditions, China has a long history of associating bodily cultivation and physical virtuosity with moral refinement and cultural status. In classical Confucian culture, training in the “Six [Confucian] arts” (六艺) -- ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and arithmetic -- were seen as essential steps in the process of becoming a *junzi*, or cultivated gentleman (Tu 1983, 1985). Likewise, in Taoism, bodily practices of meditation, ritual chanting, dietary discipline, breathing practices, and physical endurance were all importance practices in the process of achieving the Way (Robinet 1993; Schipper 1993). Exchanges among these traditions, Chinese folk performance culture, the introduction of Buddhist body culture from the Himalayas, and the development of Chinese martial arts all led to the creation, over centuries of Chinese dynastic culture, of what Chinese scholar Liu Junxiang (1996) calls “the Eastern human body culture.”

While traditional China did have an expansive body culture, culturally elite groups usually reserved the pursuit of intensive bodily training to the realm of amateur practice, and in many artistic fields it was these scholar-amateurs who set the standards of artistic style and preference (Bickford 1996; Wiedner 1990). In imperial China, dance practitioners who made their living from dance were usually servants of the court, while the wide range of dance traditions developed outside the court belonged to the realm of amateur practitioners known as local entertainers (Wang 1985). Thus, while China had a developed body culture connected to artistic practice, it was largely in the context of amateur practice that bodily cultivation could be seen as a path to moral and cultural personal cultivation.

The reversal, after Mao, of the Mao-era veneration of the physical body, enacts a return to the pre-revolutionary amateur ideal for bodily cultivation. By subverting dancers to a larger cultural regime in which exam scores and conventional education are the primary standards for

determining cultural status, critics of dance education in the reform era have reversed much of the ideals of practical education that were promoted under Mao. Vocational dance education, which promoted the recognition of dance as a viable professional, was one example of this highly progressive approach. In the Reform Era, due to a combination of the commercialization and sexualization of the physical body, as well as the declining economic value of physical labor in the context of the new market economy, dancers are situated at a difficult juncture between the Mao and the post-Mao. As graduates of a professional training system, China's dancers are masterfully trained experts in a type of virtuosic performance that is now being stripped of its cultural significance. As a result, they are struggling to find new ways to keep alive the practices to which they have devoted their lives.

Apart from its impact on dancers, the post-Mao shift in valuation of physical knowledge and bodily skill has also had other consequences. Most notably, it has led many to believe that China never had a tradition of body culture and that the only possibility for pursuing bodily expression and appreciation is in learning from the West. In October, 2008, I attended a lecture in Beijing given by Yu Dan, a well-known popularizer of "Confucian" philosophy in China. I was shocked when, during the question-and-answer period after the talk, I asked Yu to discuss Chinese ancient body culture, and she responded by stating, "Chinese culture, on the whole, does not venerate the body." In her explanation following this statement, I realized that Yu was using a very specific notion of "body culture," one that focused on the physical body as a tool of expression for the individual will and extension of the self. Yu argued that this type of "veneration of the body" existed only in Western culture. Using the ballet body as an expression of Western bodily veneration, Yu stated, "[The balletic body] shows admiration for bodily art and veneration of the body. Ballet performers' four limbs stretch out in all directions, extending out to the most extreme points. This is an expression of human freedom." Furthermore, Yu linked this specific "Western" approach to the veneration of the body with the new focus on the material body in post-Mao China. She stated, "The West's veneration of the body, which has such a deep artistic tradition, appears integrated into aspirations toward the physical body (*xingshi* 形体) that we see in China today," she concluded.

Although the post-Mao cultural regime has returned to the amateur ideal of the pre-revolutionary era, it has done so in a way that evacuates the moral element of bodily cultivation that was once there. Drawing on a distinctly Western influence inflected in capitalist commodity culture, the new notion of the body is one that sees bodily cultivation as divorced from moral cultivation. When Yu uses the term "physical body" in the quote above, she refers to the body that has been imported to China from the West, one that emphasizes a separation of physicality and morality. The physical body that is venerated in China today, under increasing Western influence, is the material body of commodity culture, not the material body of socialist cultivation.

Socialist body cultivation in China emphasized a practice in which the physical and the moral were inherently interrelated, and in this respect it was closer to the notion of bodily cultivation that was found in Chinese Confucian and Taoist traditions of the amateur ideal. However, during the Mao era physical cultivation was raised to the status of a professional pursuit for people of high social status, and in this way it departed significantly from the amateur ideal. In the new post-Mao era of capitalist market reform, the new body of post-Mao capitalism is replacing both the body of socialism and the body of Chinese tradition and, in replacing, it is perhaps erasing the memory of both. What is perceived by many as a "returning" to a more conservative pre-revolutionary "Chinese" understanding of culture as immaterial and

disembodied is highly problematic, both for dancers and for all those concerned with the value of bodily cultivation as a morally significant endeavor. This return is dangerous because, while fashioning itself as a return, it is in fact not a return at all, but rather the production of something new and potentially even more challenging to the traditions of bodily cultivation in which “Chinese body culture” and “the socialist body” each have a place.

Chapter Three

Beyond Privatization: Dance Troupes During Reform



Advertisement for dance drama production *City Beauty*, Chongqing, 2008.

“In 2005, Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Troupe became one of the first work units in the Western region to undergo *wenhua gaizhi* (文化体制改革 cultural system reform). In the same year, its name changed; it became the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe Limited Responsibility Corporation, [with] corporatized operations. Previously it was supported by the nation’s finance administration; in the future it will gradually undertake itself to follow the process of commercialization.”

--Mao Xinghong (b. 1970), Assistant to the Director, Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe, Ltd.

“In my opinion, to assume that we are witnessing a transition from socialism to capitalism, democracy, or market economies is mistaken [...] these transformations will produce a variety of forms, some of them perhaps approximating Western capitalist market economies and many of them not.”

--Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*.

Introduction

This chapter examines the history and development of the *Chongqing Shi Gewutuan* (重庆室歌舞团 Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Troupe), whose transformations over the past sixty years reflect important developments not only in the dance field but in the entire system of state-supported arts and cultural production in the People's Republic of China since the 1940s. The “*gewutuan*” (歌舞团), or “song and dance troupe” is a form of art organization specific to the People's Republic of China, and it is the country's most important structural unit for the creation and performance of professional music and dance. Compared to dance companies in the U.S. or Europe, the typical Chinese song and dance troupe is much larger, often with hundreds of employees. The major song and dance troupes are interdisciplinary conglomerates of smaller sub-troupes that each specialize in specific performance forms such as choral music, orchestral music, theater, and dance. In a large troupe these subordinate groups can each have over one hundred employees. Until the early 2000s China's song and dance troupes were almost completely funded by state monies, and they were affiliated with specific government or military units. As a result, they are usually named after a particular geographic location or level of bureaucratic organization, rather than a single artist.

The song and dance troupe has been, through the history of the PRC, the locus of creative activity for new dance works. Even when I conducted fieldwork in 2008-09, at a time when song and dance troupes around the country were undergoing a process of forced privatization known as “system change,” the majority of new domestic dance works performed on major stages throughout the country were the creations of state or military-sponsored song and dance troupes. During my two years of fieldwork, I watched live approximately fifty performances by about thirty different song and dance troupes from around the country, and these viewings inform my understanding of the work of song and dance troupes as a whole.

Song and dance troupes are also the locus of daily life for professional dancers in China. In a country in which individual lives until very recently were (and for many still are), organized around “work units” (*danwei*), the work unit has enormous impact upon the everyday realities of those who live and work in them. As Xioabo Lü and Elizabeth Perry (1997) note, “people would say one could be without a job but not without a *danwei*” (3). Over the past sixty years, the work units to which the vast majority of professional dancers have been affiliated are song and dance troupes. Before the 1980s, when only a limited number of dance schools existed in China, the majority of professional dancers received their earliest training in song and dance troupes and remained in these troupes to work after they finished training. Once recruited to the troupe's “*ban*” (班), or “class,” students lived and studied in the troupe, trained by its older troupe members, and they often began participating in troupe performances after only a few years, on a training basis, until they graduated to full troupe members with a regular salary provided by the sponsoring government or military organization.

Dancers' daily lives revolved around what was known as the troupe's *yuanzi* (院子), or central courtyard. In Chapter Two, the courtyard that Tengyuan describes as having once stood in the place of the new modern theater in his hometown Wanyuan is an important place to him because it was the place where his parents studied, rehearsed, and performed in their youth and the place where they fell in love and courted. As a child, Tengyuan remembers visiting the courtyard and watching his parents perform there. Unlike the song and dance troupe to which Tengyuan's parents belonged in the 1970s, which was converted at the end of the Cultural Revolution into a local indigenous theater troupe, most song and dance troupes existed in some continuous form (often combined with other troupes) as song and dance troupes throughout the

various political changes of the Mao and post-Mao eras. Before the dismantling of the work assignment system in the 1980s, dancers trained in a particular song and dance troupe expected to remain in that troupe for their entire lives.

Song and dance troupes in China have undergone four major periods of development and change since the 1940s: the era of communist nation-building (1940s- early 60s), Cultural Revolution (late 1960s- early 70s), early market reform (late 1970s-early 1990s), and privatization and system reform (late 1990s-2000s). The direct predecessors to the PRC's state-sponsored song and dance troupes (which here refers to troupes established as state-sponsored entities under the government of the Chinese Communist Party after 1949) were "new theater troupes" and "battlefront visiting teams." These were amateur troupes developed in Yan'an in the 1930s and 40s to improve morale and spread communist thought during the Anti-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War (Lee 2002; Wang 1999). Although similar to previously existing indigenous Chinese theater troupes in their mobility and their use of combined theatrical, musical and dance performance, these new troupes were different in that they were organized largely by educated intellectuals, and they aimed to use performance to directly inspire political action. As Sheng Jie (b. 1917), one of the earliest dance performers involved in China's war era performance troupes, states in an interview: "We used dance to make the people stand up."

After the Communist victory in 1949, song and dance troupes were slowly established under government or military units in all major cities, provinces, and autonomous regions throughout China, and this marked the beginning of the recruitment of students for training as professional dancers. Troupes around the country held auditions similar to the one described by Bao Zhana in Chapter One, in which they selected students for positions in dance training programs ("tuan dai ban" 团代班 or "troupe led classes") and created new (usually politically-themed) dance works in which these new students eventually performed. After the rapid growth and institutionalization of song and dance troupes throughout the 1950s and early 60s, the Cultural Revolution brought a period of chaos and instability, which was also an important period of development for new performance forms. During this time, many older artists were purged from established companies and sent to the countryside for re-education. New, more ephemeral performance groups, known as "Mao Zedong Thought Companies" (毛泽东思想队) formed alongside and within the established groups, and they replaced the previous performance works with a new, but aesthetically very limited, type of revolutionary performance, known as "Revolutionary Model Dramas" (革命样板戏).

By the end of the Cultural Revolution period, in the mid-to-late 1970s, song and dance troupes were returning to a more stable organizational structure and abandoning the Model Dramas for a more diverse range of performance styles, including historical dramas, revivals of folk and indigenous theater forms, classical ballet (in contrast to the revolutionary ballet of the Model Dramas), modern dance, and newly imported popular dance styles from Japan, Korea, Europe, and the United States. The troupes rehabilitated many of the older generation of artists who had been attacked and expelled during the Cultural Revolution, and they recruited a new generation of dance students, many of whom would eventually leave the troupes to seek further education, to go abroad, and to carve out their own personal artistic paths. Early market reform brought about a new era of commercial performance, and an explosion of new dance dramas were created and performed around the country. The "cultural performance gatherings" (文艺汇演) of the Mao era were replaced by national and regional cultural competitions, and a new genre of dance creation was born with the dance competition piece. Also in the 1980s, in addition to these new "official" venues for dance performance, a flood of nightclubs and cabarets sprung up

around the country, which hired dancers to perform sideline shows in popular dance forms such as disco, ballroom dance, and, later, break-dance and hip-hop.

The market reforms of the 1980s helped create a new entertainment culture that pushed song and dance troupes, by the 1990s, into a state of emergency. Faced with competition from television, popular musical entertainment, and eventually the Internet, rising costs in theater maintenance and performance production, and employees lured away by new and more lucrative work opportunities, song and dance troupes sought new strategies for growth. Many allied with local governments to produce “high culture” entertainment shows as part of city branding and tourism development, and they sought sponsorships from major corporations and associations. By the late 1990s, song and dance troupes were receiving pressure from the government to “adapt to the market,” and by the first decade of the twenty-first century, they were undergoing institutional privatization, even turning in the name “song and dance troupe” for “song and dance troupe limited responsibility corporation.” The new era, dominated by the official policy of “*wenhua tizhi gage*” (文化体制改革), or “Cultural System Reform”, is bringing about the most significant threat to dancers’ livelihood, since it is forcing song and dance troupes to replace their previous long-term hiring policy with short-term contract work.

Rather than providing archival documentation or statistical summaries, this chapter recounts the development of the song and dance troupe through stories of individuals from different generations who lived through its different eras. Although it focuses on the specific history of the Chongqing Troupe, the chapter draws on the experiences and reflections of over 170 professional dancers whose oral histories I gathered during fieldwork, all of whom were connected with a song and dance troupe, either as a member or a project collaborator, at some point in their lives. All professional dancers in China have strong opinions about and memories of song and dance troupes, and this chapter is informed by these diverse expressions of opinions and memories, even when they do not speak directly of the Chongqing Troupe specifically. In the eyes of many dancers in China, the fate of the song and dance troupe reflects the fate of not only dance in China but of the future and past of cultural work as it is defined in the People’s Republic.

Since it is told almost entirely from the perspective of the early twenty-first century -- the era of “System Reform,” this chapter reflects upon the history of the song and dance troupe as a way to investigate, genealogically rather than historically, particular tensions and problems that accompany system reform in the present. Drawing on Paul Rabinow’s methodological approach of the “anthropology of the contemporary” (1999: 171), this chapter identifies events of particular importance that help define the contours and relationships integral to system reform as a “problematized domain” in the early twenty-first century (2002: 139). Debates and discomforts that arise around system reform point to critical ideas and arrangements that inform our understanding of the past, present, and future of the cultural industry in the People’s Republic of China. This chapter takes as starting points several specific moments when certain debates and discomforts around system reform emerged and made themselves especially clear to me, either because they were accompanied by powerful emotional convictions, or because they referred to movements that inspired change in those who spoke about them, or because they simply seemed relevant. Then, through a combination of individual dancers’ accounts, my own observations, and historical evidence, the chapter follows by offering a constellation of key stories that help increase understanding of these debates and concerns and the ideas and arrangements that inform them, as well as the historical processes that bring all of these factors into existence and mutual relation. Finally, through the lens of the anthropology of privatization and postsocialism, I

consider the consequences of the song and dance troupe for understanding socio-political and economic transformation in China over the past sixty years.

Selection of the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe for the example used in this chapter is somewhat accidental. Because it happened to be an intersection point for several of the lives I followed most closely in my research, I was able to get multiple perspectives on its past, as well as special access to observe its current situation. The more I learned about the Troupe, its current and past members, and the problems it was facing in the midst of system reform in 2008-09, the more I felt it was representative of wider trends and concerns.

System Reform: A Problematized Domain

Moment One

Sitting in a café in Beijing in August, 2008, I was finally conducting a long-awaited formal life history interview with Chen Jie (b. 1980), who had been by then my dance teacher and friend of almost a year. Over the previous months, Chen had introduced me to a field of Chinese dance known as the “Han-Tang” style (discussed further in Chapter Six), about which he was tremendously passionate. He was studying for a masters degree in Han-Tang dance at the Beijing Dance Academy, under the direction of Professor Sun, the revered 80-year-old professor who had created the field. Despite being in his late twenties (already considered old for a dancer in China) and a full-time graduate student, Chen was still active as a performer, and he had recently been selected to play the lead role in Dance Academy’s 2009 performance of the Han-Tang dance drama, *Tongque Ji* (also discussed in Chapter Six). Chen actively sought out opportunities to share his dance form with the wider community through weekend outreach classes, and it was through such a class that he and I came to meet and become friends.

Because of the extreme level of commitment and enthusiasm Chen showed for his profession during the time I knew him, I was shocked when, during our interview, Chen told me that he had once seriously considered leaving the field of dance. During the 1990s, Chen said, when he was a leading dance performer in the Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Troupe in his hometown of Chongqing, he had wanted desperately to quit dance altogether, because he found it “meaningless.” “Even from my very first year in the Troupe, I wanted to leave,” Chen Jie recalled. He explained:

Most of what we did was back-up dancing (伴舞), which I hated. Every night, after work at the Troupe I went to perform in nightclub cabarets (夜总会) to make extra money. In 1998 I tested into the university program at the Beijing Dance Academy, but there was an enormous penalty if I left the Troupe before my contract was up, plus there were other financial considerations, so I couldn’t go. By 1999 I was seriously considering changing professions. I couldn’t stand life in the Troupe. Every day we just did back-up dancing. It was so meaningless. ‘This is not how I want to spend my life,’ I thought.

Just as Chen was making plans to leave the Troupe, in 1999, Professor Sun (the professor he was studying with at the time of our interview), was invited to Chongqing to create a new evening-length dance work, using his newly devised Han-Tang style. The work was entitled *Longzu Fengyun* (《龙族风韵》), *The Charm of the Dragon Tribe*, a tribute to classical Chinese history and culture. In contrast to the work Chen had previously been doing in the Troupe, which he found dull and unfulfilling, Chen said, Sun’s work challenged him and gave him a reason to

continue dancing. In the following year, 2000, Chen finally did leave the Troupe, but he did so to continue studying dance, as a student at the Beijing Dance Academy.

When I asked Chen why he had wanted to leave the Troupe, and how he ended up rediscovering his passion for dancing, he said, “I was very different then. The whole environment was different. Back then, I would often sit in my room all day playing video games and only go out once a day for practice in the morning. We didn’t have much work then at the Troupe, and the work we did have was so uninspiring. I was never exposed to anything new or interesting, and I felt like I was wasting my life.” Then, Chen told me that his experience working at the Troupe in Chongqing is quite common for dancers in local song and dance troupes around China. I immediately thought of several dancers I had recently interviewed who had also told me stories about leaving their local song and dance troupes to come to Beijing to study. Some had even gone so far as to covertly steal the official stamp from their Troupe’s Director so that they could get their release forms approved. What was it that compelled so many dancers, especially in the 1990s, to want to leave song and dance troupes? For most of them, as in Chen’s case, they had studied in the troupes since childhood, and they had strong personal and family connections there, as well as regular salaries. Why would they go to such lengths to leave, only to continue pursuing dance careers in Beijing, where the competition was steeper, the stress more potent, and the living costs higher?

Finally, Chen said: “I’ve got an idea. You need to go to Chongqing. You can stay with my parents there and I will give you all the introductions you need to spend time, observe things, and really get to talk to people at the Troupe. If you are going to understand what is going on there, you need to see it for yourself. That is the reality of the dance field in China, and it is going to determine what happens in the future.”

Moment Two

When I got off the train in Chongqing, Li Yashu, Chen Jie’s childhood classmate, colleague, and close friend, met me at the station in her husband’s car. She was short and, I thought, somewhat more plump than other dancers I knew in China. Also, unlike most female dancers employed by song and dance troupes, she had very short hair. Her hair was cut in a cute bob that framed her round face.

As if hearing the thoughts in my mind, Li took a moment on our way to the car to explain her situation. “I graduated in the same class with Chen Jie, and we both worked in the Troupe as dancers together for a few years. My parents always wanted me to be a dancer, but as it turned out I’m too short. Finally, I decided to quit, because it was too difficult. Now I work as the Troupe’s make-up artist and manage the costumes. It is perfect for me, and it is a lot less stress. I’m lucky I was able to stay on.” Li’s comments were consistent with everything I had heard already regarding the strict body requirements for performers in song and dance troupes. Dancers who grew up to be short had an extremely difficult time getting hired in dance troupes. As one dancer explained, “The star has to be beautiful and tall and slim, and the group scenes have to provide a consistent unison look.” The fact that Li was able to get hired by the Troupe as a make-up artist also did not surprise me. It was common in the past for Troupes to keep on dancers who had retired from the stage to work in other capacities, as teachers, logistics assistants, and in administrative duties. Her comment “I’m lucky I was able to stay on,” suggests that, in the new era of system reform, this practice of keeping people on is becoming less common. In Li’s case, as I learned later, she had to receive special training and a professional certificate in make-up design from a school in Beijing before she was offered the position.

The night of my arrival in Chongqing, the Troupe was having a special showing of its new dance show, a commercial work called *City Beauty* (《渝美人》). The showing was booked for the employees and clients of a local branch of China Mobile, China's nationalized wireless media corporation. Li said she could give me her extra ticket for the night's show. Before seeing the show, Li arranged for me to meet in the theater with Mao Xinghong, assistant to the Troupe Director and production manager for *City Beauty*. In a concise and (as I would soon find out, quite appropriately) businesslike manner, Mao explained to me the current state of the Troupe's development:

In 2005, Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Troupe became one of the first work units in the Western region to undergo *wenhua gaizhi* (文化改制 cultural system reform). In the same year, its name changed; it became the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe Limited Responsibility Corporation, [with] corporatized operations (公司化运作). Previously it was supported by the nation's finance administration; in the future we will gradually undertake itself to follow the process of commercialization.

Since system reform began in 2005, Mao explained, the Troupe was run on a new set of management principles, what he called "corporatized operations." According to these new principles, for example, the Troupe would change its number of employees in a more flexible way than it had previously. "If the demand exists in the market, we will recruit a large number of new performers," Mao explained. "If a particular project is not doing well, we will also let a large number of performers go. We are constantly adjusting." The methods of decision-making and production for new artistic works, Mao said, would also be impacted by this new management style. "The majority of work we do now is commercial performance, meetings and festivals mainly, and it is all done according to market methods. Government or corporations or whoever the client is will put in an order, and we will create made-to-order products to fit their requests; this is called custom cultural purchasing."

Throughout his discussion of the process and impact of system reform, Mao employed a vocabulary that I had rarely heard used by dancers, choreographers, or others working in the dance field in China before. Whereas most dancers talked about dance pieces as "works" (作品 *zuopin*) -- as in "works of art" or "works of literature" -- Mao consistently used the word "product" (产品 *chanpin*), a term usually reserved for commercial goods. By referring to dance pieces like *City Beauty* as "products," Mao shifts emphasis from the art work as an outgrowth of a creative process to a notion of the art work as a product made for sale and consumption. In addition, Mao uses the term "client" (客户) to refer to government groups and corporations who sponsor dance productions. This is a change from conventional language of song and dance troupes, in which government-sponsored performances are known as "national assignments" (国家任务) and other forms of sponsorships as "commercial performance" (商业演出). In Mao's new language these two were collapsed, producing a new kind of performance project, exemplified by the work I would see that night, *City Beauty*.

Moment Three

One day during my visit in Chongqing, I was scheduled to meet with the Troupe's Party Secretary, to continue in my effort to learn more about the historical developments and current

conditions of the Troupe.²³ When I got to her office, however, she had a distressed look on her face, and I could sense that she would not be able to meet with me that day. “I’m sorry, but today is not the best time to meet,” she said. Acknowledging her comment, I expressed that I understood she was very busy, and I suggested meeting another time.

As I prepared to leave, however, she looked as if she still had something to say. I sat down, and, with no prompting from me, she sighed heavily and began to speak:

I just came from a long meeting and was told I need to make decisions about employees today. Do you understand? We are going through system reform, and, well, this system is not always fair. Lately we have had to let a lot of dancers go. However, there is no good new system in effect for them to change jobs. If we can’t keep them, they have to go out into society and find their own way, and it’s very difficult. And now the policies for pensions have changed. It used to be that you could retire after a certain number of years of service, but now you have to work to a certain age. For dancers, this is not always possible. We can’t keep people on for that long anymore. For some of our employees we have to just say, ‘Here, take your base pay and go find another place to work, or just go do what you want, we can’t keep you employed here doing work anymore.’ But they don’t want to go; for some people it is not just about the money.

The desperate look and sound of the Party Secretary’s expression as she shared this news reminded me of a doctor who is about to provide a bad diagnosis to a patient. Because of the system reform, she was saddled with a triage-like the responsibility -- deciding which employees would go and which would stay. Those who were told to go would be sent out, “into society,” with few transferrable skills and without a system to help them enter other professions.

Of course, the challenge this Party Secretary found herself faced with is not unlike that faced by any managers in any downsizing industry in a capitalist economy. Especially in an era when increasing numbers of jobs are being replaced by mechanization, by transfer to markets with lower labor costs, and by combination through increased human “efficiency,” this particular aspect of system reform makes the pains of China’s dance industry seem like simply a regular part of the process of liberalization taking place in all markets and industries around the world.

At least two factors, which I became aware of during this encounter, however, make this instance of system change different from others elsewhere. First, over a very short period of time, in this case less than ten years, there has been a complete reversal in the way that dance labor is valued in song and dance troupes. As Chen recounted in his interview, when he wanted to leave the Troupe in 1998 to enter dance school, he faced a steep fine. Such fines were common in song and dance troupes throughout the country, and their function was to preserve dance talent that had been cultivated through training programs. According to the logic of that time, Chen had been trained by the troupe, and he was thus something of value. The fine was imposed to keep Chen from leaving, since this would take the value that he embodied away from the Troupe. Now, rather than being seen as a valuable asset, needing to be protected and coveted, dancers are treated as expensive burdens. Once seen as valuable talent, the challenge of Party Secretaries of

²³ Like most other state-owned enterprises in China, song and dance troupes have two sets of leadership, one for so-called “professional” matters and another for matters related to the Party and organization. The Party Secretary is part of the latter group.

dance troupes was to keep dancers in the Troupe. Now, in the new system, dancers and their talent are instead seen as extra cost needing to be expelled.²⁴

The second factor that makes the Party Secretary's decision take on special significance in the context of system reform in song and dance troupes is that the troupes historically have served as more than merely a place of employment for dancers. Due to the early training programs in which dancers participated, song and dance troupes took on, in the lives of dancers, even more significance than did typical *danwei*. They were the site of strong personal connections, childhood development, and, for many, the most important space of belonging. System reform has brought about a break-down in the significance of the song and dance troupe as a center of affiliation and experience, and the lay-off of dancers is only one of many examples of this larger shift, which I discuss further below.

Moment Four

The hallways of the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe's main building are lined with twenty-four 11x14 or larger sized framed photographs commemorating major performance works created by the Troupe, each marked with a name, a date, and, if relevant, an important competition placement or other honor. The photos reflect the history of the Troupe, of which one version is the following:

In the late 1940s, Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe existed as a pre-Liberation entity known as the Southwest Service Troupe Cultural and Art Production Brigade, which was subordinate to the China People's Liberation Army No. 2 Field Army Headquarters. After coming together in Shanghai in June of 1949, training for two months in Nanjing and then continuing westward, the Cultural and Art Production Brigade arrived in Chongqing at the end of 1949. On December 25, 1949, the Brigade became the Chongqing Municipal Cultural and Art Work Troupe, the first cultural and art team in post-Liberation Chongqing. In this new incarnation, the Troupe was subordinate directly to the leadership of the Chongqing Municipality Propaganda Bureau.

In 1953, the Dance Troupe of Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe was born when seven men and six women were selected from the Troupe's Performance Team to spend one year studying dance at the Three Military Corps Cultural Work Team. They returned in 1954 to set up the Dance Troupe, which became one of the smaller sub-troupes within the larger Song and Dance Unit, which was within the larger Cultural and Art Work Troupe. The Dance Troupe recruited new dance students to what was called the "little devils' troupe" in 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, and 1970. Dance performers were also transferred into to the Troupe from entities such as the Chengdu Railroad Works Cultural Work Troupe, the Sichuan Provincial Song and Dance Troupe, and cultural work troupes in nearby cities. In 1958, the Song and Dance Unit of the Chongqing Cultural and

²⁴ In another reading, the fine could be seen as an example of the troupe's capitalizing on the desires of dancers to want to leave. Or, it could be seen as a way to "make up for" the expenses of training them and housing them, which prior to the 1990s was usually free to dancers in training. Both readings were offered to me at different times by dancers. However, I find the one offered above the most convincing, because it was the one expressed by the most number of dancers, and because it fits best with the overall trends and accounts of the time.

Art Work Troupe united with a previously unaffiliated institution, the Sichuan People's Art Theater Experimental Musical Theater Troupe. The two groups together formed a new entity, called the Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Theatrical Troupe, which in 1964 split into two separate entities: the Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Troupe, and the Chongqing Municipal Opera Troupe. Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe kept this name until 2005, when Chongqing instituted the "Municipal Cultural System Reform" (市文化体制改革). As part of this reform, referred to colloquially as "system change" (改制) the Chongqing Municipal Song and Dance Troupe, in its entirety, became part of the Chongqing Broadcasting and Television Conglomerate, and it received the new name Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe Limited Responsibility Corporation. The name change and its accompanying events are usually known as "system transfer" (转制). As a result of system transfer, the Troupe gained a new official status as a "nationally-owned independently financed corporate-type" (国有独资公司性质) institution.²⁵

The photos are not hung in chronological order. However, it is possible to assemble them into a pictorial narrative of the troupe's history by looking for a date in the corner of the frame and matching it to the chronology above.

The first photo I come upon is a black and white image of a song and dance work marked with the year 1964 entitled *Sunflowers* (《向阳花》). It shows fifteen women with huge, glowing smiles on their faces sitting in a pyramid formation. The women have their hair in long pigtailed, and they are dressed in cotton floral peasant shirts with large, round sun hats tied at their chins. Their mouths are open as if in song, and the women in the front row appear to be holding white pieces of cloth and large sickles for doing farm work.

The second photo, in color, is marked with the year 1978 and entitled *Glow, Holiday Torch!* (《燃烧吧, 节日的火把!》). The plaque states that it won a third place for choreography at the second national dance competition. The photo shows a group of fifteen male and female dancers dressed in ethnic minority costumes, some standing and some kneeling, in various states of excited expression, as they cheer on a male and female couple being held up at the center of the group. The man holds both hands in the air and appears to be shouting with joy. The woman has both hands at her chin, also apparently overcome with happiness. The male dancers have swaths of red fabric hanging from their hands, and the women wear bright red shirts and red handkerchiefs attached to their heads with flowers.

The next image, marked 1997, shows a full-cast group photo standing together with government officials. The description reads, "State Council Premier Li Peng and Wife Performance Viewing, Post-Performance Full Cast Photo." This photo shows no dance performance, although such photos are common, as they demonstrate approval from government leadership. I walk past two photos showing the Troupe's Female Orchestra and a Western-style opera performance. Finally, I stop in front of an image marked 1995, of a dance drama entitled *San Xia Qing Ji* (《三峡情祭》 *Three Gorges Emotion and Sacrifice*). The photo shows a beautiful woman in a white peasant costume leaning her head back with her leg in a vertical extension, while a handsome young man dressed in a turquoise work tunic supports her with his

²⁵ This is a summary of the official troupe history as described in He (2009) and on the Troupe's official website (<http://www.ccqgw.com/>).

hand at her waist, his eyes looking longingly over her. The plaque states that the piece won prizes for new choreography, director, and male-and-female lead performance at the China Ministry of Culture Fifth Culture Awards.

Walking further down the hall, past color photos of several dance dramas produced in the 1980s, I find a photo of Chen Jie performing in Sun's 1999 creation *Longzu Fengyun*. Chen stands at the center of a group of seven male dancers, all of whom are dressed in gold and red costumes with patterned boots, headdresses, and false beards. They hold painted drums on their forearms, and their legs are lifted in the air with flexed and turned-in foot positions strongly reminiscent of Sun's anti-ballet style. The dancers' eyes gaze with looks of concentration out into the camera, and I look in them, in vain, for a sign of the dancer's inner world.

My reason for searching into the eyes of the dancers in the photos is something Li Yashu said to me about the system reform a few days earlier. One night, while we were eating dinner with her husband, she brought up the topic of system reform again, and this time she linked it to the dancers' expressions in the photos. She said,

If you look at those photos in the hallway at the Troupe, you will see a problem. The dancers in the black and white photos have expressions of *touru* (devotion, literally "throwing oneself in to it") and *fengfu* (plentiful, abundant). They are one hundred percent committed to the performance. But the performers in the more recent photos all have very different expressions, a 'half smile,' *mianqiang mianqiang* (forced, forced). There are so few young dancers now who are like the old teachers and equally committed to what they are doing. Not very many people are like Chen Jie.

Was there really such a stark change between the generations as Li describes? Is this another example, as with the discourse of "spirit" discussed in Chapter Two, of dancers searching in the past for a way to explain what they feel is lost in the present? What is it exactly that they feel is missing? In her comment, what Li said was lost is a sense of real commitment. How does one define or measure this commitment and does system reform really affect it?

All of these questions were in my mind as I compared the image of Chen Jie to several black and white images. A photo marked 1972 showed five men wearing simple dark shirts and pants, army hats, and guns strapped to their backs. The work is entitled *Life Goes On, the Assault is Endless* (《生命不息，冲锋不止》), and one of the performers is Yuan Luyang, the dancer who described his participation in 1960s-era improvised street performances in Chapter Two. Yuan and the other dancers stand in deep lunges with their feet wide apart, white socks showing out of their black shoes, one hand clenched in a fist, the other reaching upward. In the dark stage setting, the lights gleam white on the dancers' faces and arms, and their eyebrows show dramatically in the revolutionary make-up, as they gaze upward with looks of determination and passion.

After staring at the two images for a long while, I couldn't deny that there was definitely a difference between them. The dancers in *Life Goes On, the Assault is Endless* had surrounding them what dancers in China call "*qichang*" (气场) fields of breath. They emitted power through their presence on stage, and they seemed to have a command over it that the dancers in Chen Jie's photo did not possess. Was the sense of command simply a function of the difference in body position, the color of the costumes, and the use of spacing on stage? It may have been.

Regardless of what produced it, however, the effect was that the dancers in the black and white photos had a sense of ownership of the stage in a way that Chen Jie and his companions did not.

Beyond Privatization and Transition

From an initial introduction to the problematized domain of system reform, through a set of “moments” like the ones just described, it is tempting to see system reform as the most recent step in a familiar process of privatization and liberalization in China’s culture industries, one whose processes are known and whose results are predictable. In this view, market liberalization initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and early 80s in China leads to a process in which China’s economy comes to look more and more like the economies of Western neoliberal market democracies. One predicts the slow encroachment of “the market” into spaces once dominated by government ownership and government direction. And, with this encroachment, the social and cultural forms associated with market society also emerge. While these new forms are not identical -- due to their inevitably “local” terrains of articulation -- they nevertheless share important qualities and orientations, as so many different assemblages of the shared “global form” of market liberalization (Collier and Ong 2004).

In the domain of system reform in the song and dance troupe, one indeed finds signs of the social and cultural forms associated with global processes of market liberalization. In Chen Jie’s, Li Yashu’s, and the Party Secretary’s stories, for example, we see dancers being faced with the need to adapt themselves to new work opportunities and demands, and either succeeding or failing to do so in different cases. This suggests the emergence of a new practice of individuals acting as “enterprising selves” in the era of system reform, taking on a type of selfhood that has been identified with privatization and its accompanying social form, neoliberalism (Rose 1999; Dunn 2004). Likewise, in Mao’s discussion of the new corporatized operations of the Troupe -- including new personnel and client relationships and new valuations of performance works as commercial products -- we see the development of a type of “audit culture” (Strathern 2000) and “remorseless commodification” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 304) characteristic of neoliberal regimes. Finally, the affective shift in dancers’ expressions and experiences -- and perhaps more important Li’s and Chen’s perception of and concerns about these developments -- suggest both a growing “spectre of fragility” (Baudrillard 1998: 174) and “reflexivity” of late capitalist consumer society (Beck 1994).

However, this is not the story I wish to tell here. While the domain of system reform in China has produced elements of language, experience, and practice that align with patterns apparent in liberalizing societies around the world, they also present phenomena that challenge existing frameworks for understanding privatization and liberalization as globally consistent processes with predicable outcomes. In her book *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*, Elizabeth Dunn (2004) shows how processes of privatization in postsocialist societies are far from natural or spontaneous processes. Instead, they require remaking of subjectivities and major transformations in the ways people understand themselves and their relationship to work and to others.

While Dunn’s insights are important for understanding the process of system reform in China’s cultural industries (discussed further below), the model for market liberalization and privatization that forms the basis for her study is different from that of system change in a number of ways, which make a simple comparison quite difficult. Most significantly, whereas Dunn’s study looks at a Polish company acquired by an international corporation, the system change in China’s song and dance troupes is quite different. Dunn’s study was based in a Polish

food manufacturing plant (Alima) that was bought by an international corporation (Gerber), forming a new, transnational company (Alima-Gerber). In contrast, the case of system change in the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe entails no part played by an international corporation, nor was the Troupe even fully privatized in the process. Before system reform, Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe was a “state-owned state funded” organization under the direct governance of the Chongqing Municipality Propaganda Bureau. After system reform, the Troupe remained state-owned, although its governing relationship moved from the Propaganda Bureau to the Chongqing Broadcasting and Television Conglomerate, itself also a newly created organization in 2005. Additionally, the organizational status of the Troupe, rather than becoming a “private corporation” (私有企业), instead became a state organization assigned a new structure: “nationally-owned independently financed corporate nature.”

Rather than seeing system change as a process of privatization or liberalization recognizable in the terms provided by the conventions of transnational corporations or neoliberal market transition, it is more accurate to see system change in China as a process that produces entirely new forms of organization, with new forms of ownership and governance. In her pioneering book *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Katherine Verdery (1996) argues that anthropologists and others seeking to understand new developments in socialist and postsocialist societies are best served by either abandoning concepts like “transition” and “privatization” or else thoroughly problematizing them with rigorous critical reflection and reassessment. “In my opinion, to assume that we are witnessing a transition from socialism to capitalism, democracy, or market economies is mistaken” (15) Verdery writes. In place of the notion of “transition” and its projection of a predictable outcome, Verdery suggests the model of “transformation.” “[T]hese transformations will produce a variety of forms, some of them perhaps approximating Western capitalist market economies and many of them not” (15-16). Understanding the process of transformation that is happening in places like Romania, Poland, and Russia, Verdery argues, requires both “a theoretically grounded understanding of the system that has crumbled,” as well as “attempting to suspend judgment about the outcome” (10).

Following Verdery’s approach, I see system change as indicative of a process of transformation, rather than one of transition. Such a view is even more important in China, where both the ideals and practices of socialist governance are still very much present in people’s everyday lives. William (Huizhu) Sun, a professor of theater and performance studies at the Shanghai Theater Academy states in a personal communication in 2011, “China is MORE socialist than 30 years ago, despite the overwhelming fanfare about money-making and GDPism, despite the fact that it isn’t socialist enough, given the wealth the government has accumulated.” Thus, whether China in the Reform Era can even appropriately be called “postsocialist” is not clear. While some of the experiences of postsocialism pertain to China’s Reform Era condition, many do not. Even less, then, do the models of liberalization and market reform developed for describing “late capitalist” social forms in other Western or Westernized liberal economies.

Aihwa Ong has argued that market liberalization in China should be understood differently from that in other places because it is a market liberalization in the context of strong state power. This certainly makes “transformation” in China different from that in the postsocialist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that Verdery was primarily concerned with in her analysis. In *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Ong (2006) argues that Chinese and other East and Southeast Asian approaches to market liberalism make market reform into a site of state intervention, such that the state actually uses these processes to strengthen, rather than weaken, its claim to sovereignty. Ong calls this

phenomenon “the active, interventionist aspect of neoliberalism [...] where *neoliberalism as exception* articulates sovereign rule and regimes of citizenship” (2006: 3).

Ong’s concept of “neoliberalism as exception” is helpful for understanding aspects of transformation taking place through system reform in China’s culture industries that serve to reinforce the power of the Chinese state, although the exact identity of state power in these cases is sometimes difficult to define. One example that is helpful for thinking through this relationship is that of the “*zhibiao*” (指标), or government quota. An effect of changes in Troupe management since the 1990s is that allocations of benefits such as housing and local residency status are no longer an expected part of the conditions of employment for professional dancers in state-owned song and dance troupes. Long Yunna (b. 1971), a dancer in the then state-owned Guangzhou Modern Dance Company (established 1992) told me that in 2001 she received the “last round” of government-allocated housing for regular dance employees. A similar transition occurred in the Chongqing Troupe in the early 2000s. (Chen reports having the option of state-allocated housing when he was a member in the late 1990s, though such options are not available to newly hired dancers today, according to those I interviewed). The ability to allocate housing once gave the state power in its relationship with dancers, since it encouraged the best dancers to remain members of state-owned troupes, while maintaining a vision of the state as benefactor of art workers and art practice.

In the era of system reform, state-allocated benefits are becoming increasingly scarce, but the *zhibiao* is a remaining vestige of this system, and it gives the state a position of power that is strengthened as competition increases. Shang Jing and Lan Yixin, two of the Troupe’s young female stars who joined the Troupe in the early 2000s, reported that they left their former positions in other troupes to join the Chongqing Troupe in large part because it was able to provide them with *zhibiao*. *Zhibiao* status marks a worker as part of the officially allocated positions in a state-sponsored troupe (as opposed to additional transient labor), and it allows a worker to obtain legal local residence permit, as well as a more permanent position in the Troupe. As the number of *zhibiao* positions decreases, the value of such positions goes up, since the state remains the sole body able to provide the legal benefits to which they provide access.

System reform as it is being carried out in China’s cultural industries is not equivalent to the processes of privatization or marketization that have been associated with a general global process of market liberalization and the emergence of neoliberalism as a global social form. While it shares some of the strategies recognized in these global processes, system reform also creates new changes and new cultural forms which cannot be described in the terms of existing language or models. In the following sections, I discuss further problems with existing models, while offering new alternatives that are more appropriate for understanding specific concerns and situations in China more broadly, and in the culture industries specifically.

Ecologies of Support and Fulfillment

The value of the “neoliberalism as exception” model becomes less obvious for understanding system reform when it takes as a premise the assumption that state power opposes the positive possibilities of individual expression and freedom offered by the market. In the introduction to their edited volume *Privatizing China: Socialism From Afar*, Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang (2008) argue that, in China, the adoption of market principles does not lead to liberal individualism, because the persistence of state power constrains such individualism, instead shaping subjects who in different ways contribute to authoritarian rule. “In China,” write Zhang and Ong, “market-driven practices are inextricably linked to state policies, so that self-

enterprising activities frequently rely on political structures and relationships rather than opposing them. [...] [P]rivatization in China promotes a minimalist kind of individual freedom shoehorned into an authoritarian environment” (10-11). Although their aim, ultimately, is to challenge the relevance of concepts such as the “liberal subject” in China, their analysis often reinforces such concepts in its very negation of them.

When attempting to understand system reform in China’s cultural industries, it is not useful to start from an assumed contradiction between state authoritarianism and the liberal subject. One reason for this, as Richard Kraus (2004) has shown, is that the state never had absolute control over the content or production of performance art in the People’s Republic of China. Since the beginning of the socialist period, the role of the state has been to provide material and ideological platforms for artistic production, and through strong programs of censorship it has encouraged some forms of artistic production while discouraging and even outlawing others. Within these parameters, however, a wide range of diverse and often surprisingly experimental forms of artistic and creative practice have still been possible and indeed have taken place.

Another point that brings into question the value of seeing state power and individual expression as fundamentally opposed is that there is little evidence that state intervention into creative industries inherently diminishes the expressive potential of artists or performers. During my fieldwork among dancers, I encountered many, many individuals who expressed dissatisfaction with perceived limitations on their artistic expression. One dancer, a young hip-hop artist, expressed extreme dismay over an incident in which a body roll action he had choreographed into a piece had been taken out by censors because it was claimed that the action represented the “returning circle” idea of Falun Gong, the illegal group labelled a cult in China. Another dancer, a veteran specialist in Korean dance, shook her head and laughed in mockery at a rule from the 1960s that outlawed a head-swinging movement in Korean folk-dance, which was said at the time to convey a sense of political uncertainty. In all of these complaints by dancers, it was always the content of the censorship, the rules that were being applied, or the particular manner in which the state was impacting artistic practice that was being questioned or criticized. The idea that the state should not play a role in the creation of artistic work, even as a strong source of guidance and control at times, was never seen as a problem in itself.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, dancers in China during the era of system reform are just as likely to be more concerned about the state’s abandonment of the arts than of its participation in it. When dancers like Chen Jie spoke of wanting to leave the profession of dance, one of the reasons they often cited was that because the state had stopped providing opportunities for meaningful artistic contributions, song and dance troupes resorted to artistically hollow commercial activities like back-up dancing. Zhang Minxin (b. 1935), an emeritus professor of choreography at the Beijing Dance Academy, describes the problems surrounding system reform as intimately related to the state’s abandonment the arts. This abandonment, she argues, forces dancers to lack meaningful work and, in her words, “waste their talent.” Discussing the problem of placing graduating dance students in good jobs, Zhang argues that there are few good places for students to work in which they can actually make use of their training. She says,

Placing students today *makes me so sick*. You have a really wonderful performer, and you place him or her [in a troupe]. But, for whatever reason, there are no performances or whatever, and they just sit there. Before you know it the performer is old and her or she has never really performed. It’s terrible. Right

now, the number of people trained is absolutely *huge* -- not just at the Dance Academy but all over the country, in every location. And what do they all do? Back-up dancers (伴舞). Look at the enormous scenes at those ‘national celebration’ or ‘new years’ events. One person stands in front singing a song, and hundreds of people stand behind doing back-up dancing, just doing this kind of simple movement [she demonstrates in imitation]. I just think it’s such a *waste*.

When asked why she thinks this problem is occurring, Zhang responds:

It’s a problem with the whole *system of organization* (体制). Don’t you know? Before the troupes were supported by the government (国家养的, literally ‘nourished by the nation’). Later, the government stopped taking care of things, and the troupes were left up to their own devices. And then, for all kinds of reasons -- reasons of the *system of organization*-- there are huge limitations. So the result is, everyone says they are just ‘trying out’ different approaches. They say they are just ‘trying things out,’ but in reality -- [sigh] *Aiya!* The talent that has been wasted and delayed is really enormous.

Zhang laments that it is physically painful for her to watch the new commercial works produced by song and dance troupes since, in her words, “the government stopped taking care of things.” As a teacher, she says, it is especially disheartening.

I’ve gone to see [the new shows], and it just makes me sick to death. When you are training them, you know, it’s really not easy. I mean, for us, we are already old, we’ve left. But, those young people -- you’ve just finished training them and then they’ve already retired! They have no chance to achieve their full potential. The choreographers have no chance to achieve their potential, and neither do the performers. Right now, these passages are just not flowing. It’s getting a little better lately, but only a very little. Right now, all the different elements just don’t join together (接头, literally ‘come head to head’).

In Zhang’s view, a major factor in causing the system to break down is that the state no longer supports dance work the way it once did. Not only does this cause dance troupes to have to struggle independently to find their own way in a new system, by “trying out” new approaches, it also leads to the painful wasting away of what she calls a dancer’s “potential.” When dancers sit in troupes with no performances, or just doing back-up dancing, this is a waste of the talent they have accumulated through years of specialized training. Within the context of the dance school, this talent is appreciated and valued, but in order to maintain this value a healthy environment for artistic creation is necessary, what Zhang calls a “system of organization.” It is this delicate ecology of support -- a combination of market forces, government support, institutional structures, artistic motivation, cultural sensibilities -- that Zhang sees as falling into disrepair and needing to regain connection and flow.

Zhang’s discussion above introduces a possible alternative vocabulary for thinking through the types of relationships and struggles for which Zhang and Ong find the terms “neoliberalism,” “authoritarianism,” and “liberated self” useful but ultimately limiting. Two key concepts that Zhang’s discussion provides, and which I find particularly useful, are “system of

organization” (体制 *tizhi*) and “fulfilling one’s potential” (发挥 *fahui*). These two terms appear with extremely high frequency throughout my discussions with dancers in China. Furthermore, they emerge out of and refer back to historical processes and lived experiences that have real significance for dancers in China unlike many other frequently used concepts, such as neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and the liberated self.

The term “system of organization” (体制), as it was used among dancers in China during my research, refers to an entire system of state-related institutional entities, the people who work in them, and processes by which they run. In his classic study of society in the People’s Republic of China, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (1971), Franz Schurmann asserts that the Chinese revolution and the establishment of a new nation that followed, was, fundamentally, a process of replacing social system with organization. “The story of Communist China to this day is still one of organization,” he asserts (11). According to Schurmann, the Communist Party achieved and maintained a position of leadership in China by its ability to rule through organization, a uniquely dynamic set of systematic structures that, “Far from being self-regulating, demands constant effort to maintain it” (4). The term “system of organization” as Zhang uses it refers to this form of active organization that was instituted in China as part of the culture of the state in the People’s Republic. However, as an entire ecology of systematic support, the system referred to something larger than the government itself. Larger than the government, greater than the Party, more weighty than any particular policy or persona -- the system of organization was, for my informants, the everyday embodiment of a state-engineered social order. Maintaining this social order, was, for them, a fundamental requirement for maintaining the healthy functioning of society.

Members of the dance world in China, though they all talk about “the system,” have different ways of imagining it. My friend, a young art manager named Xia Fang, who spent much of her time moving between domestic and international arts organization, argued that when choosing a job in China she had to consider the difference between being “inside the system” (体制内) or “outside the system” (体制外). In her case, she described jobs inside the system as those affiliated with state-run institutions -- the National Center for the Performing Arts, China Central Television, the Beijing Dance Academy. Potential employers she described as being outside the system included private companies (Poly Theater Management Corporation, Beijing Jiatai Cultural Communications Co, Ltd.), international government organizations with offices in Beijing (*Alliance Française*, Dutch Embassy), and Chinese nonprofit or nongovernmental local groups (CCD Living Dance Workstation, Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company).

While Xia envisions the art world in China as being composed of organizations both inside and outside the system, she clearly sees the organizations she describes as “inside the system” being the most dominant and structurally important ones. Xia argues that institutions “inside the system,” such as the National Center for the Performing Arts, are by far the largest and most powerful in the arts industry in China. Much in the same way that Hollywood as a network of institutions dominates the film industry in the United States, these institutions form the core of the performance industry in China, such that other groups must be seen as secondary to the primary operations of the system. Like smaller film companies in the United States, these other groups in China occupy the realm of the “independent” or “fringe.” Unlike in the United States, the division of significance between different types of corporate entities in China is not between for-profit and non-profit but between affiliated with the state and non-affiliated with the state. Being affiliated with the state is the dominant position, and it includes a range of activities, for which the distinctions between “market” and “state” or between “for-profit” and “non-profit”

are not fully descriptive of the situation. From this perspective, system reform does not seem to be privatization at all, because as Ong and Zhang point out, market activity still takes place within the institutional ownership of the state.

To speak about being “inside the system” is different from speaking of state control, because whether one is inside or outside the system, the health of the system impacts the whole, and state control is fundamental to the existence of the system itself. As we see in Zhang’s use of her “not flowing” and “meeting head to head” metaphors, what is significant about the system is its internal harmony and state of healthful operations, not its impact on singular individuals seen as somehow outside of it. This point is absolutely critical for understanding how dancers perceive “the system” and their relationship to it, and it draws not only on socialist-era conceptions of authority and citizenship but of much older Chinese conceptions of the state’s role as part of a cosmic “body” (Sivin 1995; Hay 1994). Zhang describes the problem with the system not as a problem of transition from one state (socialism) to another (liberalization), but instead of a system in breakdown needing to be healed. “Passages are just not flowing,” Zhang says, invoking an understanding of disease as blocked flow common to traditional Chinese medicine.²⁶ In traditional Chinese conceptions of the world, the body is an ecological field, and its logics of activity are the same as those of the natural environment. Thus, in her discussion of waste and delay, Zhang continues the bodily metaphor, which is at the same time a discussion of system as ecology defined by distribution and preservation of resources.

The second term from Zhang’s discussion that is useful for understanding the concerns and experiences of dancers in system reform is “fulfilling one’s potential.” Being able to fulfill one’s potential is a much more commonly expressed concern among dancers in China than is the idea of “expressing oneself” or even “being free,” and it is the most commonly used term to describe an artist’s ultimate professional goal. To fulfill one’s potential is to find use for one’s skills, to be able to apply them fully and whole-heartedly, in a way that they can be appreciated and find value. Dancers who are sent to troupes but never get to perform in serious performances, or dancers who go into teaching directly after graduation, but never work on stage, are seen as not fulfilling their potential as dancers. Zhang explains,

Now, there’s this whole trend for ‘aesthetic education,’ and [dance] teachers are needed for kindergarten, elementary schools, middle schools, universities, everywhere. So now many [graduating students] become teachers. That has become the mainstream path after graduation these days. So you teach this person and then this person goes on to teach someone else [she laughs]. But it never even appears on stage. Just teach, teach, teach, like that. But I personally feel very strongly -- and I’ve started to say this recently at our meetings -- that if we are going to have a choreography department, we cannot separate ourselves from the stage. You can’t just teach people techniques of choreography, and then have them teach others, and never put them on stage. If that’s how it is, then there is no point in our existence at all! If you are going to train teachers that’s one thing. But, for performers and choreographers it is a huge problem.

²⁶ In classical Chinese medical theory, health is designated by the maintenance of unblocked flows of energy, breath, and fluids within and between bodies. Thus, in Chinese medicine, the ultimate explanation for physical ailment is “blocked passageways” (Farquhar 1994).

Here, Zhang sees the appearance of dance works on stage as a natural process of fulfilling one's potential. If students study choreography or performance, according to Zhang, then a healthy system is one in which students, after graduation, are able to use their skills in the workplace by putting dance works on stage.

Using Zhang's terms of analysis, in the final sections of this chapter, I address two broad questions, using the specific example of *City Beauty* (2008), the Chongqing Troupe's first major dance work produced after system reform. The questions are: what constitutes a healthy "system of organization" for China's dance world? And, how do dancers imagine and practice the process of "fulfilling one's potential" in the era of system reform? I address these questions, because these are the ones that seem most pertinent to those involved in the dance industry during system reform. Since *City Beauty* is a typical example of dance works produced under the newly emerging system, analysis of *City Beauty* can offer insight into the impact of the reform on the creative process and the material results of dance productions. Employing the key concepts of "system of organization" and "fulfilling one's potential," I ask whether *City Beauty* represents success or failure as a model for new dance works. What is it in the qualities of a dance work that makes it indicate a healthy "system of organization" that is capable of allowing dancers to "fulfill their potential"? Does *City Beauty* possess these qualities? Finally, comparing *City Beauty* to the "revolutionary dances" produced by the Troupe in the 1960s and 70s, and to the work *Longzu Fengyun* produced by Sun in 1999, I outline the ways in which the new problems created by system reform, and represented in works like *City Beauty*, can be resolved, or at least better understood, by learning from the Troupe's past.

***City Beauty*: System Reform on Stage**

Like a majority of large-scale dance productions created by song and dance troupes around China since the 1990s, *City Beauty* is a project of city branding, with a large tourism component. Total investment in the production is estimated at four million RMB (\$500,000-\$600,000), funding that came jointly from corporate investors and from the Chongqing Municipal government. Wang Jing (2001) argues that major city branding campaigns, aimed at developing "the image-capital of a city" (87), began in China in the mid-1990s, with the earliest campaigns taking place in Beijing and Shanghai and then following in other major cities. These campaigns represent one example of what Wang calls "the state's rediscovery of culture as a site where new ruling technologies can be deployed and converted simultaneously into economic capital" (71-72). Chongqing's conversion in 1997 into one of China's four direct-controlled municipalities (along with Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin) raised its status to become the most important industrial and urban center in the western and southwest regions. With this new status, among other changes, came additional funding for projects of city branding.

Unlike touring dance dramas produced by song and dance troupes, *City Beauty* is performed in a fixed location, adding to its status as a tourism performance. It has a dedicated theater inside Hong'yan Cave, a theme-park version of an old riverside market, which is one of Chongqing's largest tourist attractions. The theater is a small part of Hong'yan Cave, whose primary attraction is its stalls selling local Chongqing specialty foods and Chongqing souvenirs. The building is made in imitation-traditional architecture with stacks of green tiled roofs, ornately carved wooden railings, and a fake waterfall. However, in contrast to the fake-traditional aesthetic of the Cave, the posters for *City Beauty* have a distinctly "modern" aesthetic. The main advertisement outside the Cave is a large billboard with a deep blue background and a large photograph image of the upper bodies of five glamorous women. In their sleeveless black

evening dresses, with long, slender arms, bright pastel eyeshadow, and sultry, aloof expressions, the women look like images belonging on the cover of a fashion magazine.

The aesthetic choices for the creation of *City Beauty* were, according to Mao, based on a combination of what he calls “political considerations” and “the needs of the market.” The performance program for *City Beauty* reflects this dual influence, as the first content page shows a panoramic photograph of Chongqing at dusk, overlaid with short statements (of equal length and presented in equal font size with symmetrical positioning) by He Shizhong, Director of the Propaganda Bureau of the Chongqing Municipality Communist Party Committee, and Li Xiaofeng, Executive Director of the Chongqing Radio and Television Broadcasting Group (CRTBG). Political considerations for the work’s production, Mao explains, meant that *City Beauty* had to be about Chongqing culture. “To satisfy the needs of politics, we had to make *City Beauty* about Chongqing,” he says, “expressing the local folkways, customs and sensibilities, to fulfill the government’s requirement to ‘excavate, research, and preserve local culture.’” The word “渝” in the Chinese title of the work, 《渝美人》, is the official abbreviation for Chongqing, and it represents the part of the show that reflects local culture as mandated by the local Chongqing government. Needs of the market, by contrast, indicate what Mao calls the show’s “watchability and listenability,” in other words, its appeal to the senses and to entertainment. Choices that were made with consideration for the market, according to Mao, included the work’s focus on five beautiful women, and its use of high quality “*baozhuang*,” or “wrappings.” These so-called “wrappings” constitute one of the major expenditures of the show, and they include elements usually referred to as the “material” aspects of the show: high quality original music, technologically sophisticated lighting and sets, and elaborate, fashionable original costuming.

The second part of the show’s Chinese title “美人,” meaning “beauty” or “beautiful woman,” is part of the work’s appeal to the market, and it shows, according to Mao, a point of compromise between political and commercial concerns. “That word [beautiful woman] is not considered to be “healthy” according to the official political ideology, so it wouldn’t be used if this were a strictly government-sponsored work,” Mao explains. The word “beautiful woman” here suggests a commercialization of feminine beauty that is considered vulgar in both political ideology and the preferences of what Mao calls “pure art.” However, he says, “In making these choices we’ve had to consider the needs of the market, and we sometimes have to make choices that are not ideal from a purely artistic standpoint.”

In creating *City Beauty*, a project that took several years, the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe hired a number of well-known artists from outside Chongqing to serve as the creative directors for each of its major components. For the role of executive director and head of choreography, the Troupe hired Zhao Ming, a nationally renowned choreographer from the People’s Liberation Army “Comrade-in-Arms” (战友) Song and Dance Troupe in Beijing. Stage designer Li Wenxin and composer Li Ruiding are also highly ranked artists from the same Troupe. Zhao, Li, and Li all possess the title “Level One Artist,” the highest rank that an artist can achieve in China’s national ranking system.²⁷ The two remaining members of *Beauty City*’s

²⁷ China has a national ranking system in which artists apply for status and privileges based on their education and professional accomplishments. To obtain Level One, the highest status, one must win numerous top awards in national and/or international competitions, have extensive experience and be considered among the best in one’s field. This ranking system is an important part of the “system of organization” discussed in the previous section.

Creative Team, screenwriter Cao Lusheng and costume designer Li Ruiding, are based at the Shanghai Theater Academy. Cao serves as chief editor of the nationally ranked journal *Xiju Yishu* (*Dramatic Art*) and is author of several books, including *International Postmodern Drama* (2002). Li studied fashion design at the Tokyo Musashino Art University and has worked for international design corporations PARCO Co and Tokyo Molilin.

Hiring this creative team for the making of *City Beauty* entails a great expenditure by the Troupe, in time, money, and inconvenience, and it goes against the basic politically-mandated premise of making *City Beauty* a work that reflects local culture. To hire Zhao Ming, for example, the Chongqing Troupe had to wait for three years before he became available, due to his high demand in the dance performance market (CCTV 2009). Artists with a “Number One Artist” ranking demand high prices for being hired to work on a project, because, in cases like Zhao Ming’s, their name itself has brand recognition and value. While in many cases the hired artist him or herself will spend little time working directly on a project (assistants will do the majority of day-to-day work), having the artist’s name on the work is considered essential for guaranteeing the work’s “*pinzhi*,” or “product quality,” a characteristic seen as directly related to the work’s commercial, therefore also political, value.

In the era of system reform, the idea of “product quality” has come to dominate assessments of commercial and political viability of artistic works created as government-corporate joint ventures for city branding. According to the logic of branding, the product quality of a work needs to be at the same level as the cultural status of the groups sponsoring the work. “Our clients want to be associated with works that have high product quality,” explains Mao. “If our client is one of Chongqing’s highest end companies, then our artistic products should also be the highest end in Chongqing. The brands need to be matched. It is a formula that our planners need to understand.” To reach this high level of product quality, several elements need to be in place. One, the personal status and cultural capital represented by the members of the creative team needs to be of equal or higher status to that of the sponsoring groups. Two, the work needs to reflect a high level of cultural distinction, or taste, as evinced by its selection of content and aesthetic style. Three, the work needs to have a high level of material quality, which includes both the training and physical qualities of the performers and the quality of the so-called “wrappings,” music, costumes, and stage technology. Describing the steps that were taken to ensure the material quality of costumes in *City Beauty*, Mao states, in a televised interview to promote the work, “The materials [in the costumes] are all of extremely fine quality. Many of the materials we imported from places like Japan and Hong Kong” (CCTV 2009).

Reflecting the multiple factors that went into the making of *City Beauty*, the show itself is a spectacular hodgepodge of entertainment styles whose most salient effect is sensory overload. A combination of high-tech entertainment extravaganza, Broadway romance, futuristic fashion show, ballet, Chinese folk dance, acrobatics, and pop music video, *City Beauty* has “something for everyone.” In content, *Beauty City* is composed of five scenes, each named after a color, which depict the separate stories of five “Chongqing beauties” from different eras of Chongqing history. The movement styles using in the work include ballet, Chinese classical, folk, and ethnic dance, aerial gymnastics, ball gymnastics, modern dance, and hip hop. In themes, the stories range from a Mao era revolutionary heroine to a disco-tech love triangle.

City Beauty’s first scene (“Prologue”) opens with a simple but elegant image: a group of female dancers wearing matching calf-length white dresses, long white scarves, and their hair in

single, thick braids²⁸ stand in three lines on stage, each carrying a white umbrella. A hanging scrim of vertical strings covers the front wall of the stage, producing a visual effect like rain, or like seeing something through a digitally altered projection. Colored lights wash the white of the dancers' dresses, skin, and umbrellas in deep pink, lavender and turquoise. The dancers twirl and swing their umbrellas, bending their bodies forward, back and to the side, embodying the rhythm of a remade pop ballad version of the Chongqing folk song "The Sun Comes out Beaming with Joy." Although based on a folk ballad from the Tujia ethnic minority,²⁹ the song has been embellished with altered lyrics, synthesized bass rhythms and a deep syrupy female lounge-singer voice. As crescendos rise male dancers join the stage and perform partner lifts with the females. With the chorus "the sun comes out" yellow light floods the stage, and the dancers' free arms stretch up and then down in sweeping lyrical gestures.

The next scene ("Purple") tells the first of five stories that make up the work's narrative structure. "Purple" tells a story of forbidden love in imperial China, complete with court-inspired sets, classical zither music, historical costumes, and Chinese traditional opera-style group dance. The scene reaches a build up and climax when the star-crossed lovers dance a duet of melodramatic contemporary ballet, during which the female lead struggles against bindings wrapped around her limbs, representing the social restrictions that make it impossible for her and her lover to be together. Six dancers dressed in elaborate costumes as menacing dirt goons hold the lovers apart, representing the forces of oppression in feudal society.

Scene two, "Red," shifts to the civil war period of the 1940s and tells the story of Sister Jiang (*Jiang Jie*), a well-known heroine from the revolutionary opera of the same name. Dark and elaborate sets turn the stage into a midnight dungeon, with stone staircases, slanted false rooftops and a torture room. The scene reaches its climax during Sister Jiang's capture by the Nationalists, during which she expresses, through a combination of acrobatics and ballet, her steadfast dedication to the Communist Party. At the height of dramatic tension, Jiang Jie falls headfirst from a suspension wire several meters above the stage, where she has been executing an aerial ribbon routine. She hangs from two red silk ribbons tied around her ankles, and her revolutionary-style bobbed hair and red gown bounce in the air. Threatening orchestral music crescendos in a symbol crash and male dancers dressed as prison guards surround her from below.

In scene three, "Green," the tone of the performance changes into a carnivalesque spectacle of saccharine romance, color, and brightness. Dungeon-like nighttime sets are replaced, in what seems like an immediate transition, by a two-tiered jungle landscape complete with vines, mist and a giant waterfall. Dramatic orchestral scores give way to joyful bass-boosted ethnic minority tunes, and ballet and opera movement turns into energetic ethnic minority dancing. One line after another of dancers appears onstage, each dressed more colorfully than the previous group. Women dressed as flowers and birds, and men dressed in trees and jungle creatures fill the stage with life, a blur of petals, feathers, branches, and leaves that seem like part

²⁸ The long braid is the hairstyle worn most frequently by performers cast as the common woman in pre-revolutionary feudal society.

²⁹ "太阳出来喜洋洋" is known throughout China as a song sung by members of the Tujia minority ethnicity group, as they go to work on the mountain ridges. In this version, original lyrics such as "jumping up with my shoulder pole to climb the ridge, an ax in my hand I do not fear the lions and leopards" are changed to "...I see the red roses opening."

of a fantasy world. As the dancers jet in and out of the stage, the lead pair dance a simple story of youthful romance apparently meant to celebrate the natural beauty and ethnic diversity of Chongqing.

In scene four, “Blue,” the stage transforms yet again, this time into a modern disco club set against a backdrop of the lit up city skyline of contemporary Chongqing. The group dancers trade their feathers and leaves for sleek, modern street clothing made of silver lamé, black patent leather, and oversized silver and red belts and necklaces. The music and body language shift seamlessly from folk to hip-hop, and the entire scene is like an American MTV music video. The two wings of the stage open up, revealing stools and bars stocked with foreign liquor. Smartly-dressed bartenders entertain their guests by juggling bottles, while groups of dancers perform hip-hop numbers center stage. As the heroine, dressed in a conservative blue dress, and the hero, dressed black leather pants and an open vest, laugh over tequila shots at the bar, another woman, dressed in seductive clothing, tempts the man with suggestive dance moves. The plot unfolds with fighting between the girls, followed by the hero’s rejection of the seductress for the heroine.

Beauty City concludes with the final scene “Gold,” in which the future of Chongqing is represented as gilt science fiction fantasy of wealth and splendor. The scrim from the Prologue reappears this time with a gold overlay, and it lifts up to reveal a surreal scene of dancers wrapped in floor-length gold and red robes of fan-folded, metallic taffeta. The dancers execute mesmerizingly slow Chinese classical dance movements, set against a backdrop of red chili peppers. Live singers appear onstage singing a pop song ballad, and as they sing projections of golden light wheels spin on the floor. The finale, set to the chili paper backdrop, features the group dancers performing their hip hop routines while each of the five female soloists individually execute technique tricks in her own style.

City Beauty: Success or Failure?

City Beauty has a number of elements that make it capable of sustaining a healthy “system of organization” for the dance industry, as well as providing opportunities for dancers to “fulfill one’s potential,” yet it also presents new problems. Thus, *City Beauty* is both a success and a failure. By examining the successes and failures of *City Beauty* it is possible to understand, anticipate, and even find ways to solve the new problems emerging out of an ongoing process of system reform in China’s cultural industries.

As a tourism-based performance that satisfies the Municipal government’s quest for city branding, *City Beauty* draws on funding from both city government and corporate entities, and it has a clear source of continued market revenue in tourists visiting Chongqing and seeking live entertainment as part of their visit. Corporate sponsorships help support additional performances apart from those aimed at individual tourists. For example, the show I saw, held on a Tuesday night, was a “*baochang*” (booked theater) performance sponsored by China Mobile. Unlike the back-up dancing shows described by Zhang Minxin, in which dancers perform low quality dance movements, like moving props for the central act, which is the singers, in *City Beauty* dancers performing challenging and high quality dance serve as the narrative center of the show.

As the dancers performing in *City Beauty* described to me, the rehearsal process for *City Beauty* was exacting and arduous, and it exposed them to new dance forms that they found both personally challenging and artistically innovative. Guo Peng, the male lead in the disco scene, studies hip-hop dance on his own outside his work in the troupe, and he described the rehearsal process for the hip-hop scenes in *City Beauty* as exciting and personally rewarding. Having studied myself with Xiao Chuan, the hip hop instructor invited from Beijing to give a two-week

intensive training to the Troupe as preparation for *City Beauty*, I know that his teaching style is both intense and demanding. Dancers described this intensity as something they enjoyed about working on the piece, and part of what made it overall a successful work.

For dancers, intense training in new dance styles is rewarding because it both validates the importance of the dancers as skilled performers (rather than beautiful props) and gives them opportunities to expand their abilities. In an interview for CCTV (2009), Shang Jing, the female soloist who performs the role of Sister Jiang in the scene “Red,” describes the painstaking process of learning the acrobatic suspension ribbon technique as challenging yet ultimately rewarding. She recounts her experience as follows,

Because the entire force [of the ribbons] is concentrated on the two ankle joints, each time I practiced I would get injured. Eventually, now, my ankles have grown callused. The whole area of my ankles is covered in calluses and the surface of my calves is covered in marks and bruises. Each time it came to the point where I was supposed to fall down [and hang suspended], I felt like there was no way I was going to fall. Even if it’s a matter of life and death [I thought], I wouldn’t do it. Because, I had never done this kind of bungee dancing before, so that feeling, I’d never danced that way before. My heart didn’t have that kind of courage. The teacher told me to squat first, and then slowly start to fall. Then, eventually I was able to do it. Eventually, [even when I got injured once], I wanted to perform that role. I practiced it again and again until I could do it.

Shang’s account reflects the centrality of physical training in constituting, for dancers, work that fulfills their potential. Through a process of individual focus and daily practice, Shang eventually learns the new technique, and it is the accumulated effort and eventually ability to overcome her difficulties that makes the experience meaningful for her. Once she is trained in the technique, Shang is also more valuable as a dancer and employee, since she alone embodies the capacity to perform a key role.

Training dancers in new styles is an expensive process because it takes time and invests value into individual bodies, a risky endeavor when it is possible that performers could eventually become injured or leave the Troupe. Thus, for many commercial performances, Troupes are not willing to invest in dancers’ training and instead focus on the material elements of costume, lighting, and music, which can be used regardless of the dancers involved, and can sometimes even obscure the lack of creativity and quality in the dancing itself. This is the type of work that makes dancers like Chen feel unsatisfied in their work in Troupes and makes teachers like Zhang feel that dance talent is being wasted. *City Beauty*, by contrast, links commercial and political success to the physical training of the dancers, and to the innovations in dance as the primary creative medium of the work. As Mao explains in the CCTV interview (2009), “In the making of this piece, we’ve focused a great deal of attention on producing innovations in the artistic mediums themselves.” Unlike many other commercial works, in which the product quality of the “wrappings” exceeds that of the dance performance, *City Beauty* seeks to find a balance between these two aspects of “product quality.” By introducing elements like acrobatic techniques and new dance genres like hip hop, Mao explains, while maintaining a very high quality of dancing overall, the creators of *City Beauty* have sought to foreground the quality of dance and dance innovation as a central components in the creative process.

While *City Beauty* has been successful in generating a sustainable “market system” for dance production (market is understood here as a combination of political and commercial interests), as well as a platform for fulfilling the potential of dance talent, some argue that it has been a failure in other ways. The failures of *City Beauty* and dance productions like it indicate new problems emerging in the era of system reform. One such problem is the balance between national and local levels of artistic creation. Ma Junzhen (b. 1938), a retired member of the Chongqing Song and Dance Troupe, makes this point when she says, in an interview, “I was so disappointed and upset when I saw *Beauty City*. The dance scenes are good, but the problem is that they don’t show anything related to Chongqing.” In this statement, Ma indicates a growing problem in the dance industry in China, in which choreographers and performers with national status are being invited with increasing frequency by local song and dance troupes all over China to serve as “creative directors” for local projects. As we see in the case of *City Beauty* this phenomenon is encouraged by the particular type of marketization that is taking place in the dance industry, in which the notion of “product quality” is linked to the brand name of particular artists. In order to attract funding from both local governments and major corporations, song and dance companies find it necessary to seek out what they see as the most prestigious artistic names to work on their productions.

The practice of inviting nationally-ranked artists to serve as artistic directors on dance productions produces a number of different problems. First, because the number of nationally-ranked artists is inherently limited, these few artists become over-burdened with work, and the amount of time and energy they can put into any single project becomes limited. Zhao Ming, the executive director of *City Beauty*, is one such nationally-ranked artist who admits to feeling the pressures of system reform on his own creative process.

I would really like to produce works of a high artistic standard. However, in actuality it is very difficult to do this. The government is calling on you to do this project, and then corporations are paying you to do that project. Everything is very complicated and there are so many non-artistic factors in the mix. I always feel busy, and it is difficult to find a space for reflection. Since the early 2000s, there has been a trend in the Chinese dance world toward sameness (类同化). People talk a lot about a so-called ‘blooming of a hundred flowers,’³⁰ but actually we are facing a very non-diverse reality. It is not healthy. And, the worst part about this situation is that after working in this environment for years, one grows accustomed to the sameness. It’s as if I can only produce works that fit the mold.

³⁰ This is a reference to a phrase Mao Zedong used to describe the diversity of artistic and intellectual work that was supposed to come out of a policy of loosening up political censorship in the 1950s. The phrase is also frequently used to describe the opening up of the culture industry after the 1980s.

Even when I have an opportunity to work in a different way, it's as if I don't know how to do anything else.³¹

When nationally-ranked artists like Zhao are overburdened with work, this situation produces a problem of sameness that is not the result of active political censorship or enforced ideological agreement but rather of a new “system of organization,” which has emerged out of a new combination of government sponsorship and commercialization.

When artists with status such as Zhao Ming are brought in to work on local productions, the knowledge and creative abilities of the artists who work at the local song and dance troupes to which they are called is often not used to its fullest extent. During my fieldwork, I observed this phenomenon take place in many local productions. In Quanzhou, a culturally rich port city in Fujian Province, for example, I sat in on a meeting between representatives of a local song and dance troupe and a group of artists who had been invited to work on a new city branding tourism song and dance production similar to *City Beauty*. The invited artists came from Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, and they had little personal experience or knowledge about Quanzhou. Both the troupe leaders and the invited artists worked diligently at producing a dance production that would reflect the local culture of Quanzhou, but the lack of local knowledge on the part of the invited artists made such a project quite difficult. Ultimately, as in the case with *City Beauty*, the artists were inclined to fall back on familiar patterns and themes, using only elements of local culture that were well-known and somewhat superficial.

Ma indicates this as one of her primary complaints about the *City Beauty* production, which she also sees as falling into the problem of sameness that Zhao describes. She says,

[The creators of *City Beauty*] used the theme of the Chongqing women, and this is a good idea. Actually, there is a great deal of material that they could have used with this theme that would have really expressed Chongqing culture. Chongqing women are industrious, and they have this special way of walking quickly up hills. These are real details that could have been used, things that really relate to Chongqing and its unique culture. The creators of *City Beauty* could have worked with this material. But instead everything [in *City Beauty*] is external.

City Beauty, like many tourist productions created after system reform, uses symbolic elements to reference local culture, such as chili peppers, the story of Jiang Jie, and elements of architectural detail used in the sets. Although the creators of *City Beauty*, like the ones I witnessed in Fujian, likely did work hard to make the production reflective of Chongqing culture, the production still did not stand up to the expectations of veteran local choreographers like Ma Junzhen.

Ma's criticism of *City Beauty* as lacking in real local culture rests on a history of creation in the Troupe, in which Ma herself personally participated, that both encouraged local processes of creation and made them possible. During the 1960s and 70s, under a different “system of

³¹ These reflections were shared during part of an international choreography project, entitled Danscross, that took place at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2009. The project was cosponsored by Beijing Dance Academy and the ResCen Research Centre at Middlesex University, U.K. I served as the primary interpreter for this project, and Zhao Ming was invited to work as a collaborating choreographer.

organization” for cultural work, dancers and choreographers such as Ma and her contemporaries frequently practiced dance creation on the local level. Local knowledge was an important source of artistic inspiration and practice in this era, even when the themes of artistic works were often directed by national policies and events. It is the contrast between this history of dance creation and the current situation under system reform that causes the issues of local creation and sameness to be such significant issues in the problematized domain of system reform today.

Ma joined the Troupe in 1957, and she worked as a performer and choreographer in the Troupe for nearly forty years. During this period, Ma created numerous dance works, some of which were based on her fieldwork among ethnic minorities, and other that were based on personal experiences and stories. In 1975, Ma created a work called *Welcome Dear Ones on the Road of the Red Army* (《红军路上，迎亲人》), based on fieldwork she conducted in western Sichuan. Ma recalls,

A friend and I decided that we needed to enter deeply into life (深入生活), so we got on a bus and went to Batang. I often did choreography then, so I had collected ideas already. We studied the Batang *xuanzi*³² and within a month we had created the piece *Welcome Dear Ones on the Road of the Red Army*. This work became very popular in Chongqing. The piece used Tibetan folk dance, and the so-called ‘dear ones’ in the title were the Liberation Army.

A woman of mixed Tibetan, Hui,³³ and Han ethnicity, who was born and raised in Kangding county, part of the Tibetan Autonomous State located in what is now western Sichuan Province, Ma had important life experience that, she felt, allowed her to appreciate and understand Tibetan dance. “When I was little I used to love doing the circle dances,” Ma recalls, “I would stand behind the older people and follow along, that’s how I came to love singing and dancing. Later, when I became a choreographer, I used this material in my work.”

Ma’s understanding of dance creation is one in which content or themes may circulate on a national level, but actual creative process takes place on the local level, based on the local experiences of dancers and choreographers. In 1976, Ma choreographed the works *The Sound of Beijing* (《北京的声音》) and *Cheers!* (《干杯!》), based on her experience in a rural village during the end of the Cultural Revolution, when she learned the news of the Fall of the Gang of Four over radio broadcast. While the fall of the Gang of Four was a national event, about which dance works were made all over China, Ma describes her creative process in the works as one that was based on local experience and local inspiration. She recounts,

The Sound of Beijing was about the sound of the news coming over the speakers from Beijing, news that the Gang of Four had been crushed. At that time, I had returned to Batang to do more fieldwork. One morning when I got up, a local militia person came and said, ‘Teacher Ma, don’t go out on your trips today. We’ve got news that there is going to be an important announcement on

³² *Xuanzi* is one of the most common types of Tibetan folk dance. In this case, Ma and her friend learned the style of *xuanzi* danced in Batang county, the westernmost area of present-day Sichuan, which borders Tibet.

³³ Hui is the term used for mixed Muslim ethnic minorities in China.

television, from the Central government. Just stay around here today and we'll let you know when it's time.' That was the day that the Gang of Four was toppled. Aya! Batang in October is already very cold, it's high in the steppes. But, [after the broadcast] the streets were filled with people drinking alcohol. All the stores were open and the lights were all lit! Batang isn't much of a place, but it was all lit up that night. People fell down in the streets drunk. I was running around in the streets too. You could hear people shouting and cheering. Many people lost their voices from screaming. Eventually, the stores were all out of alcohol, so people started getting out their rice wine and the special liquors they used for entertaining. The military barracks area had a film corps and they started showing films. People drank and watched movies and sang all night. That's when I had the idea for the piece *Cheers!* It was about the overthrowing of the Gang of Four. I used the Tibetan drum in this piece too, and I had Jiang Qing portrayed as the White Bone Demon. At the end of the piece, the Gang of Four is exposed and everyone toasts, 'cheers!'

Much like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which became a major theme for new dance pieces during my fieldwork, the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976 led to an explosion of artistic creation on overtly political and ideologically consistent themes. However, because the system of artistic production was different at the time, choreographers like Ma had more opportunities to create new works based on their own experiences of these events.

Yuan Luyang (b. 1945), a contemporary of Ma's who joined the Chongqing Troupe in 1959 also recalls participating in the 1960s and 70s in dance creation that took place at the local level. A genre of improvised street performance that Yuan calls "*huopo ju*" (活泼剧), "lively/reactive theater," encouraged local creation based on national themes. Yuan describes the creative process of lively/reactive theater as follows:

This didn't require the long and arduous process usually required of artistic creation. It was a kind of improvised street performance, improvisational, exaggerated. We would find an empty spot out on the street, and sometimes we would notify the local police to keep things orderly. Then we would perform, just like that. We did these kinds of shows a lot. Sometimes there was no clearly defined director. Our boss would tell us there's to be a street performance tomorrow, then some of us would get together to throw ideas together, including costumes and whatnot. We'd perform, for example, a piece called 'Overturn American Imperialism.' As long as it was funny and vented some anger, then it was ok.

The relationship between the national and the local in the type of creative production that Yuan and Ma describe taking place at the Troupe in the 1960s and 70s is the reverse of what is encouraged in creating works like *City Beauty* in the era of system reform. In the earlier era, national themes such as political slogans or the Fall of the Gang of Four became common topics for dance works. However, the way that local troupes interpreted and performed such works was often different. In the era of system reform, however, the roles are reversed. A limited set of artists who collectively represent the national level of artistic groups and culture are now being asked to create works on diverse themes. Out of this new system of organization, a new type of

problematic homogeneity is being produced, which dancers argue threatens the health of the system of organization as a whole.

Another failure of *City Beauty* and works like it, which is different from but related to the problem of the new relationship between the national and the local in processes of creation, is that they provide, according to many, no deep sense of the exploration of culture. Chen Jie is one of many dancers I knew and observed during my fieldwork who pursued dance as a form of cultural research. What he and others meant by cultural research took many forms -- for some, it meant the local culture that Ma describes, for others it meant exploration of the relationship between bodily movement and emotion, for example, and for others it meant exploration, through dance, of Chinese traditional culture. For Chen and others like him, overly commercial productions such as *City Beauty* lacked the cultural significance if they failed to take as their goal some type of cultural research. Thus, they argued that such works would, eventually, fail to sustain a healthy system of organization that could fulfill a dancers' potential.

When Chen describes his reasons for becoming re-inspired in 1999 to continue working in the field of dance, a decision that led him, ultimately, to leave the Troupe, he cites as the main reason for this life-turning point the fact that Sun taught him to see dance as a form of culture. Reflecting on his experience working with Sun on the 1999 dance production *Longzu Fengyun*, Chen recalls Sun's serious work ethic and high demands on physical talent. However, while this physical rigor and personal challenge was an important part of what reawakened Chen's desire to dance, it was the additional appreciation of the cultural significance of dance to which Sun aspired that really made the difference for Chen, at least the way he describes the experience now. He recalls,

When we first started rehearsing I was still working evenings at the nightclub cabaret, to save money for school, but eventually I decided to quit working nights and just focus on [Sun's production]. During that time our practices were especially demanding. My muscles were all sore and sometimes our workouts were so strong that I wanted to throw up afterward. I worked really hard. During that year my dancing improved tremendously. I improved in my understanding of dance, in my physical ability, and in my performance ability.

The main thing that really impacted me was that Professor Sun had a different way of looking at dance from anything I had known before. He felt that dance should be a way of inheriting and developing Chinese traditional culture, like a cultural symbol of China. He told us that Chinese classical dance should be Chinese, so we should get rid of the ballet elements in our dancing. He was proud of Chinese culture. None of my other teachers had ever raised dance up to that level before, or given it that kind of meaning. The dance that Professor Sun produced really had its own style. It was unlike any kind of dancing I had ever seen. I thought it was very interesting, and slowly I started to like it.

Like *City Beauty*, Sun's training provided for Chen what back-up dancing had not, in that it provided an opportunity to challenge himself as a dancer and develop new skills. Unlike backup dancing, which makes singing the primary focus and dance secondary, dance drama -- both in the case of *City Beauty* and Sun's *Longzu Fengyun* -- places the focus on dance. This, for dancers like Chen and the dancers in the Troupe today, is the first step toward allowing a dancer to fulfill his or her potential, though, for Chen, it is not the only step.

The other element that Chen found in Sun's training, and possibly missing in *City Beauty* (Chen never comments on it directly), is a sense of the significance of dance as a form of cultural investigation. Sun's methods for creating *Charm of the Dragon People* were different from those Chen had experienced in the past, not only because they made dance the artistic focus but also because they called on the dancers to treat dance as a site of exploration and innovation. In a now canonical section of the 1999 work entitled *Xie Gongji* (《谢公屐》 *Gentleman Xie's Sandals*), Chen and the other dancers wore gowns with draping half-moon sleeves and grass sandals, costume elements that Sun had developed through research on literary and archeological materials from third century China. Sun insisted that the unusual costume elements be integrated organically into the dance technique, so Chen had to explore new movements based on the historical elements that Sun provided. Part of the cultural research of creating the piece was learning to move and dance in new ways that suited these new historically inspired costumes (Jin 2007).

Longzu Fengyun failed to have a large market impact when it was first performed in Chongqing in 2000. This happened largely because, Chen argues, the Troupe did not provide what he calls the expensive "wrappings" necessary for mass market performance. "When we created *Longzu Fengyun* the Troupe was still very poor," Chen explains. "Other troupes spent six to seven million RMB on a single dance drama, but we only spent eight hundred thousand. It was completely devoid of wrappings. Without expensive sets and costumes it's difficult to have any market impact." On the level of cultural and artistic significance, however, Chen argues that the work was very well-received. "But the majority of audiences today don't understand those things." In his final comment, Chen suggests, unapologetically, that his approach to dance is an elitist one. Dance works that treat dance as a form of cultural research are not necessarily appealing on the mass market, Chen concedes, but they could be if they were accompanied by expensive costumes and sets. The two possibilities, for Chen, are not mutually exclusive.

Conclusion

System reform has produced a new set of arrangements of cultural production in the field of dance in China, one that causes concern for many dancers, who worry that it will lead to an unhealthy "system of organization" for dance production that will ultimately be unable to allow dancers to "fulfill their potential" as skilled artists. While system reform injects the work of the song and dance troupe with new language, new valuation practices, and new forms of self-regulation that resemble those associated with privatization and neoliberalism, system reform does not equate to privatization or liberalization. When it introduces "concerns of the market" into the dance production process, the market that is introduced is one in which the state and the commercial cannot be separated. Local governments participate together with (often state-owned) commercial companies in a shared practice of commercial branding, and the so-called "corporate operations" of song and dance troupes after system reform still take place in the context of state-owned enterprise. Rather than being concerned with individual freedom, dancers instead worry whether the types of performances in which song and dance troupes participate will allow them to use and develop their skills as dancers, and whether the system will be able to support the types of work that they find meaningful. Regardless of whether one is inside or outside the system, it is ultimately the health of the system that determines the health of the industry as a whole, in their view. The goal for dancers is not to be either inside or outside state authority, but instead to help shape the system in a way that it supports the types of work they want to do.

Chapter Four

Arts of Truth: The Epistemological Paradox of Chinese Dance



2006 *Tao Li Bei* National Dance Competition Chinese folk dance *Rong Hua*.
Photo courtesy of <http://www.mcprc.gov.cn/>.

“In too narrowly defining the expected boundary of the real, some modern-day critics of Chinese realism have been more conservative than the actual writers of the post-May Fourth era.”

--David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*.

“The life reflected in works of art and culture can and should be higher than regular actual life, stronger, more consolidated, more typical (*geng dianxing*), and more ideal, and, therefore, more generalizable... to help the masses push forward the advance of history.”

--Mao Zedong, “Speech at the Yan’an Forum for Literature and Art,”
1942.

Introduction

In the first half of this dissertation, I showed how dancers have, during more than sixty years of Communist Party leadership in China, found themselves at the center of a shifting field of debates and practices related to the changing value and meaning of the laboring body. I have shown how the paradox of the laboring body in twentieth-century China, as seen through dance, grew out of a socialist project of re-valuing the relationship between mental and physical work, as well as re-appropriating practices of performance training and ideals of bodily and spiritual cultivation from indigenous Chinese traditions. During the Reform Era, the laboring dancer's body continues to be a site of intense debate and shifting cultural practice. Much of the value attributed to physical labor in the Mao era has been effaced in the post-Mao period, as the laboring body is being redefined as a site of gendered commodification, body-based class distinctions, and a new anti-bodily search for spiritual meaning. The paradox of the laboring body in China centers on shifting notions of "virtuosity," or the problematized relationship between physical skill and human cultivation.

Starting with this chapter, I now shift attention from one socialist paradox, virtuosity, to another, dialectics. While still investigating the meanings of bodily labor, this section focuses on the dance forms and dance works created out of dance labor in the People's Republic of China, examining them as works of art and as arenas of cultural research into what, in the context of Chinese dance, is understood as "Chinese culture." The most strongly institutionalized and lasting new dance genres created in China under Communist Party leadership have all been designated as "Chinese" dance forms. The central question animating these chapters is how, why, and in what ways these dances satisfy a claim to being Chinese. In particular, I ask how dance forms recognized as new sustain a perceived connection to the Chinese historical past, and to "Chineseness" as a cultural category. Furthermore, I ask why it is so important for dancers in China to insist on the Chineseness of their works, and how specifically socialist conceptions of realistic representation and artistic merit have impacted understandings and practices of Chineseness in Chinese dance. The two most important forms of Chinese dance created since the founding of the People's Republic of China are "Chinese folk and ethnic dance" (*Zhongguo*

minzu minjian wu 中国民族民间舞) and “Chinese *gudianwu*”³⁴ (中国古典舞), or classical dance.³⁵ Thus, in the following discussion, I focus my attention primarily on these two forms.

Although recognized by practitioners to be entirely new genres, emerging out of practices of research, creation and innovation that began in China no earlier than the 1930s and 40s, Chinese dance created in the People’s Republic of China is nevertheless considered to embody “Chinese culture,” understood as an inherited, shared property of the Chinese people and Chinese cultural traditions. In her discussion of the term “*gudian*” (古典), or “classical” in the dance genre known as Chinese “*gudianwu*,” or Chinese classical dance, Beijing Dance Academy Associate Professor Su Ya (b. circa 1979) explains her understanding of Chinese culture as follows:

If we look at a people or culture that has sedimented over three to five thousand years of history, I feel it has a basically consistent aesthetic standard. Of course there are small changes, or changes in amount and degree, but the essence remains. For example, from Laozi and Zhuangzi to Confucius and Mencius, how much change is there? In other words, the meaning and use of the term “classical” is in the fostering and acquisition of an entire people’s cultural psychology, in its setting up and sustaining, in its purges and stabilizations, its appraisals and readjustments. ‘Standard’ or ‘classical’ really refers to the lasting root of a culture! What [distinction is there between] ancient or not ancient? That root is in the blood, body and mind of every Chinese person, long ago achieved innately, reproduced through the process of every generation. (Su 2009)

³⁴ *Gudianwu* is a specific historical form produced at the Beijing Dance Academy in the 1950s. In this paper, I prefer the Chinese term *gudianwu* to the English “classical dance” in order to avoid confusion with other incarnations of “classical” Chinese dance produced in different historical and geographic contexts. The term *Gudianwu* refers, throughout this paper to “*Zhongguo Gudianwu*,” or “Chinese classical dance.”

³⁵ Chinese revolutionary ballet (中国革命芭蕾舞) had a relatively short lifespan in China (it was produced primarily between 1966 and 1976), and it has been largely abandoned as an independent form of creative practice since the beginning of the Reform Era, with its closest current relative being contemporary Chinese military dance. Although I do not address Chinese revolutionary ballet or military dance explicitly in this discussion, many of the principles of dialectical realism also apply to it. For a history and analysis of Chinese ballet, see Cheng (2000). Modern dance, as an independent genre associated with Western principles and practices, has not been strongly institutionalized in Chinese dance schools and companies in the People’s Republic of China. Unlike in Taiwan, where modern dance has attained a level of hegemonic importance similar to the United States, in China its influence has been less significant. Although several modern and contemporary dance companies modeled after Western companies have been established in China since the early 1990s, and most dance schools and performing companies teach and perform variations of Western modern dance, the genre itself remains marginal. For a brief discussion of the history of modern dance in China and the reasons for its marginalization, see Ou (1995). The topic of ballet, modern, and military dance and their relationship to one another in China is a major research project that deserves a separate volume.

The highly contentious debates over how to define and embody this “classical” culture, which have raged in the field of *gudianwu* since its founding in the 1950s, are enough to cast doubt on what Su calls the “basically consistent” nature of any such Chinese cultural tradition. Despite the acknowledged evidence of the historical disruption and contemporary multiplicity of Chinese cultural tradition, Chinese dance practitioners and dance scholars uphold the idea of cultural continuity as a central principle of their work.

Luo Xiongyan (b. circa 1935), in his textbook *Chinese Folk Dance Culture*, argues that it is the capacity of Chinese culture to constantly change, to adopt foreign elements, and to recreate itself constantly anew that gives it a continued existence and vitality. He writes,

The central principle of the excellent tradition of Chinese culture, “continuous self-renewal, embrace all things with virtue and tolerance” (*zhiqiangbuxi, houdezaiwu* 自强不息、厚德载物), expresses [the fact that] Chinese traditional culture in the midst of development unceasingly strengthens the raising of the nation’s (*minzu* 民族) own cultural quality, and broadly adopting the advantages of foreign progressive culture, causing them to blend into national cultural elements, [and thereby] strengthen the vitality of traditional culture.” (Luo 2006: 2)

The tone and language of Luo’s statement suggests the influence of state discourses. Terms such as “the excellent tradition of Chinese culture” and “Chinese culture in the midst of development” are commonly found in state policy, propadanda, and political speeches. Apart from evincing a connection to this “official” language of the state, however, Luo’s discussion also imparts important information about how Chinese culture is understood by a vast majority of practitioners of Chinese dance. The idea that Chinese culture exists as a changing and diverse although nevertheless continuous and consistent body of “excellent traditions,” and that change and development are important preserving mechanisms for this traditional culture, was a basic assumption of artists, scholars, and performers I met throughout my research on Chinese dance.

Another pervasive assumption shaping the understanding of Chinese cultural tradition among practitioners of Chinese dance in the People’s Republic of China is that the preservation and transmission of Chinese cultural tradition into the future requires enlightened intervention in the present. Sun Ying (1929-2009), creator of one of the competing “schools” of *gudianwu*, justifies his method of “embodying Chinese culture” through this kind of future-oriented argument about enlightened cultural preservation. The following excerpt is from an article Sun published in *Dance Magazine* in the mid-1980s, in which he argues that *gudianwu* should discontinue its focus on Ming and Qing-era Chinese indigenous drama as the basis for its bodily aesthetic. Sun writes,

In the development of Chinese historical dance, there is an unprecedented and strange stage, that is, a process of transition from a period of natural feet -- from ancient times up through the Tang Dynasty [618-907] and Five Dynasties [907-960] -- to a period of bound feet, which began in the Song [960-1279] and became the accepted public morals through the Ming [1368-1644] and Qing [1644-1911]. [...] One needn’t be a researcher, if you’ve seen just once the abnormal movement of a women with bound feet, you will understand the influence that the transition from natural to bound feet had on the profession of

dance in China. Excuse me, but is it even possible that the traditions, expressed spirit, and fashionable aesthetic sensibilities of the natural feet period could have not undergone significant change when it ‘moved’ into the time of bound feet?.... Why must we use the time when feudal society developed to the peak of decay, when ancient dance faced annihilation, when the laws of an empty ethical code arbitrarily imposed cruel torture on women, when the history of human civilization saw this stroke of a ruthless and barbaric history -- that is, the bound feet period of the Ming and Qing eras -- as our foundation?.... Writer Guo [Guo Dakun] calls on us to use the bound feet era as our foundation; I promote using the period of natural feet as our foundation. (Sun 2006: 126-29)

Here, Sun recognizes that what he calls the “the bound feet period” marks an important part of Chinese history and cultural tradition. However, figuring himself and others like him as enlightened curators of Chinese culture, Sun argues that the bound foot tradition is not an element of Chinese culture worth promoting into the future. “Why must we use the time when feudal society developed to the peak of decay.... as our foundation?” he asks. Recognizing that Chinese cultural tradition is diverse, Sun argues that it is the job of the responsible artist to preserve the traditions that are worth preserving.

According to Sun, there are two reasons that enlightened intervention is necessary for the transmission and preservation of Chinese cultural tradition: first, Chinese cultural tradition must retain its contemporary appeal; and, second, it must remain true to the desires of the ancestors. Evoking the imagined disappointment that would be caused by bound foot era-style *gudianwu* dance for both the implied audiences of future Chinese dance performances and the mythical ancestors of Chinese ancient civilization, Sun writes,

Do the standard inch-by-inch shifting steps of Chinese classical dance make people feel inspired, expansive, joyful, and excited, or do they make people feel gloomy, cramped, reduced, even listless and dispirited? Haven’t you felt that in this kind of “beauty” hides that scary yoke of the ethical code which long ago should have been cast aside? I really want to cry out at the top of my lungs and say: ‘friends, colleagues, wake up!’ ... Is this the creative wisdom and artistic quintessence of our nation? ‘This is just ignorance and confusion,’ grumbles the soul of our ancestors Yan and Huang,³⁶ their hearts filled with a sense of injury. ‘Our sons and grandsons! Is this really all we left you?’ ...Isn’t it just rehashing the past, moving backward, conservatism? (Sun 2006: 127).

For Sun, part of the work of responsibly inheriting Chinese tradition is making the right choices in how to selectively remember it and transmit it to the future. To avoid what he calls “moving backward,” then, it is important in his eyes for dancers seeking to embody classical Chinese culture to reshape that culture in an a way that remains true to a deeper level of cultural responsibility. Sun argues that it is this deeper responsibility -- and the deeper knowledge and understanding that it requires -- that gives the enlightened artist the historical imperative to direct culture.

³⁶ Reference to the Yan and Huang Emperors, the mythical ancestors of the Chinese people.

The scholars I have cited above, Su Ya, Luo Xiongyan, and Sun Ying, are all highly respected scholars in the field of Chinese dance research in the People's Republic of China. As current or past research faculty at the Beijing Dance Academy, China's most prestigious research and teaching institute for Chinese dance, they hold important posts as theoretical leaders in the field, and their views represent the accepted standard for deep conceptualization of problems in Chinese dance research in China. I emphasize the stature of these individuals and their ideas within the Chinese dance field because I suspect that many readers from outside the sphere of Chinese dance in China may see them as problematic. How could Chinese cultural tradition be both unified and multiple, both disrupted and continuous, and require enlightened selection and continual re-invention in order to be inherited and passed on? The very idea that "Chinese cultural tradition" has any real referent outside of contemporary Chinese Communist ideology is itself difficult to accept from the perspective of much of conventional liberal Western ways of understanding cultural tradition, representation, and the relationship between art and the objective world.

In this chapter, I explore the artistic manifestations of the paradoxical ideas about Chinese cultural tradition held by practitioners of Chinese dance, as well as their broader historical and cultural antecedents. I argue that these ideas are not an incorrect or problematic understanding of Chinese tradition, but, rather, one founded in a distinctly dialectical epistemology based in its own understandings of art, representation, and the nature of reality. Seeing Chinese cultural tradition as something both real and in need of re-invention, and learning to represent it in a way that recognizes its dual quality as both an essence and an appearance, practitioners of Chinese dance draw, in developing their dialectical epistemology, on a range of influences in twentieth-century China, including Chinese postcolonial nationalism, Chinese socialist realism, and Chinese indigenous aesthetics. Understanding the epistemological paradox of Chinese dance requires exploring each of these cultural traditions and their relevance for China today. In response to Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery's (2009) methodological appeal for "thinking between the posts," I propose the epistemological paradox of Chinese dance as a point of critical conjunction between postcolonial studies and studies of socialism and postsocialism. Epistemological issues have been underexplored in postsocialism studies, largely because scholars have yet to accord the problem of Cold War era prejudices about the relationship between ideology and truth the same critical attention they have to the politics of individualism and subjectivity under authoritarianism. Furthermore, I argue that understanding this dialectical epistemology is key to understanding contemporary notions of cultural identity, cultural tradition, and inheritance in contemporary China.

Dance and the Realist Traditions in China

In 1937, Wu Xiaobang (1906-1995), later named the "Father of Chinese New Dance," left his newly established modern dance studio in Shanghai to join the front lines in the beginning of World War Two in Asia, what in China is known as the Anti-Japanese War. Rather than fighting, however, Wu was part of a nation-wide movement of Chinese writers and artists who aimed to use art as a tool for national salvation. Intellectual and literary historian Leo Ou-Fan Lee (2002) writes of this period, "Two reigning slogans indicated the mood of patriotic commitment: 'Literature must go to the countryside! Literature must join the army!'" (242). Under the newly formed All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists, leaders from diverse backgrounds in China's literary and artistic world united to organize "battlefront visiting teams" and patriotic popular drama troupes to travel around the countryside performing for

soldiers and people living in rural areas. Lee cites one estimate that by 1939, 130,000 people were engaged in dramatic performances, transforming Chinese literary and theatrical production from a primarily urban and elite phenomenon to one fundamentally oriented toward the masses.

In his memoir, Wu writes of this era, "It wasn't until after August 13, 1937, when I was baptized into the flames of the Anti-Japanese war, that I finally threw out that immature 'beautiful dream' of my student years. I faced into the tempest of revolutionary struggle, stepped into the wide road of realist dance, and really leapt into the great door of life." During his time on the road with the Shanghai National Salvation Performance Team in 1937-38, Wu created more than fifty new dance works, which later formed the basis for the establishment of a new field of dance production in the People's Republic of China. During this period, Wu travelled across central and south China, performing, teaching, and creating new works aimed at inspiring anti-imperialist struggle and reflecting the realities he witnessed and experienced. In Zhenjiang, (Jiangsu Province), Wu created *Exile Trilogy*, a work based on the experiences of refugees fleeing northeast China whom he met on the road. In Nanchang Wu organized a battle service team to perform a New Year show for the soldiers that included the new work *March of the Volunteers*. The piece, patriotic in theme, was set to the music that later became the national anthem of the People's Republic of China (Wu 1982: 30-34).

The early dance works created in the 1930s and 40s by Wu and his contemporaries -- including two of the most important early female pioneers of Chinese dance, Dai Ailian (1916-2006) and Sheng Jie (1917-) -- belong to the literary and artistic genre of Chinese realism, a new type of artistic practice that emerged in China during early twentieth century. As Marston Anderson (1990) discusses in *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*, realism as a mimetic approach was not emphasized in traditional forms of Chinese indigenous aesthetic practice. He writes,

Chinese aesthetic philosophers thus concerned themselves little with the mimetic relationship of art object to real world but instead directed their attention to the affective and didactic capacities of art, its power either to awaken in readers the range of emotions that motivated the work's composition or to reveal to readers the network of "principles" that were thought to support both the natural and social worlds. (Marston 1990: 13)

Since realism was not an important part of Chinese aesthetics traditionally, its adoption by Chinese writers and artists in the early twentieth century was highly innovative, and it was motivated by a different set of concerns and values from those that motivated artists and writers to adopt realism as an artistic strategy in other places and times.

In China, the adoption of a realist aesthetic was closely related to nationalism, specifically to the idea that national preservation required social change that could be encouraged through realism. Early literary realists, such as Lu Xun, saw realism as an artistic strategy for creating the social change they felt was necessary to save China. In his literary works, he sought to reflect the realities of Chinese society in such a way that readers would be inspired by his works to enact change, through social revolution. The early revolutionary dance works created during the Anti-Japanese War era by Wu Xiaobang, Dai Ailian, and Sheng Jie also sought to use realistic aesthetics as a means to social change, for the ultimate purpose of national salvation. For example, Wu's 1939 piece, *Poppy Flower* (《罂粟花》), is a political allegory criticizing Japanese occupation of Shanghai. It was aimed at inciting Chinese resistance against the

international spread of fascism. *Poppy Flower* tells the story of a Chinese peasant and petty landlord who are cheated and abused by a Japanese woman (named *Poppy Flower*) and her two relatives, who represent Hitler and Mussolini (Wu 1982: 35-36).

Like Lu Xun and other realist writers during the 1930s and 40s, Wu and the other Chinese dance pioneers created dance performances with the explicit aim of using dance to incite action among the Chinese people. Sheng Jie, Wu Xiaobang's student, collaborator, and wife, performed in the original 1939 Shanghai performance of *Poppy Flower*, and she travelled and collaborated with Wu on the making of many of his major early dance works throughout the late 30s and early 40s. During an interview in 2008, Sheng Jie recalls the approach that she and Wu took to their dance creation and performance during that period as follows:

The purpose of our performances was to spread political ideas and drum up inspiration in the people (鼓舞人民), to launch them into action... Of course when the audiences saw our performances they became very excited and stirred up. They clapped, some clapped profusely, others jumped up and down. Dance worked quickly and that's why it was supported by Zhou Enlai and the other leaders. And so eventually the people did stand up.

Drawing on nationalistic language of the time, including the metaphor of encouraging the Chinese people to "stand up," Sheng describes dance productions of the 30s and 40s as being intensely interventionist in both their aims and their results. By reflecting the social realities they saw around them onstage and imbuing these representations with political meaning, dance artists like Wu Xiaobang and others hoped to inspire in audiences the desire to produce change in society.

In their efforts to create artistic works that simultaneously reflect social reality and inspire social change, the practitioners of Chinese realism faced a paradox: they wanted to reflect the world as it was, while at the same time reflecting its deeper truths. In the case of Wu's dance work *Poppy Flower*, this paradox can be seen as a tension between the political message of the work -- anti-fascism -- and the narrative details represented in the work's story -- the trials and tribulations experienced by ordinary Chinese people under Japanese invasion and occupation. In *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*, David Der-wei Wang (1992) describes this paradox as a conflict between "the real" and "the Real," or as competing desires for what he calls "realistic mimesis" and "realistic verisimilitude." Using the literary works of Lu Xun to describe what he sees as a larger phenomenon in early twentieth century Chinese fictional realism, Wang explains,

Lu Xun's fiction reenacts the perennial dialectic between the need to give form to a reality in flux and the commitment to contextualize that form, the desire to transcend time and the impulse to inscribe time, realism for aesthetic catharsis and realism for normative purpose, for mimesis, and for verisimilitude. Let us understand realistic mimesis as a claim to faithful reflection of the world's objective surface, and realistic verisimilitude as the narration of truths deeply ingrained in cultural-historical subjectivity. (Wang 1992: 3)

Wang argues that Chinese writers like Lu Xun recognized the paradoxical nature of the realist project even as they took part in it. "The formation of Lu Xun's realist discourse," Wang writes,

“evokes at the same time a counter-discourse, an allegorical subtext that reveals the tension between what the real should be and what the real is” (4). Thus, Wang argues that in assessing the work of practitioners of Chinese realism, scholars should both acknowledge and take seriously the fact that the practitioners themselves often had a very complex view of what reality is, the problems involved in its representation, and their own paradoxical relationship to it. Wang writes,

In contrast to the conventional wisdom that modern Chinese fiction is dominated by a unanimous discourse of critical realism, I have argued that writers were far more imaginative about invoking the real, and that critical intent did not imply a single form of realistic expression. In too narrowly defining the expected boundary of the real, some modern-day critics of Chinese realism have been more conservative than the actual writers of the post-May Fourth era. (Wang 1992: 292)

Many scholars, including Marston Anderson, have interpreted the social interventionist concerns of Chinese realist writers and artists as an impediment to a more truly realist -- understood here as necessarily critical -- kind of representation. “Although they remained sympathetic to realism,” Anderson writes, “the Chinese writers we have discussed here refused to accord their aesthetic instincts priority over their reformist aims,” (200). For Anderson, the paradox of the real and the Real -- the real of objective surfaces and the Real of deeper truths -- presents a problem that leads Chinese writers and artists, ultimately, he argues, away from realism. “[D]idactic fiction [...] came increasingly to supplant critical realism in all its varieties after 1942,” Anderson writes (200). In contrast to Anderson, Wang encourages a view in which the paradox of the real and the Real is an inherent part of realism, and no clear historical distinction can be made between critical and non-critical periods.

The conventional view of Chinese artistic and literary creation after 1942 is one in which the contradiction between the real and the Real eventually breaks down, and depictions of everyday realities are used in artistic and literary works only when they serve an ideological end, that is, to support the politically correct version of the Real. Taking a more extreme tone than Anderson, but nevertheless following a similar logic, Lee Yee (1983) celebrates the emergence of a genre identified as New Realism in China after 1979, which he says “sought to accurately reflect reality” (6). Yee contrasts New Realism with the literature produced in China between 1942 and 1979, in which, he argues, “Leftist doctrine had cast a shadow over Chinese literature, distorting the images of reality which it delineated” (4). By describing Chinese literature produced during the Mao period as distorting, rather than reflecting, reality, Yee challenges the realistic nature of these literary representations. “For a long period of time,” Yee writes, referring to the Mao era, “the literary works of China were not accurately reflecting reality, but were functioning to reinforce the images which top level officials wanted to perpetuate” (4).

While there can be no doubt that literary and artistic production in China during the Mao period shaped its representations of reality in a way that supported socialist policy, to argue that this makes such works unrealistic is to negate the multiple understandings of the real that exist within the realist project. As Anderson points out in his discussion of the historical development of realism as a literary and artistic form, realism as it developed in the West is associated with a literal philosophy of representation, in which “a literary text may constitute a direct representation of the material or social world” (5). He argues, however, that this notion of representation, and the view of epistemology it presupposes, is now largely discredited among

Western critics. “Contemporary criticism, with its base in linguistic philosophy, has effectively undermined realism's pretense [of literal representation].” For this reason, he writes, “Western critics [...] set off the word with quotation marks, capitalization, or italics, thereby hoping to dissociate themselves from the now thoroughly discredited epistemology the term assumes” (4). Despite its discrediting of the epistemological and representational pretenses of realism, however, Anderson argues that the Western scholarly establishment remains strongly influenced by these assumptions and habits of understanding. “[R]ealism still exerts a powerful normative hold over the Western literary imagination,” he writes (5). Thus, when he uses a narrowly defined understanding of realism to assess Chinese literary movements, Anderson does so with self-conscious knowledge that such an understanding reflects dominant trends in Western thought.

Soviet socialist realism, the version of realism that had the greatest influence on China during the Mao era, assumes an approach to realist representation that, like the one Anderson ascribes to “contemporary criticism” in the West, questions basic assumptions of conventional Western realism. Unlike the conventional mimetic Western realism that Anderson describes, with its literal understanding of representation and its epistemological focus on what Wang calls the “objective surfaces” of reality, Soviet socialist realism treats realist representation as an inherently generative process, with an epistemological focus on discovering deeper truths within everyday realities. In his essay “Appearance and Essence,” Georg Lukács, an important theorist of the Marxist philosophy of aesthetics, which had a strong influence on socialist realism, writes, “the Marxist concept of realism has nothing to do with the photographic reproduction of daily life [...] Marxist aesthetics denies the realistic character of a world drawn in naturalistic detail and demands that in representing this world the essential moving forces should be expressed.” (Lukács 1973: 19). Realist approaches that are based on a Marxist understanding of reality emphasize what Lukács calls reality’s dialectical nature, which involves an ongoing exchange between appearance and essence. Lukács writes,

True art, then, tends to be deep and all-embracing. It tries to seize life in its complex totality, that is, to explore at the greatest possible depth the essential forces hidden behind the appearances, but it does not represent them in the abstract, detached from the appearances or confronting them; on the contrary, art represents the living dialectical process in which essence turns into appearance, reveals itself in the appearance; it also shows the other side of the same process, when the appearance in its mobility reveals its own essence. (1973: 18)

Insofar as it draws on a Marxist philosophy of aesthetics, Soviet socialist realism defines reality as itself a dialectical process, in which appearances and essences are related in a cycle of mutual production and influence. Rather than promoting a type of mimetic realism that seeks naturalistic reflection of the surfaces of things, therefore, it promotes artistic and literary work that reflects both essences and appearances, as well as the movement between them.

Apart from its dialectical understanding of reality as an ongoing flux between essence and appearance, the approach to realism taken in Soviet socialist realism has another important point of difference from conventional Western approaches to mimetic realism: Drawing on influences from the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, Soviet socialist realism takes as a fundamental premise the idea that artistic and literary representation both does and should produce the reality it represents. “We must shape reality, not merely capture it,” writes Miklós Haraszti (1989), adopting the voice of the socialist realist artist. “As Marx put it in a

famous exhortation to philosophers: the task is not just to understand the world but to change it. So too with artists. ‘Socialist realism’ is more than mere faithfulness to reality: it contributes to reality; it creates reality” (124). In *Art Power* Boris Groys (2008) describes the generative aim of socialist realist art as follows:

Socialist Realism was not supposed to depict life as it was, because life was interpreted by Socialist Realist theory as being constantly in flux and in development -- specifically in ‘revolutionary development,’ as it was officially formulated. Socialist Realism was oriented toward what had not yet come into being but what it saw should be created and was destined to become a part of the Communist future (144).

According to Groys, the locus of creativity in socialist realism was in what he calls the “staging of the picture,” since it was this staging of reality that helped cultivate viewers who could see and experience reality in a new way. “[T]he ultimate artistic act,” Groys argues, “would be not the production of new images for an old public to view with old eyes, but the creation of a new public with new eyes” (147).

As Donald Egbert (1967) argues, the idea that art should create reality is a fundamental tenet of Marxist-Leninist Soviet socialist realism, and it emerged out of early nineteenth-century notions of the artistic avant-garde set out in the utopian socialist writings of Henri de Saint-Simon. Saint-Simon called for artists and intellectuals to be the vanguards of a new social order, by representing, in their creative works, a new vision of society. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (1994) show that in the Soviet Union, the utopian tendencies of socialist realism in high Stalinist Soviet art emerged directly out of early twentieth century experimental avant-garde movements.

In China, as in the Soviet Union, the early adoption of socialist realism emphasized its vanguard and interventionist components. In his 1942 speech at the Yan’an Forum for Arts and Literature, Mao Zedong described China’s writers and artists as a cultural army who were just as important to China’s socialist revolution as “those who hold guns in their hands.” “The [cultural] army is absolutely necessary if we are to unite ourselves and overcome our enemies,” Mao proclaimed. He called on artists and writers to join the revolution as what he called “cultural and art workers” (*wenyi gongzuozhe* 文艺工作者) by using their creative efforts to appeal to and reflecting the lives of the proletarian masses. In the conclusion to his speech, Mao argues that socialist artists and intellectuals should “pursue truth” and “set out from the reality of objective existence.” To do so, he argues, they should “use the key observation points of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to go observe the world, observe society, and observe literature and art.” To express truth and reality in their work, Mao argues, artists and intellectuals should “take the views of the mass of political thinkers, consolidate them, and add further refinement.” When it is produced in this way, he states, art will better serve its purpose of “helping the masses to push forward historical progress” (Mao 1953).

Most studies of socialist realism produced by or for liberal Western intellectuals denigrate the artistic merit of socialist realism by focusing on the ways in which it encouraged and even required the co-optation of art and literature by the socialist state. Haraszti’s book *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism*, can be read as one example of this type of account, since he shows the insidious ways in which socialist states compelled artists to produce creative works that served political and ideological ends. Under state socialism, Haraszti writes, “Art can be

taught in schools only if professional judgement and political loyalty are not separated” (137). Alternatively, Haraszti’s work could be read instead, anthropologically, as an investigation of a socialist realist logic of artistic practice, with its own aesthetic standards and its own representational and epistemological logics. This approach aligns with Alfred Gell’s (1996) view that anthropological studies of art should practice aesthetic relativism, or what he calls “methodological philistinism,” in their studies of non-Western art worlds. Haraszti’s discussion of socialist realism lends itself to this type of reading, for example, when he writes,

Any artist whose perception is different [from the accepted view] is not a real artist, in the same way that painters of the previous era considered dilettante those who thought they portrayed ‘real’ objects (whether ‘apples’ or ‘morals’) instead of mere forms and colors. Our apple is *non-apple* in a different way from Cézanne’s. (Haraszti 1989: 125).

Here, Haraszti provides an opportunity to counter the claim made by Yee above that literary and artistic production under the “Leftist doctrine” served only to provide distorted images of reality. Instead, as Haraszti suggests here, it offers but one approach, among many possible ones, of understanding what reality is and how it can and should be represented.

As I show here and in the following two chapters, practitioners of dance in the People’s Republic of China had their own understanding of reality and approach to realism. This approach was driven by a combination both of the dialectical and generative principles of socialist realism and the nationalistic impulses of China’s postcolonial modernization project. It has two components, which together make up the most important contributions of Chinese realism to the epistemological paradox of Chinese dance: First, it entails a dialectical understanding of reality as a dynamic interplay of appearances and essences. Second, it entails a generative approach to representation, in which the creative process is supposed to reinvent reality even as it conveys it in artistic form. The dancer, writer, or artist must investigate reality in both its “objective surfaces” and its “deeper truths,” and she must create works that represent reality even as they re-invent it. These approaches to realism provided the epistemological scaffolding for the understanding of Chinese cultural tradition applied in the making of Chinese dance. Like reality, Chinese tradition was understood to be a dynamic interaction of appearance and essence, with diverse manifestations driven by deeper “core truths.” Also, like reality, Chinese cultural tradition was understood to be something that was produced through intervention. It was only with the active remaking of Chinese cultural tradition, they argued, that Chinese culture could continue to remain vital, strong, and appealing to future generations.

By the end of World War II, Wu Xiaobang and other early pioneers of the so-called “new dance” movement, like many Chinese realist writers and artists, had turned their strategies of nationalistic and interventionist writing and performance toward support of the socialist vision of China’s new future. As with the initial emergence of Chinese realism in the early twentieth century, the development at mid-century of Chinese socialist realism had a strongly nationalist character. The theme of “national salvation” continued under the Chinese Communists in the form of a Cold War-inflected postcolonial sentiment of Chinese modernization always viewed in comparison to and in resistance against “the West.” New forms of dance identified as specifically “Chinese” dance -- including Chinese folk and ethnic dance, Chinese classical dance, and Chinese revolutionary ballet -- were created in the 1950s and 60s based on the dual principle

that, one, socialist realist dance was needed to serve the socialist revolution and, two, Chinese dance was needed to preserve Chinese national identity.

***Tao Li Bei*: The Epistemological Paradox On Stage**

In contemporary productions of Chinese dance works, the dialectical epistemology remains highly influential, and it can be found as a standard element in works of both *gudianwu* and folk and ethnic dance. In this section, I discuss three short dance works, each of which won first place awards in the solo youth divisions of the national *Tao Li Bei* (Peach Plum Cup) dance competition in 2006. Known as “the Oscars of Chinese dance,” *Tao Li Bei* is the single most prestigious competition for professional dance students in China, and its winning competition pieces are among the most frequently performed and critically examined works in Chinese dance in the early twenty-first century. The solo and youth divisions are the most prestigious and anticipated events, and they often launch individual dancers and dance works into national levels of recognition. Although *Tao Li Bei* is a student dance competition, its choreographers and judges are among the most well-known and established dance artists in the field of Chinese dance. Held once every three years, in rotating locations, *Tao Li Bei* draws participants and spectators from the major dance schools around China, and its award-winning pieces are aired on a special program on China Central Television.

The works discussed include three subfields of Chinese dance: *gudianwu*, Chinese ethnic dance, and Chinese folk dance. *Gudianwu* is represented by the work *Ai Lian Shuo* 《爱莲说》, a female piece performed by a student of the Beijing Dance Academy. Based on the poem with the same name by Song Dynasty poet Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073), it expresses the image of a lotus flower emerging from mud,³⁷ in the *Shenyun* style of *gudianwu*. Chinese ethnic dance is represented by the work *Ba Lang* 《巴郎》, a male piece performed by a student of the People’s Liberation Army Art Academy. The work depicts an idealized version of an energetic young Uygur man performing with a drum, in the style of ethnic dance styles of the Uygur minority group in Xinjiang Province. Chinese folk dance is represented by the work *Rong Hua* 《绒花》, a female piece performed by a student of the Beijing Dance Academy. It is based on a peasant revolutionary character from a 1950s film with the same title, and it is danced in the style of Shandong *yangge* folk dance.

In each of these dance works, the dialectical epistemology appears through the use of two main creative strategies: the “*dianxing*” (典型), or ideal or perfect “type,” and the *yijing* (意境), or “artistic realm” (literally “conceptual realm”). *Dianxing* is an important concept in Chinese socialist aesthetic theory, and it indicates the process of representing the essence of a thing through the accumulation and ideologically-informed refinement of its diverse appearances. Encouraged by Mao Zedong in his 1942 speech at the Yan’an Forum for Literature and Art, and further articulated by Chinese socialist realist artists and aesthetic theorists, the *dianxing* is one of the most important creative strategies used across the fields of Chinese art during the Mao era. *Yijing* indicates the ultimate goal of artistic practice in indigenous Chinese aesthetic theory, found in diverse fields including poetry, music, and painting. Often explained as “the realm born beyond the image,” *yijing* achieves the merging, in the mind and heart of either the artist or the receiver, of external scenes and images with internal emotions and ideas. In the paragraphs below, I first offer deeper insight into the two creative strategies of the *dianxing* and the *yijing*.

³⁷ This is an important Buddhist metaphor for rebirth.

Then, I show how these strategies contribute to the different type of dialectical epistemology in each of the three *Tao Li Bei* dance pieces.

Dianxing -- “Type”

One way in which this dialectical understanding of reality, and its corresponding dialectical understanding of Chinese cultural tradition, manifests itself in Chinese dance in the People’s Republic of China is in the use of character “types.” As elevated composites of real individuals, character types both contain empirically realistic elements and express what are thought to be the deeper truths that are said to convey the essence of a group of individuals. Lukács distinguishes the type from other literary devices, such as the average, and from scientific laws. He writes,

Contrary to science, which separates this motion into its abstract components and aims at formulating the laws of the interaction of these elements, art brings to us this motion as motion and makes us grasp it in its living unity. One of the most important categories of this artistic synthesis is the type. It is not by chance that Marx and Engels put great stress on this concept when they defined true realism. As Engels writes, ‘in my opinion realism means, besides fidelity in the details, the true representation of typical characters in typical circumstances.’ [...for Marx and Engels, the type is...] not the abstract type of the classical tragedy, not the form of Schiller’s idealizing generalization and even less what the Zola and post-Zola school of writers and critics said it was: the average. The type is characterized by the fact that all the prominent features of that dynamic unity in which true literature reflects life run together in their contradictory unity and that in these contradictions the most important social, ethical and spiritual contradictions of an epoch are woven into a living unity. The representation of the average, on the contrary, has as a necessary consequence that these contradictions, always reflecting the great problems of the epoch, appear toned down, weakened in the soul and fate of an average man and thus lose their essential traits. (Lukács 1973: 19)

What distinguishes the ideal type from other composite representations is that, as a dialectical unity, it maintains elements of both appearances (empirical details of different individuals as observable in the real) and essences (the unity of a group or category as understood on a deeper level). By including the “prominent features” in their “contradictory unity,” the type offers an idealized representation that reflects the whole while also maintaining the contrasting elements of individual difference.

In his 1942 speech at the Yan’an Forum, Mao Zedong calls upon China’s culture and art workers to represent the world using the artistic strategy of the type, or *dianxing*. Art should be like life but more typical than life, he argues, because it is only in this way that art can have its impact as a force of revolution for society. Mao describes the type as follows:

Although the social life of humanity is the only source of literature and art, and compared to the latter it has incomparably lively and rich content, yet the people are not satisfied with it and still seek the latter. Why is this? Because although both are beautiful, the life reflected in works of art and culture can and should be

higher than regular actual life, stronger, more consolidated, more typical (*geng dianxing*), and more ideal, and, therefore, more generalizable. Revolutionary art and literature should according to real life create all kinds of human characters, to help the masses push forward the advance of history. For example, on the one hand there are people starving, freezing, being oppressed, and on the other hand there are people exploiting people, people oppressing people, this reality exists everywhere, [so] people find it boring and ordinary; literature and art consolidates this kind of everyday phenomenon, typifying (*dianxing hua*) the contradictions and struggles within it, turning it into a work of literature or art. [This is what] makes the people wake up with a start, become fired with enthusiasm, pushes the masses of people to unite and enter struggle, and accomplish the remaking of their environment. If there is not this kind of art and literature, then this task cannot be completed, or it cannot be completed with force and speed. (Mao 1953)

Even more strongly than in Lukács' discussion above, Mao highlights both parts of the dialectical epistemology -- the injunction to represent reality in both its appearances and its essences, and the need to remake reality through these representations, by using them to bring about social change. In Mao's description of the type, it is clear that artists and writers must carefully study the details of observable reality. However, when it comes to representing that reality, rather than offering naturalistic representation, Mao insists that artists and writers must "typify" reality, that is, raise it to a higher and more consolidated level, one that exposes the inherent contradictions and struggles to such a degree that they become sufficiently stirring. The ability to create an effect is an important part of typification, since ultimately this process of artistic refinement is directed at the goal of stirring its audience to action.

Yijing -- "Artistic Realm"

Like the type, the artistic realm achieves artistic accomplishment through the merging of the empirical and the ideal, and it is part of indigenous Chinese aesthetic theory. The most important difference between the type and the artistic realm is that the type brings together empirical appearances with deeper truths taken to be objective (the contradictions and struggles expressed in the type are taken, according to Marxist thought, to be objective truths about society), the artistic realm instead seeks to bring together empirical appearances with deeper truths taken to be experienced on a subjective level of emotion and personal imagination. Composed of the character for "meaning" or "idea" ("yi" 意) and the character for "territory" or "place" ("jing" 境), *yijing* can be translated literally as "meaning-territory" or "idea-space." Since it is used almost exclusively with reference to aesthetic practice, in which it indicates both sources of artistic inspiration and products of artistic enjoyment, *yijing* is often translated as "creative concept," "artistic realm," or "aesthetic realm." It is also sometimes translated as "inscape" and "lyric space in the mind" (Kao 1991).

The popular Chinese aesthetics textbook *Zhongguo Meixue Shi Dagang (Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics)* defines the *yijing* as follows:

The essence of *yijing*, summarized in a single sentence, is 'the realm born beyond the image.' The aesthetic target of the artist is not the 'image' but rather the 'realm'. 'Realm' is the unification of the 'virtual' (xu) and the 'real' (shi). (Ye 1985: 621)

This brief definition highlights some of the important features of *yijing*. First, *yijing* is a realm that exists or emerges beyond the immediate reality of what is seen or experienced in a literal sense. This is what is meant by being “beyond the image.” Second, realizing or producing *yijing* is one of the most important goals of artistic practice, *yijing* is the target of aesthetic experience. Finally, in the realm of *yijing* two realms of reality come together: the *xu* (virtual) and the *shi* (real).³⁸ Associated with emotion, idea and internality, the virtual (*xu*) may be experientially tangible or real to the artist, but only the real (*shi*), associated with scene, image, and externality, is objectively tangible in a literal, shared sense. As a realm that is both virtual the real, *yijing* is born out of a merging between external scenes and images and internal emotions and ideas.

Using concepts inspired by German aesthetic theory, contemporary Chinese aesthetic theorist Zong Baihua describes the unification of the virtual and the real in the creative act of the production of *yijing* as a coming together of “the subjective sentiment of life” and “the objective natural scene.” This coming together, he explains, produces a “realm of the spirit” (*lingjing* 灵境) that is the basis for artistic realm (Zong 1981: 72). In creating art, the realization of that strangely real yet virtual, objective and also subjective “realm of the spirit” is the artist’s most important creative process, Zong argues. Though image plays a very important role in the experience of *yijing* and its expression in art, it is not the image that motivates or serves as the subject of artistic work, but rather the experiential realm that is born beyond the image. It is the experience of this realm “beyond” which inspires art, and it is this realm that the production of art aims to transmit, communicate, or realize.

The production of *yijing* as Zong understands it is a fundamentally creative act, and it is one that allows the possibility for a dialectical epistemology through the relationship between the artistic image (*yixiang* 意象) and the artistic realm (*yijing*). In the experience and production of *yijing*, one discovers and creates new spaces of experience that do not otherwise exist in the world. Zong explains:

In artistic expression, sentiment and scene blend and intermingle, thus unearthing the deepest sentiment, each level deeper than the one before, and at the same time penetrating the deepest scene, each level more glittering than the one before it; in the scene all is sentiment, the concrete expression of the sentiment is the scene. And thus, a unique universe emerges forth in profusion, a brand new image, adding to the diversity of images for humanity, opening new realms for the world. It is just as Hun Nantian said, “the unique openings of the spirit’s thoughts are always those that the world does not have!” This is what I call *yijing*. (Zong 1981: 72)

The conceptual distinction between the artistic image and artistic realm is extremely important in Chinese aesthetics, and, like the Marxist understanding of reality and representation, it offers the possibility of a dialectical epistemology. Though the immediately sensible artistic image (like Lukács’ appearance) may serve to inspire, bring into being, or transmit artistic realm, it is the artistic realm (comparable to the “deeper truths”) and not the artistic image that is the true

³⁸ The Chinese concepts *xu* and *shi* are translated here as “the virtual” and “the real,” respectively, though their philosophical meaning is not matched perfectly or exhausted by their English translations.

creative product and process of artistic labor. However, the *yijing* is a category unique to Chinese aesthetics (Ye 1985: 621).

Scholars of Chinese aesthetics have called *yijing* the most important core concept of Chinese classical aesthetic theory, and a concept that makes art and aesthetic experience in ancient China different from in other cultural traditions. Its usage in Chinese aesthetic theory has been traced to the Tang Dynasty (Ye 1985). Wang Guowei, one of China's most influential modern aesthetic theorists, argues that artistic realm (which he spoke of using two terms almost interchangeably, *jingjie* and *yijing*)³⁹ was the core of all Chinese aesthetics, more important even than the notions of “*qizhi*” (气质 literally “essence of *qi*”) and *shenyun* (神韵 literally “rhyme of spirit”).⁴⁰ Wang famously wrote: “Talking about *qizhi* and talking about *shenyun* are both not as good as talking about *jingjie* [*yijing*]. Having *jingjie* [*yijing*] is the inherent quality. If you have *jingjie* [*yijing*] then the other two will come with it.”⁴¹

Interior experience, on the part of both the artist and the audience, is central to the artistic production of *yijing*. Contemporary aesthetic philosopher Yu-Kong Kao (1991) developed the idea of “Chinese lyric aesthetics” based on the importance of *yijing* as an organizing principle in aesthetics of music, poetry, painting in ancient China.⁴² Kao argues that mainstream Chinese philosophy, as opposed to Western analytic philosophy, is characterized by a focus on “centripetal experience,” or inner-directed experience. Thus, he argues, creative acts in Chinese classical aesthetics (what he calls “Chinese lyric aesthetics”) are thought to both begin in and be directed toward human interior experience. Visualization is important in Chinese aesthetic practice, Kao claims, because it makes the realm of artistic imagination (what he calls the “lyric space in the mind” or the “inscape”) tangible. To envisage the inscape, he argues, in Chinese lyric aesthetics, is to experience the artistic act.

³⁹ Wang Guowei (1877-1927) revived and popularized the concept of *yijing* in the early twentieth century. Wang also introduced the term “*jingjie*” (境界), meaning “border” or “realm,” which he often used interchangeably with *yijing*. For a discussion of the distinctions in Wang's use of these two terms and their meanings historically, see Ye (1985), pp. 603-641. According to Ye, Wang tended to prefer the term *yijing* in his writings on traditional opera (e.g. 《宋元戏曲考》 1912) and *jingjie* in his writings on poetry (e.g. 《人间词话》 1908). In modern Chinese the term *jingjie* refers to high levels of cultivation or abstract experience evoked in artistic or intellectual works.

⁴⁰ The concepts of *qi* (vital energy) and *yun* (rhyme) are both extremely important ideas in *gudianwu* and are discussed at length in Chapter Six.

⁴¹ “言气质，言神韵，不如言境界。有境界，本色。气质，神韵末也。有境界而二者随之矣” 《人间词话删稿》 十三. Quoted in Ye (1985), p. 623.

⁴² According to Kao, Chinese lyric aesthetics can be traced back to the earliest Chinese texts on music and ritual, and it achieved highest expression and development in the Song Dynasty (approximately eleventh century C.E.).

Type and Artistic Realm in Three Chinese Dance Works: *Ai Lian Shuo*, *Ba Lang*, and *Rong Hua*
Ai Lian Shuo

The *gudianwu* female solo dance work *Ai Lian Shuo*⁴³ begins with the dancer, Shao Junting, standing, facing away from the audience, dressed in a pink, lavender, and cream-colored dress with flowing pants and sleeves that vaguely suggest flower petals. The musical score is a contemporary Chinese zither piece from the musical compilation *National Colors* (《国色》). Before that lights have fully come up, Shao is already beginning her first movement, a side step into a deep circular back bend. As Shao prepares to step, her body first sways away from and then toward the moving foot, setting in motion what is known in *gudianwu* as a “*chuandao*” (传导) or “conduction.” Conduction, with its accompanied spiraling actions and rippling effects, creates a sense of circular flow in the body that *gudianwu* practitioners say depicts a uniquely Chinese aesthetic worldview. As she executes the backbend, Shao’s arms and hands follow a circular sweeping action parallel to the ground called “*yun shou*” (云手), “cloud hands,” a movement used in Chinese indigenous theater and martial arts that was adopted, in an expanded way into *gudianwu*. Shao completes the cloud hands action by sweeping her hands to the floor, so that her head now faces the audience, as if preparing for a handstand. One leg on the ground, she lifts the opposite leg up into a vertical extension, then lifts her head and bends her raised foot down to nearly touch her forehead. Finally, she rolls into a sitting position, completes two additional circling backbend motions, and ends in the signature movement of the piece: kneeling in a sideways silhouette, she sits with one foot lifted behind her body, head and torso arched back and hands above her chest in a “*xiao wu hua*” or “small five flower” movement.

The ending pose with the small five flower hand position is an important motif in the dance, because the theme and title of the work reference a Chinese poem from the eleventh century about a lotus flower emerging from mud. It is meant to produce an artistic image (*yixiang*) which contributes to the artistic realm (*yijing*), created through a combination of mimetic imagery and artistic interpretation. By moving her hands and body into this position, Shao creates a vivid artistic image because her body and movements resembles the shape and form of a lotus flower emerging from the ground. The ethereal Chinese quality of the music, the flower-like dress, and the subtle movements of her fingers and toes all contribute to creating a subjective inner experience that accentuates the vividness of the artistic image, bringing into the space of the artistic image. For the viewer, Shao conjures both the image of the flower and the ideal of purity that is suggested from the more abstract notion of a beautiful flower growing out of muddy earth.

In *Ai Lian Shuo*, both the artistic strategies of the type and the artistic image are used to create the artistic significance of the work. In addition to embodying the lotus flower, Shao embodies the type of the classical Chinese woman, as understood and depicted in *gudianwu* choreography. Following the “lotus flower” position, Shao sweeps her hands forward, and her face becomes clearly visible to the audience for the first time. As she stands up, slowly, her soft smile suggests humble self-satisfaction, what in *gudianwu* is known as the “*hanxu*” (含蓄), or “reserved.” *Hanxu* is the characteristic most commonly described by practitioners as expressing of a uniquely “Chinese” kind of feminine beauty. It is frequently espoused as a component of feminine expression in *gudianwu*, and in this piece it serves as an important indication of the character “type” of the classical female. After Shao stands up, she frames her face with her arms and looks out at the audience, her body twisted slightly and her eyes looking out of the corners of

⁴³ See a video here: <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/lxo1L5a2Rug/>

her eyes. The equivalent of the “lotus flower position” for the poetic flower image, this stance clearly conveys the image of the Chinese classical female.

The combination of the lotus image and the classical female image together produces the larger *yijing* of the piece, which is the dialectical representation and reinvention of Chinese traditional culture. In an article entitled “The ‘Coming to Life’ of an *Yijing*, Appreciating Solo Dance *Ai Lian Shuo*,” an anonymous contributor to an online Chinese dance discussion forum describes the layered meanings of *Ai Lian Shuo* as follows:

One leg kneeling on the ground, a small five flower in front of the chest, back leg turned upwards and upper body pitched back, combines together into a ‘lotus flower’ position, bringing the theme out vividly. Following close behind is an image that makes us feel we’ve seen a lotus female immortal appear, from the ground slowly standing up, one hand half covering her face, as if making us see clearly the bashfulness of a young girl. The next movement, a turn of the body and rise on a demi-point, again makes us feel the process of a growing lotus flower, and at the same time think of the growing image of a slim and graceful young woman. (zwdance 2008)

By shifting back and forth between the flower and the young woman, the author argues, Shao conveys “more than the literal meaning of the lotus flower.” What these shifting movements convey, the author argues, is the dancer’s “own unique *qizhi* (气质 style/disposition) [...] located in a psychological contradiction of wanting to express and not wanting to express.” Finally, the author writes, “this makes us truly feel the *yunwei* (韵味 rhyme flavor) that is found in the Chinese classical woman” (zwdance 2008). Further emphasizing the dialectical nature of the form of representation used in the work, as well as its ultimate interventionist goal, the author remarks:

The beauty of the lotus flower and the extraordinary disposition of the woman combine together, making us feel one moment like we have entered a fairyland, one moment returned to reality, the next moment returned again to the fairyland, until we revel in it as if intoxicated. This kind of beautiful *yijing*, how could we not recall and ponder it?

The interventionist goal of the work is implied by the final sentence: “how could we not recall and ponder it?” This suggests that apart from providing the audience with an artistic experience of Chinese traditional culture, conveyed through a combination of *yijing* and type, the work also seeks to make that experience pleasant. The audience has become nearly intoxicated by the beauty of the piece, and he or she has been drawn into a dialectical experience of real and Real, represented here by “reality” and “a fairyland.” When the author says that the work makes us want to ponder and recall it, this statement implies that the work has been successful in the interventionist element of its artistic mission: not only because it has conveyed the essence and appearance of Chinese culture, but because it has made that culture appealing and memorable, helping to ensure its continued existence.

Ba Lang

Whereas *Ai Lian Shuo* embodies the dialectical conception of Chinese traditional culture in its most unified and centralized form (the Chinese classical woman is understood here to represent the ancient shared root of all Chinese culture), *Ba Lang* offers an embodiment of a diversified and marginalized form of Chinese traditional culture. Yumiti, the dancer in *Ba Lang*, is himself a member of the Uygur ethnic minority group whose “Chinese ethnic minority traditional culture” (*zhongguo shaoshu minzu chuantong wenhua* 中国少数民族传统文化) is meant to be embodied in this work. Yumiti has light brown wavy hair, pale skin, and a pointed nose. Like many people of Uygur ethnicity in China, this physical appearance marks him as ethnically different from the Han majority, and it contributes effectively to the mimetic realism of the piece. Apart from Yumiti’s physical appearance (which is officially considered irrelevant, as I discuss below), the work conveys what is understood to be “Uygur culture” through its use of costumes, music, props, and, most importantly, bodily movements. Throughout the work, Yumiti creates, using rhythmic actions and postures that are both mimetic and idealized, a “typical” image of the Uygur man. Combining the type together with the dialectical method of *yijing*, Yumiti he leads the audience into an experience of an artistic realm in which the Uygur culture is real, positive, and full of life.

At the opening of *Ba Lang*,⁴⁴ a loud “Heeeiiiye!” sounds from the speakers, and Yumiti runs onto the stage, throwing a round hand-drum high into the air, and catching it at stage center. The music continues with fast-paced, high energy vocals, and Yumiti throws the drum into the air, catches it, throws it again, and then spins in a low stance and tumbles on the floor. Typical of the highly athletic dance style of the People’s Liberation Army Arts Academy, where Yumiti is a student, the beginning of the piece establishes an electrifying atmosphere through a string of rapid, physically demanding movements. Within a span of ten seconds, Yumiti completes three spins, two tumbles to the ground and back up, a high leap, and four different full body poses. The style of the dance is recognizable as “Uygur,” not only because of Yumiti’s embroidered knee-high boots and tunic, but because the movements are part of a repertoire of “Uygur”-style dance steps and positions collected and standardized in China since the 1940s. Uygur dance is a recognized dance form in China, for which one can purchase textbooks, instructional DVDs, and choreography manuals. Set poses, such as the stance with one hand snapping high over the head and one leg slightly behind the other, are immediately identifiable from this repertoire.

Like most examples of new minority ethnic dance choreography in China since the 1950s, the movement vocabulary used in *Ba Lang* includes a combination of elements: standard “minority dance” movements included in the regularized though ever-expanding official canon; non-minority dance tricks, such as leaps, spins, and kicks; and innovated elements added by the choreographer or the performer as part of the artistic process of invention. The innovated elements may be based on new research into the folk dances or customs of the group or practice represented in the piece, or they may be products of the artist’s imagination and experimentation. The new elements, though acknowledged to be non-traditional, nevertheless are considered to be integral to the representation and inheritance of the culture embodied in the dance form.

Reflecting on his own views on Uygur dance creation and performance during an interview conducted in 2008, Yumiti argues, like the dance researchers quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that innovation is necessary for the continued vitality of ethnic minority dance. “There are some dancers in Xinjiang who just keep repeating the same old dances from the past.

⁴⁴ See a video at <http://video.sina.com.cn/v/b/33412360-1576778683.html>

In my opinion, this is a big problem. Repeating the old dances without innovating is just stepping in place, not progressing forward. To create good works, innovation is very important.” Also in agreement with the practitioners quoted above, Yumiti argues that within innovation the artist must maintain a principle of continuity. When artists create new works that depart from the deeper truths of the tradition, this results in what Yumiti calls “the route of development going astray.” To illustrate this point, Yumiti cites an example in which a dance that is labelled as Uygur incorporates revealing clothing and hip movements similar to belly dance. “Uygur culture is very conservative,” Yumiti explains, and dressing in revealing costumes and performing suggestive hip movements is not consistent with that deeper element of Uygur culture.

Of course the decision about what constitutes changeable and unchangeable elements of a cultural tradition relies on the enlightened cultural insights of the artistic creator and the specific aspect of culture he or she aims to embody. The name of the work *ba lang* is a word used to refer to young men in Xinjiang. Thus, like *Ai Lian Shuo*, *Ba Lang* reflects a particular, gendered understanding of Chinese Uygur ethnic minority culture. When Yumiti marches in the recognized style of Uygur dance, shaking his head and shoulders ever so slightly, lifting his heels high, and tossing his shoulders back in a swagger, he generates a sense of both confidence and charisma. One of the most important aesthetic concepts in Chinese folk and ethnic dance is the notion of “style” (*fengge* 风格). “Style” refers to the overall “flavor” or “feeling” of a work of art, and it is often much broader than any specific movement or element of the work itself. While style is generated through an accumulation of realistic or authentic cultural details, it ultimately transcends these details. What is important in Yumiti’s performance, then is that he conveys the “style” of a *ba lang*. This style can be conveyed as much through truly authentic movements as it can through the generation of a composite type or artistic realm.

In *Ba Lang*, there are several moments when the “style” of the *ba lang* character is particularly poignant. One is toward the middle of the piece when Yumiti places his drum on the floor. He reaches his arms slowly up from the ground, palms up, until they form a flattened “U.” Yumiti tilts his head and assumes an expression of condescension and pride, as he leans slowly forward. He makes a subtle movement with his shoulders, over the drum, and then sits back and throws his hands up with a start. He brings his hands to a cross over his chest slowly and leans back into a thoughtful pose, as the music changes to a rough man’s voice, chanting in a style similar to Arabic religious chanting. As in *Ai Lian Shuo*, it is a combination of music, costume, and subtle movements that together produce a palpable sense of “flavor,” sending the audience into a realm of reverie that extends beyond basic imitation or likeness. Also, as in the case of *Ai Lian Shuo*, the goal of the piece is to convey a sense of culture in a way that is both continuous with the past and inventive and appealing enough to make it relevant to the future.

Rong Hua

*Rong Hua*⁴⁵, the Chinese folk dance piece performed in the style of Shandong Yangge, begins with dancer Liu Mengmeng seated quietly on the ground bathed in soft white light. She is dressed in a simple white floral cotton jacket, blue cotton pants with patches on them, white socks, and black cloth shoes. She wears her hair in a long braid over her shoulder, in a style popular in China during the 1950s. On her lap, Liu holds a piece of cloth, which she appears to be embroidering. Of the three pieces discussed here, this is the first one that incorporates movements directly from life, suggesting that it is made in the socialist realist aesthetic. Like

⁴⁵ See a video of *Rong Hua* here: http://www.56.com/u27/v_NDIzODY3MTI.html

Shao in *Ai Lian Shuo*, Liu's opening movement is a circular one. However, instead of a deep circular backbend, Liu's circle is a less ostentatious one drawn only with her arms and torso. She is embroidering the piece of fabric in her lap, and her circle motion is the path of her hand as she pulls the needle through the fabric and around into the air. The movement is drawn directly from life, though exaggerated for extra effect. Focused on the work at hand, Liu's movements are deliberate and calm. Her lovely demeanor and softly swaying torso makes the regular act of embroidery appear beautiful.

All the elements of the piece -- the music, Liu's costume, her earnest expression -- communicate to the audience that Liu's character is the embodiment of an archetypal figure in twentieth-century Chinese art, literature and performance: the quintessential virtuous female peasant revolutionary. Humble and devoted, the heroine of revolutionary drama commits her life to the revolution without asking for anything in return. For this, she is both beautiful and good. In her movements, she expresses a sentimental earnestness that is associated with heroic characters from the revolutionary era. The musical score for *Rong Hua* is based on a song of the same name in the soundtrack to a popular Chinese film from 1979 entitled *Little Flower*. It is a historical drama set during the Chinese Civil War, and Liu is identifiable here as playing the role of the heroine in the film, Little Flower.

In playing the role of Little Flower, Liu performs both a character type and a set of typical emotions associated with China's revolutionary history. Stories of the civil war make up the single most important theme in Chinese political performance during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, (Chen 2002; Wang, 1997), and they continue to appear in contemporary film, television drama, dance, and other cultural productions in the early twenty-first century. Like Shao in *Ai Lian Shuo* and Yimiti in *Ba Lang*, Liu simultaneously embodies two levels of reality. First, she embodies the character type of the 1950s Chinese peasant female revolutionary and even the specific character of Little Flower. Second, Liu embodies the emotional content of a familiar telling of Chinese history: of the ordinary Chinese people's sincere wish for a communist victory during the Civil War. A report by the Ministry of Culture (2009) describes the historical significance of *Rong Hua* as follows:

Using our country's Shandong region Jiaozhou *Yangge* as artistic material together with war era revolutionary content as background, the work uses the form of solo dance to show the revolutionary image of that period in that place, and expresses the emotion of urgent expectance for an early and victorious end to the war.

In the term "revolutionary image," this description refers to an idealized image that is capable of representing an entire historical era and its emotional sentiments. Thus, the deeper truth that *Rong Hua* conveys is what this description calls "the emotion of urgent expectance."

Like the Uygur dance movements in Yimiti's piece, the Shandong Jiaozhou folk dance movements used in *Rong Hua* are a codified and recognizable genre of dance in China. The twisting arm and torso movements that Liu performs after she throws down the fabric, for example, are drawn from this repertoire. However, as in Yumiti's piece, the folk dance movements serve here only as a means to producing a larger, overall effect of "style." They offer a sense of the rural, as well as a sense of Chinese cultural content, both of which are integral to producing the overall effect of the piece, which is to transport the audience into the historical and emotional world of the piece. Consistent with the style of Chinese revolutionary melodrama,

Liu's emotions are exaggerated and extreme. As she tosses her embroidered fabric into the air, she appears to be bursting with feeling.

Mixing naturalistic imitation with artistic embellishment is an important strategy for creation of both the type and the *yijing* in *Rong Hua*, as it is in the other pieces discussed above. At some points, Liu takes pains in her movements to imitate aspects of everyday life. For example, at the beginning of the piece, when Liu sits on the floor embroidering the fabric on her lap, she uses details of choreography to make her actions imitate, in a natural way, the actual movements of sewing. When Liu finishes a stitch and then pulls her imaginary thread taut, she uses her opposite hand to move the fabric slightly in the direction of the thread. This movement makes the fabric appear as though it is pulled by the piece of thread, the way fabric normally would, even though there is no actual thread or needle.

In contrast to these elements of naturalistic imitation, however, are elements like the piece of silk fabric that Liu uses as a prop throughout the piece. Silk is not a fabric usually owned by peasants, and the silk appears in the piece not as part of a naturalistic scene but rather to enhance the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the work. As Liu dances with it, the silk fabric flutters and swirls through the air, deepening the intoxicating appeal of the *yijing*. Liu's facial expressions are another important part of the "type" created in *Rong Hua*. The earnestness she shows on her face as she works on her embroidery offers an idealized view of the world, one in which peasants are naively good-hearted and devoted to their daily tasks, and basic activities such as embroidery can be deeply rewarding.

Ideology and Authenticity: Invention of Tradition as Postcolonial Mandate

In *Ideology: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton (1991) argues that while there is no single definition of ideology, one of its most important strategies is the use of naturalizing discourse, which often produces reification. Through naturalizing discourse -- including visual images -- ideological representation reifies invented concepts and categories until they take on a concreteness and consistency that makes them appear real. In his theorization of ideology, Lukács (1922) argues that reification produces the "phantom-objectivity" of things. Thus, one of the most important functions of ideology is to make ideas and entities that are invented and artificial appear authentic and natural.

By this definition of ideology, all of the dance works I have discussed here are ideological. In their embodiments of different elements of so-called "Chinese traditional culture," each of these pieces takes part in the naturalization and reification of cultural entities and ideal character types which are known to be in large part invented and artificial. By embodying the "Chinese classical woman," *Ai Lian Shuo* reifies and naturalizes the idea of a unified Chinese classical culture, imparting consistency upon a historical tradition known to be full of historical variation and rupture. By embodying the proud, strong, and culturally independent Uygur man as a symbol of Chinese cultural diversity, *Ba Lang* reifies and naturalizes the idea that China is both a unified and a culturally diverse nation and that ethnic minorities in China maintain a strong sense of ethnic difference, esteem, and historical continuity. The ideological work of *Ba Lang* is thus to impart unity on a nation known to contain significant ethnic discord and to impart a sense of cultural diversity on a nation known to promote strong centralization of official culture. Finally, by reifying and naturalizing the "emotion of urgent expectance" purportedly felt by the Chinese people in anticipation of the end of the Chinese Civil War, *Rong Hua* imposes an singular sentimental narrative on a history known to contain great difference of emotional content.

Chinese dance is an invented tradition whose dialectical epistemology facilitates a strongly ideological function. Because practitioners of Chinese dance apply a dialectical epistemology both to reality and to Chinese cultural tradition -- seeing them as dynamic, dualistic, malleable, requiring enlightened intervention to persist -- they maintain practices and understandings of realistic representation and cultural authenticity that encourage compliance with the official version of truth. Chinese dance promotes a set of invented traditions with ideological uses that support official versions of hegemonic truth. However, this does not mean that practitioners of Chinese dance possess a false consciousness, nor does it mean that they are complicitous in a state conspiracy to misrepresent the truth. Following on the discussion of Chinese realism and its connection to national salvation in the section above, I argue that the dialectical epistemology of Chinese dance has a strongly postcolonial component, which makes both the invention of tradition and the reification of culture take on different meanings in the context of Chinese dance practice.

As Eric Hobsbawm (1983) defines it, the term “invention of tradition” refers to specific phenomenon of European modernity. The invention of tradition is both surprising and significant in this historical and cultural context for two reasons, of which Hobsbawm is aware: first, because tradition is understood, even newly defined, by the European modern Enlightenment tradition as something historically continuous and existing in the past; second, because European modernity, as a project of social transformation, justifies and defines itself by insisting on a rejection of tradition. “[I]n consciously setting itself against tradition and for radical innovation,” Hobsbawm writes, “the nineteenth-century liberal ideology of social change systematically failed to provide for the social and authority ties taken for granted in earlier societies, and created voids which might have to be filled by invented practices” (8). In this context, invented traditions needed to be created to fill the “voids” produced by a modern negation of tradition. At the time same time, because of the Enlightenment understanding of tradition as something that should be continuous and natural (only modernity could be seen as invented in this view), such new traditions had to be made to appear continuous.

The context of the invention of tradition in the case of Chinese traditional culture in the People’s Republic of China is altogether different from that described by Hobsbawm. For one, Chinese modernity was from the beginning a project set up in explicit confrontation with European modernity. While Chinese revolutionaries ranging from Sun Yatsen to Mao Zedong all insisted on the rejection of problems of Chinese traditional society and its culture as a basis for Chinese modernization, they usually founded these rejections on the ultimate goal of preserving Chineseness and the integrity of the Chinese nation. This concern with preserving Chinese national integrity and Chinese cultural identity makes the Chinese problem of modernization a postcolonial one, as Andrew Jones (2001) and others have argued. Furthermore, the dialectical understanding of history adopted in Marxist theory after the 1940s in China made it imperative that, rather than denying historical change, one should see all culture and social process as one of constant renewal and change.

The role of cultural identity in Chinese modernity makes it significantly different from the Soviet Union as well, because unlike the Soviet Union, where “Soviet” identity replaced “Russian” identity, communist China never established a clear socialist cultural identity distinct from Chinese identity. In their work on ethnic identity in the Soviet Union and Russia, Serguei Oushakine (2009), Yuri Slezkine (1994, 2004), and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) have all shown that Bolshevik, Leninist, and Stalinist socialism in the Soviet Union all maintained an ambivalent relationship to Russianness as a cultural identity. However, this was not the case in

China. No equivalent to “Sovietness” exists in communist China. In *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity Under Reform*, Yingjie Guo (2004) argues that a new kind of cultural nationalism emerged in China in the 1990s, found in what he calls the new “search for roots” and “a quest for authentic experience, authentic community, national spirit, or the creative life-principle of the nation” (6). Guo cites the Confucian revival, language politics, and the re-writing of national history as sites of the generation and enactment of cultural nationalism in discursive form. Guo interprets these new forms of cultural nationalism as being “fundamentally against the ideology of the Party,” since, he argues, they propose a view of national identity that contests “the Party-state’s configuration of the nation and its monopoly on the right to name the nation” (4). Rather than representing a cultural nationalism that did not exist previously, rather, it represents a new effort to separate cultural nationalism from the Party, in a context in which the two have always been intimately linked.⁴⁶

Thus, while the invention of Chinese cultural tradition in the People’s Republic of China serves to maintain forms of hegemonic knowledge advantageous to the socialist state, it also serves as an act of postcolonial resistance in support of the maintenance of Chinese cultural identity in the face of Western imperial encroachment. As participants in the artistic field of Chinese dance, the choreographers, teachers, and performers involved in the making of Chinese dance are often quite aware of the ideological nature of their work. Rather than seeing this as a sign of false-consciousness, however, many see it as a tool to be used for acknowledged political ends. In *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Thomas Mullaney (2010) argues that, during the ethnic identification projects of the 1950s, many of the social scientists working on the project of ethnic identification knew that they were creating invented categories. Rather than seeing categories such as the Zhuang and Yi as misrepresentations of reality, they saw them as useful tools. By organizing ethnic minority groups into categories that could then be reified and naturalized, these scientists realized, they were making it possible for the ethnic groups to be represented and included in state processes.

I argue that a similar process takes place in the making of Chinese dance. Specifically, dancers create and reify forms of cultural authenticity that they know to be largely invented, and they do this because they see these forms as tools for cultural use, rather than as reflections of an already existing objective reality. When emphasis on authenticity and empirical realism appears in Chinese dance --which it does with great frequency -- these are understood not as ends in themselves, but rather as part of a process of cultural representation that is always creative and always oriented at larger socially significant goals. One example of this type of reasoning can be found in the extensive use of fieldwork as a form of cultural research in Chinese dance. Because fieldwork is such an important component of the process of making Chinese dance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I take some time to describe it, then I offer analysis of how this particular kind of realism serves, for dancers, interventionist projects informed by a dialectical epistemology.

Fieldwork: Bodily Experience as Creative Tool

In the early 1960s, seventeen-year-old Ba Jingkan, then a professional ballet dancer in a major state-supported, provincial-level song and dance troupe in northeast China, was sent to the An Mountain Steel Factory, where he performed three weeks of manual labor as part of his

⁴⁶ Considerable scholarship has shown this is not the case. See Nylan (2010) and Makeham (2008).

professional training. “I worked alongside the workers in the steel factory,” Ba remembers during an interview nearly fifty years later, “and I experienced the real details of steel life.”⁴⁷ Ba states that he learned from the workers in the factory how to heat pieces of steel in giant vats, to test steel for weakness using industrial machines and giant presses, and to mold steel using heavy tools. He recalls, “Steel work is extremely difficult, and it requires great physical strength. In the winter, it is very cold here; when you are standing facing the giant steel vat, you will feel that your face and chest are burning from the heat of the molten steel, but your back will face the harsh wind and it will feel frozen.”

Unlike so many others in China during the 1960s and 70s, who were sent to the countryside or to factories to undergo “reeducation through manual labor,” Ba labored in the An Mountain Steel Factory not for political reeducation but rather to create better art. “To create a good dance performance, you have to learn from life,” Ba explained. “After I had experienced the steelworkers’ life with my own body,” said Ba, “I performed much better in pieces in which we tried to depict real workers’ lives. My performances were more informed by experience, and thus they were much more moving and artistically rich.” Ba went to the steel factory so that he could, in his words, “experience life” (体验生活 “*tiyan shenghuo*”), in order to become a better artist. Through the experience of working in the steel factory, he argued, he became a better ballet dancer, and he provided better performances that made for higher quality artistic works.

While the idea of working in a steel factory to improve one’s dancing might seem unexpected for those familiar with American and Western European practices of ballet training and artistic creation, it was not at all peculiar for Chinese ballet dancers like Ba in the 1960s. The type of experience Ba describes in the steel factory was standard practice for dancers in China during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (the height of the so-called “Mao era”), and I would argue that it continues, in theory at least, to be an important part of the creative process for dancers in China in the early twenty-first century. Through oral histories conducted in China in 2008-09 with one hundred and seventy professional dancers ranging in age from 18 to 92 and in birthplace from twenty provinces, I found that nearly every dancer I interviewed had participated in some form of dance-related fieldwork during their lives.

These dancers, as I learned through the interviews, conducted fieldwork in a number of different settings and contexts. Many dancers, like Ba, had conducted field trips in industrial contexts where they labored alongside workers to physically experience the life of a particular factory environment. Others, especially dancers in military troupes, conducted field trips to military compounds, to “learn from the soldier’s life so that they could better represent it on stage.” For dancers who specialized in Chinese folk and ethnic dance, it was common for them to take field trips to rural areas or minority regions of China. During these field trips, which lasted anywhere from a few days to several months, and sometimes including multiple trips over several decades, dancers often lived among local villagers, took part in local activities, and studied with folk performers.

While some dancers, like Ba, conducted fieldwork to do research for a specific new work (Ba went to the An Mountain Steel Factory in preparation for making a dance piece called *The Steelworker*), others went regularly as part of their ongoing dance training, or as part of their performance schedule. Most state-sponsored dance troupes in China are required to provide performances for workers, soldiers, and peasants in factories, military zones, and rural areas as

⁴⁷ Based on an interview conducted with the author in Shenyang, China, in January, 2009. Transcribed and translated by the author.

part of their annual “national responsibilities” (国家人物 “*guojia renwu*”). Thus, dancers often engage in fieldwork as part of their touring schedule. Between performances, for example, dancers might engage in the work of the people for whom they are performing, and, especially in the past, they often live in the homes of the people for whom they provide touring performances. While most touring performance troupes today stay in hotels or other private housing facilities, it is not uncommon for them to arrange for special opportunities to “experience life” as part of their continued training and artistic development.

The idea that dancers should “experience life” by conducting fieldwork is part of a larger aesthetic philosophy of bodily experience (体验) that dominated artistic life in the People’s Republic of China, not only for dancers but for all artists and intellectuals working under the Maoist state motto of “entering deeply into life” (*shenru shenghuo* 深入生活). “Entering deeply into life,” according to Maoist aesthetic theory, was the ultimate creative practice for artists and intellectuals seeking to produce innovative and dynamic artistic works in a socialist society. In his 1942 speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao Zedong advanced a new aesthetic ideology (Lee 2002) that called on artists and intellectuals to “learn from the worker, peasant, and soldier masses” by participating in “observation, experience, research” (Mao 1967). According to Mao’s argument, artists and intellectuals who learned from the lives of the masses would have a more direct access to artistic creativity, because they would be drawing on the dynamic resources provided by life itself. Mao explains,

China’s revolutionary writers and artists, to be writers and artists of promise, must on the long term, unconditionally, whole-heartedly go into the worker, peasant and soldier masses, into the fiery hot struggle, into the one and only greatest, most abundant original source: observation, experience, research, and analysis of every person, every class, every mass, every vivid and lively form of life and struggle, the primary material for all literature and all art, for only then is it possible to begin the process of creation.

Here, Mao cites experience of life itself as a source of artistic creativity, and he argues that writers and artists, “to be writers and artists of promise,” must experience, with their own bodies, the “fiery hot struggle” of the masses. As one instance of the Maoist aesthetic method of “entering deeply into life,” fieldwork practiced by dancers in the People’s Republic was therefore understood to be a fundamental part of creative experience, as well as an indispensable methodology for the making of good art.

In their accounts of dance and theater work in China in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, numerous historians and scholars have described the use of field research by Chinese actors, dancers, and directors as an important artistic practice in Chinese performance in the PRC. Louis Wheeler Snow (1972) quotes interviews in which ballet dancers from the Cultural Revolution era revolutionary ballets *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl* reflect on their experiences of living and working with peasants and workers to improve their performances. “Working with the peasants is not only good for our own thinking, it’s good for the characters we play,” Snow quotes the dancer who played Xi’er in *The White-Haired Girl*. “For example, in the first scene when father brings back the red string as a gift [... At first] I couldn’t express Hsi-erh’s [Xi’er’s] happiness at receiving this little piece of thread as a gift. Then we went to the countryside [...] I began to understand that piece of string” (205). In their discussions of *Yangge* dance in the 1950s, Wang Kefen (1985) and Hung Chang’tai (2011) show that rural folk dance

forms were incorporated into national parades and performances. Likewise, in their accounts of theater during the first three decades of the People's Republic, Colin Mackerras (1975), William Dolby (1976), and Xiaomei Chen (2002) all show that engagement with rural and factory life was an important part of theater life at this time.

Fieldwork conducted among ethnic minorities was also a common part of dance research and creation in the late 1940s. Wu Xiaobang led a field expedition to Inner Mongolia in 1946, the goal of which was to “research the basic rhythms of the folk dances of the Mongolian ethnicity” (Luo 2006: 5). Wu writes of this expedition in his memoir:

In mid-June [1946], I went with six students from my dance class to join the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe down to the grassland for two months. We moved into an Inner Mongolian grassland castle, welcomed by the Troupe's ethnic brother comrades. Each morning, I led more than thirty of the members of the troupe who liked dancing in a practice of basic dance training out on the muddy ground. Inner Mongolian folk dance activities are very common, and the members of the Troupe placed a lot of importance on dance work. The young male and female Troupe members quickly gained an understanding of the basic principles of modern dance art. Based on movements taken from the life of the Mongolian people, adding my own selection, refinement, and combinations, I created and rehearsed two new dance pieces for them: *Mongolian Dance* and *Inner Mongolia People's Trilogy* (77-78).

In Wu's description, we see the basic model of much *caifeng* work, as it was carried out by dancers in China beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the early twenty-first century. The dancer and his or her team travel to the minority or rural region, spend a period time living with the people there, and then create a dance work that utilizes movements, rhythms, and content drawn from the lives of the people as experienced through the fieldwork process.

Dai Ailian and Sheng Jie also organized and participated in fieldwork with rural and minority groups. In the late 1940s, around the same time that Wu was conducting his fieldwork in Inner Mongolia, Dai Ailian did similar work with other ethnic minority groups. “As a foreign-born returning Chinese,” Luo (2006) writes, Dai “overcame many inconveniences of language and lifestyle to enter into the minority regions to collect customs and study dance. In the process of studying and researching the local folk dance, she was deeply moved by the sincerity and humility of the local cultures, and she recognized in their folk dances a tenacious vitality” (5). Luo lists a series of fieldwork trips led by Sheng Jie in collaboration with Wu Xiaobang and the Dance Cadre Training Class offered at the Central Drama Academy in 1951. Luo writes, “A group of students, under Sheng Jie's leadership, went to Anhui and the three provinces of northeast China to study the *huagudeng*, stilts, and *errenzhuan* [folk performance styles] with local artists, and to study, arrange, and develop their experience of Dongbei *yangge*” (6).

Dance is a particularly useful medium in which to explore the dialectical epistemology of Chinese realism, because in dance creation the body serves simultaneously as a tool for empirical knowing and as a tool for the creation of new forms. In dancers' experiences of fieldwork, the physical experience of bodily participation serves as both an empirical process of gathering data and a creative process of producing new works of art. Consider the following explanation from Ba of how empirical experience of reality in the steel factory contributed to his creation of new artistic works:

When you are standing facing the giant steel vat, you will feel that your face and chest are burning from the heat of the molten steel, but your back will face the harsh wind and it will feel frozen. There is a famous saying among steelworkers: ‘Fire roasts the front while wind blows the back.’ After I experienced steel life, I knew what this meant. There is this movement, for example, that steelworkers do with their hands and their face when they pull a piece of steel out of the giant vat. You see, the steel is very hot, so the steelworker will automatically do this, to protect himself. We learn this movement too, and when we perform as the steelworker, we put this movement in the performance to make it more real.

Ultimately, Ba’s bodily experience in the steel factory is as much a way for him to learn about the real experiences of steel workers as it is a tool for him to convincingly represent these experiences on stage. As in Mao’s call for dancers to express a “more typical” version of life, Ba takes empirical experience of reality as not an ends but rather a means to the more important goal of representing the deeper truths, that is, the ideological content of the work. Bodily experience, in this case, serves to make the work “more real” in both dialectical understandings of the term.

While not directly related to fieldwork, the following example also serves to illustrate the relationship between authenticity or empirical reflections of reality and their use for ideological and politically practical ends. In 2003, Yumiti (the performer in *Ba lang*), won first place in the Tao Li Bei competition performing a work called *A Lovable Rose*.⁴⁸ In the piece, Yumiti uses a prop that resembles a dombra, a musical instrument usually associated with Kazakh, rather than Uygur, ethnic minority culture. Many members of the Kazakh community, when hearing that *A Lovable Rose* had won first place with the appellation “Uygur dance work” became very angry at what they considered a breach of authenticity. One Kazakh dancer explains his view of the controversy as follows:

A few years ago at the National Dance Competition,⁴⁹ a Xinjiang dance piece won the gold prize. The performer was Uygur, and the movements he performed were from Uygur dance, but, the music, costumes, and prop were obviously of Kazakh origin. This dancer performed using a musical instrument, and this instrument is the oldest musical instrument of the Kazakh people. Because the dancer himself was Uygur, its possible that he did not know Kazakh dance. So, the fact that he used Uygur dance to go with Kazakh music, costumes, and instrument, we can forgive him for that. It’s a kind of fusion. However, what we definitely cannot accept is that at the end, when he won the prize, the piece was given the label “Uygur dance.” Can you believe it? They said it was a Uygur dance and not a Khazak dance, although the musical instrument and the costumes and all of that were all clearly Khazak! When we saw the live broadcast back at home on TV in the Kazakh area, we were extremely angry. Later, I wrote several articles about

⁴⁸ See a video at http://www.56.com/u40/v_NTYyMTk0NDU.html

⁴⁹ Yumiti’s *A Lovable Rose* won awards in several competitions. Here, Hester is referring to the nationwide dance competition open to all participants, regardless of institution (Tao Li Bei is only for professional dance students).

the incorrect labeling of this piece, and I tried to get them published in *Dance* magazine. In the end, no place would publish it. This proves that the judges and the other leaders all have a great deal of power. It's because of this power, and the inequality that exists, that the complaints and opinions of the Kazakhs are not heard.

From this dancer's point of view, what is most problematic about the breach of authenticity in the case of *A Lovable Rose* is not its lack of purity on a level of cultural categories, but that it produces negative effects for the promotion of Kazakh culture. Since award-winning dance works can provide status and opportunity for the represented groups (opportunities for tourism, performance, and teaching, to name a few), minority groups are eager to have winning dances that represent them. In Xinjiang, this dancer argues, it is difficult for smaller ethnic minority groups such as the Kazakhs to get representative dance pieces seen on the national stage of competitions like *Tao Li Bei*. "In Xinjiang there are always two political leaders," he explains, "One must be Han and one must be Uyghur. That means that political leaders from other groups, like Kazakhs, are all relegated to the lower levels. Without representatives at the top, it is almost impossible to get [our] works into the major competitions." Thus, what matters most is that the representation of minority culture help to facilitate the group's cultural representation.

The Kazakh dancer's description of the event can be profitably compared to the following assessment of the same piece by an ethnomusicologist working in the United States who specializes in Xinjiang music. The ethnomusicologist states, in a personal communication:

The dance seems very modern to me, although there are obvious references (often dramatized) to a local kind of Turfan dance, some pan-Uyghur dance gestures, and the "inverted playing" of the instrument (a dance form found on the fresco of Dunhuang and thought to be in the style of China's "western region"). The instrument (obviously a fake one, often used for choreography) doesn't resemble anything Uyghur. It's probably a dombra (but doesn't look exactly like one, too). The costume is typical of those worn by dancers and musicians of modern Uyghur stage performance. The tune isn't anything traditional; it's an appropriation of a modern "Uyghur-style" folksong.

Using terms like "modern," "fake," "traditional," and "appropriation," the ethnomusicologist exhibits concern with a particular type of authenticity, one that is connected with an epistemological framework in which something like a consistent, identifiable "traditional" Uyghur cultural form can be identified and preserved. This understanding of authenticity is quite different from that expressed in the Kazakh dancers' comments above. For him, culture is always changing, and a certain amount of artistic innovation and cultural hybridity is not only expected but considered useful. What matters, ultimately, for him is that these representations remain "authentic" in the sense that they serve the true needs and desires of the Kazakh people, in a way that helps to maintain their cultural existence into the future.

Anthropology "Between the Posts"

The majority of existing research into cultural production in socialist states has focused on political problems, at the expense of the epistemological ones. That is, in seeking to understand cultural production under state socialism, scholars in the West have been concerned

primarily with the imposition of state authority at the expense of individual expression. What they have failed to attend to, in making this choice to focus on the political, however, is the possibility for investigating the alternative epistemologies that cultural production in state socialism offers. Many anthropologists and historians, sensitive to the lasting impact of Cold War politics on the scholarship on socialism in Western liberal academia, have been active in challenging conceptions of the political subject taken for granted in much scholarship on socialism. However, they have been slow in offering a similarly critical approach on the existing treatments of socialist epistemology. As I argue here, the epistemological insights of critical postcolonial anthropology and critical postcolonial science studies can be fruitfully used in the study of epistemology in socialist and postsocialist contexts. Such an approach is an important way of pursuing an anthropology “between the posts” (Chari and Verdery 2009).

Comparative studies of art and culture under state socialism see socialist art as a highly controlled means of enacting symbolic and discursive political power for ruling regimes, in which authoritarian control elides the expressive potential of individual artists and intellectuals. Katherine Verdery (1991), for example, argues that under state socialism cultural production acts as a “symbolic-ideological mode of control,” producing a restrictive kind of “authoritative discourse” (429-431). “[C]ommunist rule seeks to make all language into authoritative discourse,” Verdery writes, “to reduce the meanings of words, to straightjacket them into singular intentions, and to preclude any use of language that permits multiple meanings” (430). Susan Buck-Morss (2002) describes how, in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, the Russian avant-garde lost almost all of its capacities for open-ended artistic experimentation when it became subsumed into the political vanguard. “Once artists accepted the cosmological time of the political vanguard,” Buck-Morss writes, “it followed that to continue to be revolutionary in a cultural sense meant glorifying the successes of the party and covering over its failures” (62). Buck-Morss’ view of artistic practice in the Soviet Union after the mid-1920s is decidedly one of disappointment, since for her, the shift from avant-garde to vanguard meant a loss of the true practice of art. She writes,

Art was no longer to inspire imagination in a way that set reality into question, but, rather to stage affirmative representations of reality that encourages uncritical acceptance of the party’s monopolistic right to control the direction of social transformation [...] In acquiescing to the vanguard’s cosmological conception of revolutionary time, the avant-garde abandoned the *lived* temporality of interruption, estrangement, arrest -- that is, they abandoned the *phenomenological experience of avant-garde practice*” (62).

For Buck-Morss, the artist’s relation to accepted social realities should be one of friction, discontent, and confrontation. She privileges a notion of art that places agency in the individual artist, and she sees artistic and cultural practice under the Stalinist regime as being problematic because of its lack of this kind of critical artistic agency.

Anthropologists and historians working in the field of postsocialism studies have worked to challenge the ideas of agency and individual subjectivity underlying analyses of socialist cultural production like that of Buck-Morss and Verdery above. In the context of socialist governance, they argue, the meaning of subjectivity was altogether different from that assumed in many studies of socialism produced in the West. Johann Hellbeck (2009), for example, argues that what he calls “a liberal understanding of selfhood” (such as that implied in the work of Michel Foucault, he argues) is inappropriate as a tool for analysis in the context of socialist

experience, since it assumes binaries between individual and social, public and private, which were not applicable in the same way for socialist subjects. Hellbeck writes, “The liberal model makes a universal claim that all individuals cultivate the private realm as a sphere of unfettered and authentic individual subjectivity. However, Soviet diaries raise questions about the universality of the pursuit of autonomy and of the private as a realm of integrated selfhood” (86).

Alexei Yurchak (2006) has similarly challenged the relevance of liberal notions of selfhood and it implied notions of authenticity in socialist contexts. Yurchak argues that fundamental to the core ideological system of socialism is the idea that the liberated subject can only exist as a product of, rather than prior to, social shaping and cultivation. He writes, “A person could not become truly liberated spontaneously; that person had to be educated and cultivated. [Therefore...] In the socialist context, the independence of creativity and the control of creative work by the party are not mutually contradictory but must be pursued simultaneously” (12). Thus, in both Hellbeck’s and Yurchak’s work, the very idea of a liberated subject existing prior to or outside of social processes of education and cultivation is not possible within socialist ideology, and so it is problematic for scholars to impose this framework as the most important question for understanding cultural production in the context of state socialism.

While studies like Hellbeck’s and Yurchak’s offer useful avenues for thinking outside the increasingly hegemonic political perspectives promoted in the ideologies of liberalism, they have tended to remain fairly conservative on the question of epistemology. As Chari and Verdery point out, “Postcolonial scholars have focused more on questions of epistemology than have postsocialist scholars” (11). Adriana Petryna’s (2002) *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl* offers one example of this problem. While Petryna points out important ways in which scientific knowledge serves a role “legitimizing democratic institutions” (7), she fails to deeply consider the possibility that the scientific discourses produced under Ukrainian socialism might offer alternative ways of understanding reality. While she does acknowledge the role of biological entities in impacting political regimes, the overall force of Petryna’s argument is to highlight *new forms of citizenship*, rather than new forms of biological existence or scientific representations of the world. In her discussions of what she calls she calls “Soviet science,” she uses terms such as “specific state conceptions of biology” and “interpretations of biological processes” (119). By placing the scientific discourses produced in Soviet Ukraine under the label of “Soviet science,” she implies that these discourses cannot be taken seriously as alternative views of the world, only as expressions of the influence of ideology on scientific research.

When confronted with theories of knowledge and representation -- including artistic representation -- produced under socialist regimes, scholars writing in the Western liberal tradition tend to dismiss these claims as being contaminated by socialist ideology, much as Petryna does with “Soviet science” and Buck-Morss does with Stalin-era art. In postcolonial scholarship, by contrast, the acknowledgement of alternative epistemologies is considered to be a fundamental scholarly responsibility, of significant importance and value. In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues that a postcolonial approach to historical scholarship requires that basic ideas about chronology, historicity, and historical knowledge taken for granted in the modern European historical research all need to come under question, and they need to be confronted with alternative forms of historical claims from non-European traditions. Scholars of postcolonial medical anthropology and science studies such as Donna Haraway (1994), Susan Harding (1998), Jean Langford (2002), Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980) have all argued that understanding knowledge systems in comparative context requires abandoning aspects of a modern Western

epistemological frame that is itself filled with ideological elements. Liberal western scientific epistemologies have, these scholars argue, been tools for colonial, patriarchal, and racist agendas. If applied to the socialist context, one could say that the difference between the socialist epistemology and the liberal Western epistemology is that while the socialist one systematically recognizes its connection to ideology, the liberal Western one systematically denies it.

Anthropology “between the posts” recognizes the areas of overlap and shared concerns between studies of socialism and colonialism, as well as the shared prejudices and shared consequences of much research on these areas. One shared concern is with the impact of the political and economic power of the liberal West on knowledge production. European colonialism and the post-Cold War era of neoliberal expansion both form examples of the cultural imperialism of the liberal West, though in different forms. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (2009) argue that postsocialist studies should be in dialogue with postcolonial studies to form a new cooperative effort to critique global capitalist imperialism. “In a world riven by capitalist imperialism,” they write, “analysis in solidarity with such struggles today requires interdisciplinary ethnographic engagement” (29). Apart from a shared geopolitical positionality with respect to the liberal West, however, socialism and postsocialism studies also share with postcolonial studies a concern for understanding human experience across cultural difference.

In arguing for a deeper understanding of the dialectical epistemology of Chinese dance, I suggest a way in which postcolonial insights about the relationship between ideology and representation can be used in the context of understanding cultural production in socialist contexts, of which China is one example. As with so many other socialist contexts, artistic production in the People’s Republic of China is shaped not only by the culture of socialism but also by indigenous cultural practices, which are themselves dynamic and diverse. In attending to the artistic concept of *yijing* I have shown one small way in which indigenous Chinese aesthetic theory is also relevant to investigations of cultural work in contemporary China, thus drawing another important connection to postcolonial studies. The interaction between *yijing* and “the type” in the making of Chinese dance in the socialist era shows just one example of the inextricable connection between socialist sensibilities and indigenous Chinese sensibilities in the making of socialist Chinese culture, and both of these influences call for the serious consideration of alternative epistemologies.

Chapter Five

Embodying the Minority: Politics of Aesthetics in Chinese Ethnic Dance



Mogedema performing *Zhongwan Wu*. 1962.
Photo Courtesy of tvtour.com.cn

“If you had never seen the boundless expanse of Inner Mongolia’s great grassland, you would not be able to understand Modegema’s dancing; likewise, without seeing the tempered forcefulness, unadorned simplicity, and sublime beauty of her dance movements, one cannot understand the customs and colors of the great grassland.”

-Tian Yu “Preface,” *Matchless in the East: The Dance Journey of Modegema* 《东方一绝：莫得格玛舞蹈之路》.

“Folk dance is the inheritance of ethnic culture through the moving form.”

-Luo Xiongyan, *Chinese Folk Dance Culture* 《中国民间舞蹈文化》.

Introduction

In November, 1979, Chinese Mongolian dance legend Siqintariha (b. 1932) gave a speech at the China Dance Workers Association Fourth Member Representatives Meeting (中国舞蹈工作者协会第四次会员代表大会) in Beijing,⁵⁰ in which she called on the leaders of China's dance world to use ethnic dance as a means of improving China's ethnic relations. Her speech, entitled "Under the Brilliant Illumination of the Party's Ethnicities Policy, Developing the Ethnic Dance Vocation," levies harsh criticism of what she calls the "pro-Han prejudices" of the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution, while calling for a return to approaches to ethnic politics begun by the Party in the 1950s (Siqintariha 2008). Citing the earliest PRC Constitution, as well as pre-Cultural Revolution efforts by former Party leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, Siqintariha argues that the true goal of the Party is to promote ethnic equality, and that the post-1979 era of dance development should help to bring about this goal.

One of the most important steps toward actualizing equality among ethnic groups, Siqintariha argues, is to increase state support for the research and promotion of ethnic minority culture and art, and for this work to be increasingly done by China's ethnic minority people themselves. She states,

The many ethnicities united in fraternal love make concerted efforts to manage together the nation's art and culture vocation, and together struggle devotedly to realize the [goal of] improving the science and cultural level of the entire greater Chinese ethnicity (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) [which has been] initiated by the Party Central Committee. Only in this way can [we] better give expression to the Constitution's stipulation of the policy of equality without exception. (Siqintariha 2008: 7-8)

To realize this collaborative management of the nation's culture and art work, Siqintariha recommends the following actions: 1) within each central art research department, the establishment of dedicated ethnic minority culture and art research organs, created with the participation of ethnic minority people who use their ethnic spoken and written languages and are familiar with the history, folk customs, and habits of one's ethnic group; 2) within all of the central Ministry of Culture's bureaus and sections, as well as its subordinate arts associations, schools, and performance troupes, increase in the representation of ethnic minorities in the membership and employee base; 3) within each of the central arts schools, the establishment of special classes made up of talented and qualified ethnic minority students to be carefully trained to be ethnic minority arts and culture cadres. Each of these actions, Siqintariha argues, are extensions of existing policies and approaches, designed to better "carry out... the principle of quality without exception among ethnic groups" which she says is guaranteed by the constitution (Siqintariha 2008: 6-8).

⁵⁰ As part of the national Fourth Representatives Meeting of Literature and Arts Workers, this was the most important nationwide meeting of China's dance leaders since 1960, when the Third Meeting was held in Beijing (Feng 2002). Taking place only three years after the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the so-called "Gang of Four" in 1976, and one year after the rise of Deng Xiaoping to power in 1978, this meeting marks the transition in China's dance development from the Mao period into the Reform Era.

The actions that Siqintariha calls for in her speech are consistent with the Chinese Communist Party's historical strategy of gaining power through the representation and recognition of minority groups. As Thomas Mullaney (2010) argues in *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, the PRC offered the most extensive political representation of minority ethnic groups of any regime in Chinese history (Mullaney 2010: 120). Compared to all three other ruling groups in China in the twentieth-century -- the Qing dynasty, Sun Yatsen's Republican government, and the Nationalist regime under Chiang Kai-shek -- the Communist Party made by far the strongest effort to recognize ethnic minority political and cultural rights (121). Recognizing minority political rights was a central strategy to the Communist Party's consolidation of power in the 1940s and 50s, as Katherine Kaup (2000) demonstrates in *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China*. New ethnic minority identities, such as the Zhuang, were actively created by the Party in the 1950s, and existing ethnic minority identities, such as the Mongolian and Tibetan, were encouraged and given official representation in Party activities. Rather than aiming to strengthen local ties, however, the strategy behind these early policies was to transfer the loyalty of ethnic minority groups from localities to the greater Chinese nation-state. "The Zhuang were offered a variety of preferential policies to gain their loyalty and to ingratiate them politically, culturally, and economically into the Chinese state," Kaup writes. "Early CCP policy toward the Zhuang [...] was designed to weaken localist tendencies among the southwestern peoples" (8).

One important way in which the Chinese Communist Party established its control over minority groups, while at the same time offering them increased representation and preferential policies, was by positioning itself as the only legitimate definer of ethnic minority status, culture, and identity. As Mullaney shows in his examination of the 1954 Ethnic Classification (*minzu shibie* 民族识别) carried out in Yunnan Province, researchers and government officials engaged in "participant transformation" and "persuasion work" to impose new state-defined ethnic categories and identities on China's minority citizens. Between the 1953-54 census, which showed 400 potential ethnic categories, and the end of the 1954 Classification, which narrowed the categories to 56 nation-wide, numerous ethnic minority classifications had disappeared, and new ones had been created. Thus, in the case of new ethnic categories, the state took on the role of an internal colonizer, forcefully teaching its citizens how to identify, name, and even experience their ethnic and cultural status as members of a new political body. "Non-Han citizens in the post-Classification period have thus been the subject of two state-led programs of nationalization: one geared toward 'becoming Chinese,' and the other toward becoming Achang, Bai, Lisu, Wa, Yi, Zhuang, and so forth," Mullaney writes (13). With the help of researchers, local government authorities, and cultural workers, the Chinese state imposed a new system of ethnic minority classification on its population -- the "Fifty-Six *Minzu* Model," using what Mullaney calls ethnotaxonomic "strategies of closure" (90) and "social engineering projects" (134).

The making of Chinese ethnic minority dance has been an important part of the state's "engineering" of ethnic identity and culture in the People's Republic of China, through its implementation of a new "politics of aesthetics" for the performance of ethnic minority culture (Rancière 2004). Chinese minority ethnic dance makes possible new arrangements of space, time, and activity that encourage members of ethnic minority groups to relearn how to experience their own culture. Through the practice of ethnic minority dance training and performance, ethnic minority groups are identified with particular cultural symbols and personalities that are often simplified, essentialized, and stereotyped. Furthermore, because of the

set of methods used to make these dance forms, dance practitioners experience the forms as highly authentic and deeply meaningful. Even in cases where a particular minority ethnic identity predates the 1954 Classification -- as with Mongolian identity -- the state inserts itself into the process of ethnic experience and identification by positioning itself as the arbiter of authenticity. As discussed in Chapter Four, Chinese dance created in the People's Republic of China employs a dialectical epistemology in which both reality and tradition are understood as dynamic, changing entities whose continued existence depends on enlightened intervention and active remaking. When employed in the making of Chinese ethnic minority dance, this approach encourages dancers to seek out cultural authenticity through a combination of empirical experience and creative innovation. New dances are invented, celebrated, and canonized under the support and supervision of the state, and when interpreted through the dialectical epistemology, these new dances are seen to be highly representative of minority ethnic culture.

The making of Chinese ethnic minority dance is not a simple process of the "Chinese state," as a monolithic entity, imposing its vision of culture and identity on minority groups. As Louisa Schein (2000) has demonstrated in *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*, ethnic identity is a negotiated process in which multiple forces, motivations, and players are involved in an ongoing series of everyday performances that, overtime, shape their lives, experiences, and identities. Together, these ongoing activities make up what Schein calls "the work of cultural production" (17). Miao create their own versions of ethnic practice and identity through a series of temporally distinct performances, each of which is shaped by a particular set of circumstances. While the state is often strongly present as a structuring force in these activities, it cannot be identified with any single entity or position. In many cases, as with practitioners of Chinese ethnic dance, an ongoing exchange takes place between members of ethnic minority groups and the representatives of state institutions, discourses, and cultural practices. In some cases, because ethnic minority subjectivities are produced in the context of a Chinese national culture dominated by the hegemonic presence of the Communist Party, members of minority groups themselves learn to see no distinction between supporting the Party and representing one's ethnic group.⁵¹

Because Chinese ethnic dance was supported and developed as a professional field for the first time under Chinese Communist Party leadership, many practitioners of Chinese ethnic dance possess the type of subjectivity just described: they experience the protection of their own cultural tradition as directly related to, and inseparable from the support of the Party. Regardless of their strategic motivations and contributions to an often violent state monopoly on the representation of ethnic minority culture, many practitioners of Chinese ethnic dance see the Party's ethnic policies of the 1950s as a positive force for the protection and promotion of ethnic minority culture in dance. In her 1979 speech, cited above, Siqintariha calls on the state to return to these policies of the 1950s and to serve an even larger role in promoting the advancement of ethnic minority art practice. As an ethnic minority actively seeking the aid of the state in the protection of her own culture, Siqintariha here embodies the ultimate success of the state's project of nationalization through internal colonization: she at once embodies the internally colonized ethnic group calling on the state to provide development, equality, and cultural preservation, Siqintariha, and the state itself. It is through the work of ethnic minority leaders like herself, who embraced the views, practice, and culture of the Party in their own work of

⁵¹ Obvious political dissent by ethnic minority groups has also occurred.

remaking minority culture, that the state's ethnic minority policies have achieved their greatest impact.

In this chapter, I examine the state-mediated, minority-led work of cultural production through which Mongolian ethnic identity is produced in ethnic dance in the People's Republic of China. Beginning with a biographical sketch of Siqintariha, I show how early state-sponsored institutions for dance training and promotion were instrumental in the cultivation of a generation of ethnic minority dancers and choreographers who saw themselves as innovators and pioneers in the protection and development of minority culture. Next, I discuss the shift that occurred in later generations of Mongolian dancers, exemplified by two female Mongolian dancers Modegema (b. 1941) and Geganshanda (b. 1959). While Modegema represents the professional ideal of making Mongolian dance simultaneously "reflective of life" and "artistically sophisticated," Geganshanda shows how experiences of performing and learning Mongolian dance produce new ethnic identities, understood as an authentic experiences with deep cultural roots. Finally, reflecting on my field research in Chinese ethnic dance classrooms and performance spaces in China in 2007-09, I show how Mongolian ethnic identity continues to be remade through a philosophy of "protection through development" in the teaching, research, and performance of Mongolian dance in China in the early twenty-first century. Throughout the chapter, I show how the dance classroom and the dance stage form two important spaces for the expansion of a "politics of aesthetics" of ethnic minority cultural appreciation. In these spaces, dancers experience and participate in the dialectical epistemology in which art and life are understood to be mutually impacting. In their practices of Mongolian dance, Party legitimacy and ethnic minority identity are simultaneously generated through affective experiences of state-mediated forms of ethnic minority culture.

Participating in a combination of real and virtual visceral experiences, dancers use two central artistic and cultural images as foci of aesthetic experience in the making of Mongolian dance: first, the grassland, and second, the "typical" Mongolian man or woman. Through the embodied cultural work of Chinese ethnic dance, these two key cultural symbols are reified and naturalized into markers of a state-mediated version of authentic Mongolian ethnic identity that comes to characterize Mongolian dance in China from the 1950s to the early twenty-first century. It is through reference to these cultural symbols that dancers cultivate affective connection to Mongolian identity in the post-1949 era, and in some cases their experiences as practitioners of Mongolian dance lead them to developing stronger emotional connections to Mongolian culture than they might have had without participation in state-mediated dance work. Likewise, it is through reference to these same cultural symbols that Mongolians express dissent and resistance against forms of state-perpetrated violence against Mongolian culture. By reacting against the environmental degradation of the grassland, and by offering new interpretations of "typical" Mongolian personalities, practitioners of Mongolian dance in China enact new political and cultural strategies through established forms of dance practice.

By combining historical and ethnographic sources, this chapter aims, like the entirety of this dissertation, to offer an account of the development of dance practices in China during the entire period of the People's Republic. Rather than highlighting the changes in China's cultural, political, and social milieu in the post-Cultural Revolution period, I show important continuities between the post-1978 era and the early decades of the People's Republic. In the development of Chinese dance in the People's Republic of China, the Reform Era can be seen as an era of returning to Party policies and approaches from the 1950s and early 1960s that were largely reversed during the Cultural Revolution. In both Chinese folk and ethnic dance and Chinese

gudianwu, the Cultural Revolution brought about increased Westernization and Han-centrism in dance productions and training, and the older generation of dance leaders saw this as fundamentally antithetical to the practices and approaches of the 1950s and 60s, which they personally helped pioneer. In the post-1978 era, older dance practitioners like Siqintariha who survived the violence of the late 1960s and 1970s regained their position as leaders in the dance field. As in the 1950s, they used a language of “development” and “modernization” to return to many of the older approaches of the 1950s and 60s, which they saw as both more truly “Chinese” and more true to “Party policy” than the approaches taken in the Cultural Revolution. The Reform Era witnessed a large-scale movement to research, collect, and rebuild authentic Chinese dance forms, and in doing so it once again established the Chinese state as the ultimate protector and promoter of Chinese culture.

Siqintariha: The First Generation of Ethnic Dance Cadres

Siqintariha frequently states in her essays and memoirs that she “grew up together with the People’s Republic.” She was born in 1932, during the height of Communist Party political consolidation, and she began her career as a dancer in 1948, on the eve of Communist Party victory and establishment of the People’s Republic. After age fifteen, Siqintariha received her education exclusively in state-sponsored schools and training programs, and at age twenty-one she had become one of many young Mongolian members of the Chinese Communist Party. As a young performer in the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe during her late teenage years, Siqintariha received recognition as an emerging female icon of Chinese Mongolian dance. Between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four, Siqintariha enjoyed opportunities to participate in free state-sponsored professional dance training with nationally and internationally renowned teachers in Beijing. By age twenty-three, she had travelled abroad to Hungary, North Korea, and Poland on three different Chinese youth cultural ambassador programs, even winning international recognition and a first place award for her performance of a Mongolian folk dance at the International Youth Gathering Festival in Poland. When she returned to Inner Mongolia at age twenty-four to perform as a solo dancer in the Inner Mongolia Dance Troupe, Siqintariha apparently felt she was devoting her life to the cause of “developing her own ethnic dance vocation,” thanks to the opportunities that were, in her view, made possible entirely by the support of the Communist Party (Wulan 2008: 387).

In a speech made in 1982, later published in 1983, entitled “Protect and Develop Folk Dance Art,” Siqintariha rehearses the well-worn Party line, learned through her lifelong participation in state-mediated ethnic dance work and Communist Party culture, that the contemporary flourishing of Mongolian ethnic dance culture was made possible by the all-important support of the Party. It was only with the post-1949 establishment of professional dance troupes, Siqintariha argues, that the protection and development of Mongolian dance was fully carried out. She writes,

Having a guaranteed number of professional dance teams is very important to the development and protection of folk dance. However, in the history of the feudal nobility and aristocracy, no effective measures were ever taken for the organized establishment of dance art. In that very long-lasting feudal society, there never developed professional teams for Mongolian dance... [which] seriously influenced the inheritance and development of folk dance. After Liberation, under the care of the Party’s ethnic policy, the Mongolian ethnicity finally emerged from suffering,

threw off the ignorant, backward life, and, together with its other brother ethnicities hand in hand, shoulder-to-shoulder established our great socialist nation. The sleeping grassland regained consciousness, the ancient culture regained life. Under the attention and leadership of the Party and the nation, professional dance teams were established, and the work of inheriting and developing the excellent cultural heritage of one's own ethnicity and of rescuing and protecting folk dance art launched widely in Inner Mongolia. (Siqintariha 2008: 19)

Here, relying on a familiar discourse of the Communist Party ethnic policy developed in the 1950s, Siqintariha describes the Party as a savior of Mongolian traditional culture. Employing the commonly used phrases “development and protection,” “inheritance and development,” and “rescuing and protecting,” she references the dialectical epistemology of Party ideology as it is applied to ethnic minority culture. Just as Chinese traditional culture as a whole is said to require constant protection and remaking of the enlightened cultural vanguard, the protection and inheritance of Chinese minority culture too is seen as requiring the enlightened guidance of the Party and the nation.

Siqintariha's early dance training and performance experience included exposure to a wide range of dance forms, and it upheld the principle that traditional culture, while retaining its cultural essence, should also be capable of adaptation, innovation, and creativity. Siqintariha's first important dance role, for which she was selected to travel to Hungary as part of the China Youth Delegation in 1949, was in the work *Hope* (《希望》) choreographed by China's revolutionary dance pioneer Wu Xiaobang. Wu was best known for his adaptation of German modern dance (to which he was exposed in Japan in the 1930s) to Chinese revolutionary performance, creating a new genre he called “New Dance.” *Hope* is described as “a female duet [...] expressing the Mongolian ethnicity's expectant anticipation for a beautiful future” (Wulan 2008: 381). A photograph of the piece shows two women dressed in floor-length adaptations of Mongolian style robes with their arms outstretched, upward posture, and long braided pigtailed; it is a clear mix of Mongolian, modern, and revolutionary elements.

During three years of study in Beijing, Siqintariha studied with international teachers and participated in the creation of new Chinese dance forms, based on the idea of blending research with innovation. In 1951-52, Siqintariha was one of several members of the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe selected to participate in the Dance Cadre Training Class held at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, led by the world-renowned Korean dancer Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi (Cui Chengxi). Like Wu Xiaobang, Ch'oe created her own dance style through a blending of German modern dance studied in Japan, research into traditional forms of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese performance, and her own invention (Van Zile 2001). Under Ch'oe's teaching, Siqintariha studied ballet, New Dance, Southern Dance, and Korean dance (Tian and Li 2005: 478), and upon returning to Inner Mongolia, she performed Ch'oe's well-known Korean dance duet entitled *Mr. Chai and the Village Girl* (《柴郎与村女》). In 1954-56, Siqintariha was part of the first class of students admitted to the Beijing Dance Academy, where she studied ballet with Soviet instructors, the new experimental Chinese *gudianwu* curriculum, and multiple forms of Chinese folk dance.

When Siqintariha returned to the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe in 1956, she embarked on a project of creating a new dance style that would project “the new modern image of the Mongolian woman” (Wulan 2008: 393). One of the most important dance works in this

genre is the female solo piece *Zhongwan Wu* (《盅碗舞》).⁵² In *Zhongwan Wu*, the dancer balances a stack of porcelain bowls on her head, while executing gliding, bouncing, and spinning movements across the stage. In each of her hands she holds a tiny porcelain drink bowl, which she waves up and down in fluttering movements with her arms. As she dances, the performer holds her chest high, maintaining a straight and slightly backward posture, and she switches her shoulders forward and back with the beat of the music. Siqintariha adapted this piece from an earlier version choreographed by Jia Zuoguang, entitled *Dingdeng Wu* (《顶灯舞》), in which the dancer knelt on the stage holding an oil lamp on her forehead. After a performance of *Dingdeng Wu* received a “lukewarm” reception among audience members, Siqintariha was given the task to revise the piece. She substituted the lamp for a stack of bowls, added the small drink bowls, and created a “completely new movement vocabulary [...] portraying the new era Mongolian woman’s dignified, innate, passionate, bold and uninhibited personality” (Wulan 2008: 392).

The connection between Siqintariha’s commitment to Party politics and her connection to Mongolian ethnic identity and culture is complex, and it is difficult to say how they impacted one another. Siqintariha was born to an aristocratic Mongolian family living in an ethnically diverse area of northeast China. Her paternal grandfather was a descendent of a relative of Genghis Khan’s, and her maternal grandfather was fluent in four written languages, including Mongolian, Manchurian, Han, and Tibetan. From childhood, Siqintariha learned Mongolian folk songs and traditional stories from her family members, many of whom were skilled musicians and artists. One account of Siqintariha’s life states that when she left home, at age fifteen, to “participate in the revolution” (*canjia geming* 参加革命), she did so in an act of defiance against her parents, who apparently opposed her decision. To convince her parents to let her join her friend at the leftist Inner Mongolia Youth School in Wulanhaote, Siqintariha reportedly went on a hunger strike and finally snuck away without her father’s consent. Although her support for the Party took her away from her family, once she was at the youth school, Siqintariha was taught to promote her Mongolian heritage in a new way, by “opposing the Han-centrism of the Nationalist Party and endorsing the ethnic policy of the Chinese Communist Party” (Wulan 2008: 378). Later, when she studied at the Beijing Dance Academy, Siqintariha purportedly refused a position in the Central Ethnicities Song and Dance Troupe in order to return to Inner Mongolia to pursue the development of Mongolian dance.

Whatever her motivations for leaving home at age fifteen to “join the revolution,” it is likely that Siqintariha’s early experiences at the party school in Wulanhaote deeply influenced her lifelong political affiliation with the Party. Like many young people who joined in the communist movement in the 1940s and 50s, Siqintariha often experienced her commitment to leftist politics as a contentious, rather than hegemonic, position. In some cases, as with her disagreement with her parents, her support of the ideas and approaches promoted by the Party led to confrontations with members of her local community who possessed differing views. What constituted the “politically correct” choice, or the most beneficial action for the support of Mongolian culture was not always clear. In 1957, after returning from her studies at the Beijing Dance Academy, Siqintariha was labelled a “Rightist” by members of the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe after she tried to implement training techniques she had learned in Beijing. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, Siqintariha, like most practitioners of Chinese dance of her

⁵² See a video of *Zhongwan Wu*, performed by a later dancer Modegema here: <http://video.sina.com.cn/v/b/25401934-1576778683.html>

generation, was attacked. “[A]t the prime of her artistic career [...she was] was forced to leave the stage before her time, for a period of ten years” (Wulan 2008: 399). Within the context of the Cultural Revolution, Siqintariha represented a set of aesthetic practices and political views that were no longer considered progressive enough, and for which she suffered years of ostracism, criticism, and suffering. While Siqintariha’s views and approaches are strongly impacted by state-mediated national political culture, this culture underwent significant changes during her own lifetime, with the result that she does not necessarily experience her position as conforming with a clear political consensus.

In 1976, when Siqintariha performed, at age forty-four, her representative work *Zhongwan Wu* on the stage of the Spring Festival Gala, this marked the rehabilitation of a generation of Chinese dancers like herself, as well as a new movement to re-legitimize the Party through its support of ethnic minority culture. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, Siqintariha and the surviving members of her generation regained their previous status as leaders in the field of Chinese ethnic dance. While some older dancers who survived the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution never returned to the stage, either because of disenchantment with Party politics or the dance profession as whole, or because of injury, changes in life course, or other reasons, those who did attained a status akin to that of saints. Throughout the Reform Era, these “old dance workers” had an enormous influence on the dance field, producing award-winning dance works, teaching as esteemed professors in dance schools and performance troupes, serving as judges in dance competitions, and publishing dance training curricula. The aesthetic and political ideals that these first-generation cadres promoted in the Reform Era (after 1978) were in many ways consistent with what they had studied and helped create in the 1950s and 60s, often to the chagrin of the younger generations. Now, due to age, experience, and the esteem gained through having remained dedicated to their profession despite years of pain and struggle, ethnic cadres like Siqintariha who “grew up with the Party” hold extremely powerful positions as co-legitimizers of Party policy and ideology. Chinese dance in the PRC, and the forms of ethnic identity it helped to enable, are in many ways a legacy of the particular artistic and political commitments and experiences of a single generation whose personal biographies have spanned the Mao and the post-Mao eras. Their personal status within the field helps to create at least a perceived sense of continuity between the early People’s Republic and the Reform Era, and this perceived continuity helps to continue the legitimation of the Party and its role in the representation of minority ethnic culture.

Modegema: Embodying the Mongolian

In the wake of Siqintariha’s generation, those who entered the field of Chinese ethnic dance in the late 1950s entered a system that was in large part already established. Their relationship to Chinese ethnic dance was quite different from that of Siqintariha’s generation, and rather being remembered as creators of something new, they instead came to represent the highest achievement of a newly naturalized set of cultural symbols, professional techniques, and aesthetic ideals. Modegema, a woman of Mongolian ethnicity born in central Inner Mongolia in 1941, is a member of this generation. She joined the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe Training Program in 1956, at age fifteen, the year Siqintariha returned from her training at the Beijing Dance Academy. Unlike Siqintariha, Modegema grew up in a poor family. Her biography, published in 1987, emphasizes her difficult youth, stating that she was raised by her old grandmother and had to work as a child herder, with “bare feet and tattered clothes, facing the harsh environment of the grassland all on her own” (Zhang et al. 1987). Unlike Siqintariha’s

biography, which emphasizes her independent spirit, her commitment to the Party, and her innovative choreographic practices, Modegema's highlights her deep connection to "Mongolian traditional culture" and her endurance in demanding physical training.

Modegema's biography and early works illustrate the emergence of several important elements of Chinese Mongolian ethnic dance, all of which continued to define the form when I conducted fieldwork in 2007-09. First, two of the most important cultural symbols of Mongolian dance -- the grassland and the "typical" Mongolian woman -- had, during Modegema's rise to renown as a famous Mongolian dancer, become reified as naturally existing artifacts of Mongolian traditional culture. In her performance of *Zhongwan Wu*, for example, Modegema is described as embodying the essence of the grassland, as well as her own cultural essence as an authentic Mongolian woman. Rather than inventing these new symbols and their representative aesthetic forms, Modegema is understood to be embodying them, inheriting them, and demonstrating their realness. Second, in Modegema's training and development, her experience is described as one of strict dedication to the mastering of dance techniques, within the structured context of the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe. Unlike Siqintariha, who patches together a program of dance education through engagement multiple different styles, institutions, and teachers, Modegema studies "Mongolian dance" understood as an established genre with set boundaries and rules. Finally, as is demonstrated in Modegema's performance in the 1964 state-sponsored dance spectacle *The East is Red* (《东方红》), Modegema practices Mongolian dance as part of a clear politicized representation of China as a multi-ethnic state under the leadership of the Communist Party. As a lead dancer in the China National Song and Dance Ensemble (*Dongfang Gewutuan* 东方歌舞团), Modegema leaves Inner Mongolia to become a representative of Mongolian culture on the national stage.

When Siqintariha adapted *Dingdeng Wu* to create *Zhongwan Wu*, replacing the oil lamps with the porcelain bowls, adding the drink bowls, and creating a new movement vocabulary for what her biographer calls the "new image of the Mongolian woman," it was Modegema's body that served as the medium for her creation. Siqintariha was nearly thirty and serving as the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe's Dance Team Assistant Director. Modegema was nineteen, and a recent graduate from a dancer-in-training to a young dance performer in the Troupe. Modegema was selected to perform the solo piece, and Siqintariha worked with her to adapt it. After Modegema first performed the piece in Inner Mongolia in 1961, the piece was selected by the Central Ministry of Culture to represent China in the Seventh World Youth Gathering Festival held in Finland. Like Siqintariha in the 1955 Festival, Modegema won a gold prize for her performance. The following is a description, from Modegema's biography, of her award-winning performance of *Zhongwan Wu* at the National Opera House in Helsinki:

To a piece of lively, melodious music, a young and beautiful Chinese Mongolian girl enters the stage. On her head sits a stack of porcelain bowls. Her two arms beat up and down like the wings of a bird. Striding in rapid but light steps, she floats across the stage like a puff of rosy clouds across the sky (Zhang 1987: 1).

Here, Modegema is compared to natural features of the grassland -- a gliding bird and rosy clouds. No mention is made of the "new era Mongolia woman," but Modegema is seen as embodying Mongolian culture in its natural representation -- the grassland. "If you had never seen the boundless expanse of Inner Mongolia's great grassland," her biographers write, "you would not be able to understand Modegema's dancing; likewise, without seeing the tempered

forcefulness, unadorned simplicity, and sublime beauty of her dance movements, one cannot understand the customs and colors of the great grassland” (Tian 1987: 1).

Throughout their description of Modegema’s performances, her biographers argue that the power of her dancing draws from her experience of the grassland, understood as the foundation of Mongolian culture. Having been born to a poor family of Mongolian herders and herself worked herding animals on the grassland for a short part of her childhood, Modegema has, they argue, a unique access to the types of folk customs and lifestyles most frequently depicted in Mongolian dance: wearing Mongolian robes and embroidered boots, herding sheep, watching wolves and birds on the grassland, and experiencing the changes of season and their effects on the land. Her character and spirit, they argue, are in part forged by the grassland. For this reason, they write, she carries the grassland with her, draws on it for inspiration, exudes it in her movements, and even visits it in reverie during her performances.

The grassland is beautiful, like a green ocean endowing the sons and daughters of the grassland with broad hearts. It is like a giant smelting furnace, forging one generation after another of Mongol heroes. It is full of the poetic charm of idyllic landscapes, molding the soul of the Mongolian ethnicity. Inside Modegema’s bosom there seems to play the ‘baa! baa!’ of the lamb’s bleat, giving her limitless strength. She is like a soaring eagle, really on stage spreading her wings, spinning at full speed into the wind. Suddenly, a flood of applause and cheers gives her a shock. From the ‘grassland’ she returns to the stage, again calm and collected, and continues performing (Zhang 1987: 2).

Following their logic of folk expertise, the authors describe Modegema as drawing inspiration for her performance from experiences of the grassland, as metaphorical sounds of bleating lambs in her bosom, and as the movement and feeling of a bird soaring on the wind. They even suggest that as she dances she is reliving her experiences on the grassland, and she is startled back from these memories by the shock of applause and cheers. Insofar as Modegema has the grassland inside her, they insist, she can call upon it to lend expertise, emotional depth, and artistic value to her dance performance.

Apart from her so-called “folk” expertise of life on the grassland, Modegema is also described as an embodiment of the strict physical training of the professional dancer. Like most dancers who entered the professional dance field in China during the 1950s, Modegema studied dance as a student in a boarding school program within an established song and dance troupe. As a student in the troupe’s training program, which would have been free to her and aimed at a career in professional dance performance, she received full-time training in music, ballet, Mongolian ethnic dance, theater, language, history, and a range of other subjects. In their description of Modegema’s dance training experience, they focus on her intensive professionalism and dedication to building correct technique through mastery of her physical body. They write,

In her student training period, Modegema stood out. She quickly mastered the basic skills that she studied and was especially hardworking, [so] she earned relatively high marks. For this reason, she was pleased with herself. However, when she began receiving standard and strict training from Mongolian experts, only then did she come to appreciate the harshness and difficulty of approaching

the spirit of dance art. It is not enough to be industriousness and knowledgeable; one must also have perseverance and devotion. Otherwise, one can forget even about passing through the door into its real study, not to mention climbing to the highest achievements in dance art. [Her teachers reminds her:]

‘Such relaxed muscles -- is that beautiful? Use force!’

‘Again! Again!’ (Zhang 1987: 36)

In their insistence on the physical rigor of Modegema’s dance training, her biographers emphasize the professionalization of Mongolian dance that occurred in the 1950s. By describing the “harshness and difficulty” of dance training, the writers reveal here the post-1950s professional ideal in Chinese ethnic dance: the idea that to be a skilled ethnic dancer, one must master both cultural inspiration and professional training.

Insisting that folk and ethnic dancers be professionally trained, according to nationally-standardized conceptions of physical rigor and excellence, is one of the most important ways in which the Party inserted itself into the process of making and representing ethnic minority dance culture. While dancers such as Modegema were thought to develop folk expertise through personal experience in the traditional settings of Mongolian life, the only way to prove themselves as deserving representatives of their ethnic dance forms in the context of Chinese national culture was to also develop the expertise of the academy. As Modegema’s biographers show, the acquisition of academy expertise requires extreme physical discipline, and this discipline becomes a sign of professional dedication and worthiness. In their description of Modegema’s training for *Zhongwan Wu*, they recount how, to achieve the desired “floating” characteristic of the stepping action required for the piece, Modegema practiced the technique painstakingly day after day, pushing herself to the point of physical exhaustion and injury. They write,

Due to the repeated high speed movement and chaffing, she more than once wore out the inside ankle bones of her boots, leaving the flesh covered in black scars. Her tendons went into spasms, her legs became swollen, but she ignored it. Her feet became so swollen that she could not remove her boots, so she just went and wore her boots to sleep. She silently suffered the sickness and injury without telling anyone. Finally, it became so serious that she suffered long-term amenorrhea, low blood sugar, and edema, so that when her boss and colleagues found out they sent her straight to the hospital (Zhang 1987: 46).

This vignette, the whole of which is adulatory in tone, celebrates Modegema’s dedication to the professional standards of her field. Through her willingness to undergo such hardship, her biographers argue, Modegema demonstrated the persevering spirit of a serious dancer. It is this spirit, they argue, and the talent developed through it, that Modegema earned her position as a star of Mongolian ethnic dance.

Throughout their discussion of Modegema’s training, her biographers treat Mongolian ethnic dance as a bounded entity whose content and limits, though malleable and dynamic, are clearly defined. In their discussion of the making of *Zhongwan Wu*, Modegema’s biographers point out that the fluttering steps used throughout the piece employ the swift *yuanchang* step technique adapted from Chinese indigenous theater. Because this step was not part of the Mongolian dance curriculum, they argue, nor was it taught in the form of ballet at the Troupe, Modegema was unfamiliar with it and had to learn it especially for this piece. The *yuanchang*

step was part of the *gudianwu* curriculum that Siqintariha would have learned at the Beijing Dance Academy, and it is likely that the addition of the technique came from Siqintariha's changes. Rather than treating the addition of the *yuanchang* step as part of an overall creative process in which Mongolian dance took shape through a combination of multiple factors, they highlight the unfamiliarity of the step. "For Modegema, who had only received training in Mongolian folk dance and ballet, and had never even been exposed to *xiqu* dance training, it was certainly not easy!" (Zhang 1987). Even as this analysis celebrates the creativity and innovation produced through the mixing of styles -- "'*yuanchang*' is supremely suited the needs of the *Zhongwan Wu* piece," they write -- it also reifies Mongolian dance as a recognizable entity.

Modegema's performance of *Zhongwan Wu* in the massive state propaganda song and dance spectacle *The East is Red* demonstrates the direct way in which ethnic minority dance serves national ideology, reinforcing the approved relationship between ethnic minority groups and the Party-state. Modegema appears as the lead dancer in the Mongolian dance segment of the ethnic minority section of the performance. Together with dancers representing Uygur, Tibetan, and other ethnic minority groups, Modegema's performance produces a joyful, harmonious image of ethnic minority groups gathering in national unity under the supreme leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Here, the ethnic minorities represented in this segment stand in for all of the officially recognized fifty-six minority groups in China. Apart from naturalizing the ethnic groups as identifiable cultural entities, the performance also serves to impart a specific message about the successes of the Party's ethnicity policies. By demonstrating their apparent protection of diverse cultural traditions, represented on the stage in bright costumes, music, and dance forms, the dances serve as proof of the cultural freedoms offered to ethnic minority groups under Communist rule.

Mongolian dance is the first in the series of ethnic minority dances in this scene, and it follows immediately after a choral piece entitled "Without the Communist Party, There Would be No New China." Wearing a Mongolian-style dress, holding small bowls in her hands and balancing a stack of larger bowls on her head, Modegema represents not the "new-era Mongolian woman" but rather Mongolian cultural tradition carefully "protected and developed" under the nurturing care of state policy and support. Behind Modegema on the stage is a painted backdrop of Tian'anmen Square, and directly above her head is a portrait of Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Sixteen female dancers join Modegema, also wearing Mongolian-style costumes and performing Mongolian bowl dance movements. Behind them, a group of more than forty performers, many dressed in minority and regional costumes, sway in the background. The dancing is accompanied by a solo song performed by singer Caidanzhuoma, who sings a folk style song with the following lyrics:

From the grassland [I] come to Tian'anmen Square,
Holding up a full glass to sing a song of praise,
Giving thanks to the great Communist Party,
Wishing Chairman Mao a long life.
The heroic motherland stands towering in the East,
Like a rising sun gloriously radiant.
All the ethnic brothers happily reunited in a single hall,

Celebrating our ‘turning over’⁵³ and ‘Liberation’⁵⁴!
Ah-ah-aaaah-ah Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah Aaaaaah!

The final line of “ah’s” incorporates a special method of vocal echoing that is associated with traditional grassland singing, and it, like the costumes and dancing styles, is meant to represent Mongolian ethnic tradition. As the line of “ah’s” comes to an end, the music suddenly picks up into a fast beat of galloping horses, and Modegema leads the dancers in a climactic, exciting dance that features the signature movements of the piece -- the rapid “floating” *yuanchang* steps, shimmying shoulder movements both standing and leaning backwards from a kneeling position, and the bird-like flowing beating of the arms. As her dance ends, the music shifts rhythm to a Xinjiang *mukamu* and a group of dancers and drummers enter the stage to start the performance of the Uygur minority segment.

The spectacle of diverse ethnic and regional groups joined together onstage joyously performing their different “local cultures” is a staple of socialist Chinese performance that continues in the early twenty-first century. The main difference in the works performed in the early 2000s is a sense of increased technological and aesthetic commercialization -- younger, thinner dancers, fancier stage sets and lights, more decadent costumes -- and a fading away of older political symbols such as Mao’s portrait and song lyrics about “turning over” and “liberation.” The overt political message of the works has not changed much, however; neither has their overall feeling. Like the works of the 1950s and 60s, works of folk and ethnic dance in the early twentieth-century are energetic, colorful, and “representative” -- through the use of recognizable examples of folk and regional dance forms, they aim to represent the ethnic diversity of the nation, reaffirming the ideology of the diverse Chinese nation-state. In Modegema’s 1964 performance, we see how dance styles created through a process of invention and experimentation came to represent ethnic identities and their cultural traditions, usually in service of promoting specific agendas and interests of national unity under the Communist Party.

“Protect and Develop”: The Politics of Inheritance

The dialectical relationship between folk expertise and professional dance training that is apparent in Modegema’s biography is part of the larger epistemological paradox and politics of Chinese ethnic dance “inheritance” in which the “protection” of ethnic minority culture is thought to be only possible through its continual improvement and development. The title of Siqintariha’s essay “Protect and Develop Folk Dance Art” conveys this ideal through the pairing of the two key terms “protect and develop” (保护与发展), which appear frequently in Chinese ethnic dance theory and practice. In his book on contemporary Chinese dance culture, dance critic and scholar Jin Hao (2007) explains the meaning of the phrase “protect and develop” in the context of his discussion of a major Chinese folk and ethnic dance gala put on by the Beijing Dance Academy in 2004. He writes,

⁵³ *Fanshen*, or “turning over,” is a term used during the era of land reform to describe the changing of social stature of peasants and workers when they revolted against landlords and claimed land and property of their own.

⁵⁴ *Jiefang*, or “Liberation” is the standard term for the Communist Party take-over in China.

In the dance works *Li Taiyang Zui Jin de Ren* 《离太阳最近的人》,⁵⁵ *Reba Bu Mu* 《热巴卜姆》,⁵⁶ *Yuan Shang Cao* 《原上草》,⁵⁷ etc., ethnic minority-themed dance pieces, we see the choreographers have worked hard in protecting ethnic traditions, striving to make each ethnic group's authentic flavor feel it has “made a home in” the creative works of academic style folk dance. This kind of taking and leaving really allows us, throughout the evening-length gala, to feel the dual-layered cultural significance of the term “develop and protect.” (Jin 2007: 43)

Jin argues that the “develop and protect” ideal expresses the academic and creative orientation of Chinese folk and ethnic dance in China during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and it is the lasting theoretical foundation for the dance research discipline represented by the Beijing Dance Academy and China's entire professional dance system.

The phrases “authentic flavor” (*yuan zhi yuan wei* 原汁原味) and “academic style folk dance” (*xueyuan pai minjian wudao* 学院派民间舞到), introduced in Jin's discussion above, are important elements in the theoretical vocabulary of the protect and develop ideal in Chinese ethnic dance. The term “authentic flavor” can be literally translated as “original juice and original flavor/aroma.” It refers to the imagined core essence, sensibility, or aesthetic style of authentic ethnic or folk dance, that which conveys the cultural content of a dance work, particularly one thought to be associated either with ethnic minority culture or with rural life. In the following description, Jin gives an account of a dance piece from the same gala which he says preserves “authentic flavor” even while making innovations:

Feng Cai Mu Dan (《凤采牡丹》) uses the breaking down of connections in the stylistic language of Jiaozhou *yangge* folk dance along with transformations in movements to create the image of the piece, and on this foundation it strives for a unified overall style, rather than total innovation. At the appropriate times, it adds original folk dance language, also protecting the mutual harmonization of the folk dance's holistic style, even as it also pays close attention to the nuanced, vivid, and precise [creation of] a distinct characteristic language of the piece. (Jin 2007: 43)

“Academic style folk dance” is folk dance created within the context of the professional dance school, which, like the piece described above, uses folk and ethnic dance forms as the basis for innovative artistic expression. Exemplified by Modegema's performance style, academic style folk dance is folk dance created through a combination of folk expertise and professional training. Academic style folk dance uses material gathered through fieldwork, archival research, and apprenticeship with folk artistes (民间艺人) to create new forms of folk dance performed by professionally-trained dancers. It is usually contrasted with so-called “original environment folk dance” (*yuanshengtai minjian wudao* 原生太民间舞蹈), which emphasizes the use of non-professionally trained local performers and the maintenance of original forms. Whereas

⁵⁵ View a video here: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNzk2MTk5MDA=.html

⁵⁶ View a video here: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XOTA2MTk4MjA=.html

⁵⁷ View a video here: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XOTA1NzYyMTY=.html

academic style folk dance is associated with both state support and artistic quality, original environment folk dance is associated with both commercial performance and authentic folk traditions.

The creative logic of Chinese ethnic dance emphasizes a politics of inheritance in which the artistic innovation and development of ethnic culture in state-sponsored schools and performance troupes is understood as necessary for inheritance and continued protection of these forms. This approach, Jin argues, derives from a philosophical principle he calls “*tongbian* theory” (通变观, or “theory of going through change”), which informs much Chinese ethnic dance production. He writes,

It is on the basis of an understanding of “*tongbian* theory” that the people participating in the making of folk dance creation engage in deep analysis and research on traditional ethnic dance, making it become a foundation for research and a vehicle for seeking innovation and change, [and] hence seeking confirmation of themselves as the receivers (接受者) of folk dance, the carriers on (发扬者) of folk dance, and even more so the creators (创造者) of folk dance. They approach folk dance through selection and innovation, not only satisfying the standards of dance creation but at the same, and time even more so, to make dance art, in the midst of inheritance (继承), pursue the hidden and moving principles of development. (Jin 2007: 45)

According to the *tongbian* theory, practitioners of academic style folk dance not only help to preserve and inherit ethnic dance forms, through their innovation and development, they also help to, in some cases, return them to a more authentic form. This second part of change theory is what Jin calls “the recreation of tradition” (*chuantong zaizao* 传统再造), and it is one of the more controversial aspects of the academic style approach to folk dance. Jin writes,

The choreographers of the academic style folk dance made ethnic and folk dance movements return to the source, feel out anew its vestige image, grasp the movement’s most primitive rhythms, develop any and every possible movement potential, [and] in the end re-created its new image, deriving many new dance languages. Even as the choreographer completely follows nature, copies nature, and from it gains the primitive life force, [he or she is] at the same time finding a way to drive or control nature -- in safeguarding the authenticity of the movements, avoiding repeated use, in this way [one] activates the persistent newness of body language, [and] at the same time enriches folk dance language, achieves the uniqueness of the movements, and thus accomplishes the systematic project of “the recreation of tradition.” (Jin 2007: 43)

What Jin has described is the basic philosophy of artistic creation in academic style Chinese folk and ethnic dance. Since practitioners view themselves as both artists and cultural researchers, they view the work of ethnic dance choreography as a combination of innovation and inquiry into the deeper historical and cultural truths of the dances they seek to understand and recreate. In this sense they treat their work as a fusion of scholarly research, artistic creation, and cultural preservation.

One of the ways in which practitioners of Chinese ethnic dance justify the authenticity of their works is by insisting that the body is a medium for the accumulation, transmission, and expression of culture. In the logic of Chinese folk and ethnic dance, specific embodied rhythms, postures, gestures, and movements all contain cultural information that can be used to understand and preserve ways of life, sensibilities, and ways of interpreting the world. In the opening lines of *Chinese Folk Dance Culture*, a textbook used by graduate students, researchers and choreographers in the field of Chinese folk and ethnic dance, Beijing Dance Academy Professor Luo Xiongyan (2006) writes, “Folk dance is the inheritance of ethnic culture through the moving form; the dancer’s moving form is the essential foundation for exploring the principles of inheritance of dance culture” (1). Fieldwork is the most important way that dancers use the moving body as a medium for cultural research and creation. Performers, dance researchers, and choreographers in the People’s Republic of China have traditionally been expected to conduct fieldwork as the basis for their artistic creation, and the dancers I interviewed often spoke of these fieldwork experiences as the most creative and inspiring experiences of their entire careers in the dance field. By using their own moving bodies as tools for research, practitioners of Chinese folk and ethnic dance claim to have access to cultural knowledge of peoples and places often quite different from their own, and this access provides them with both artistic inspiration and representational legitimacy according to the logic of their field.

Apart from the legitimacy gained from embodied engagement with folk traditions, fieldwork also generates emotional legitimacy, according to Chinese dance practitioners. Put another way, practitioners of Chinese folk and ethnic dance argue that fieldwork allows them to develop deep emotional connection to the cultural traditions they represent and remake through dance, and that this emotional connection helps ensure their commitment to authentic understanding and recreation of tradition. Reflecting on his own experience and that of his colleagues, Luo (2006) writes,

Diverse nationalities, with their many kinds of style and performance forms, simple and unadorned popular customs and popular feelings, have attracted the attention of the masses of dance workers to enter deeply into the folk, conducting fieldwork and studying dance, throwing themselves in with full emotion and commitment. For the past half century, shaped by folk culture and the simple popular customs of the various ethnic groups, the author has, from a student of folk dance transformed himself into a researcher of folk culture. At the same time, [the author] has had a very deep feeling that, since our generation has been lucky enough to study the folk dances of each ethnic group, we should systematically research the Chinese cultural spirit and ethnic aesthetic sensibilities that they embody and express, creating the complementary new discipline of “Chinese Folk Dance Culture.” (Luo 2006: 1)

Luo describes himself as being “shaped by” folk customs and culture and being part of a generation of dance workers who “enter deeply into the folk [...] throwing themselves in with full emotion and commitment.” The phrase “entering deeply into the folk” (深入民间) is one of the most frequently used descriptions for the ethical orientation of fieldwork in Chinese folk and ethnic dance. “To enter deeply into the folk” (深入民间) is to take seriously and sincerely the challenge of seeking to experience the essence traditional culture, by spending time among the people whose culture one hopes to “preserve and develop” through dance. It means developing

bodily knowledge and emotional connection with folk customs and sensibilities, so that one can understand not only the dance movements, but the way of life in which they are embedded and from which they draw flavor and meaning.

Qian Dongfan (b. 1962), a choreographer and former dance performer of Hani ethnicity at the Yunnan Provincial Song and Dance Troupe, describes his own fieldwork experiences with great detail and sentiment. As a graduate of the professional dance program at the Yunnan Province Literature and Arts School, a recipient of a three-year extension studies degree in dance from the Central University of Nationalities in Beijing, and a national Level One performer, Qian is a successful participant in the institutions of academic style folk dance in China. When speaking of different approaches to making dance works, Qian shows a clear preference for fieldwork, and he speaks disdainfully of dancers who create works without this component. Qian states,

You know those beautiful sword dance movements in the piece I was just talking about? Those were all things [the choreographers] discovered when they went to conduct fieldwork in the countryside. Those were *collected* during fieldwork (采风采的).⁵⁸ Now many people just gather a few images or things from the Internet and make a piece, but it's not the same.

Unlike the process of copying electronic images, or what Qian describes as “just gather[ing] a few images or things from the Internet,” fieldwork requires full bodily and emotional immersion in the research process. He says,

It's about doing real fieldwork. You go to the folk or ethnic areas, sit with the people, talk with them, ask about their lives -- just like you are asking me right now. You really ask them questions. And when they are dancing, tossing their heads, you toss your head together with them. You become a part of it yourself, feel the excitement, and that's when the inspiration gets stirred up and comes out. What I feel is missing in many works now is this element of bodily experience.

When Qian speaks about his own fieldwork experiences, his demeanor becomes increasingly excited, and he exudes a sense of passion that I found quite common when speaking with dancers about fieldwork. “If you have the opportunity, you have to go to those places and experience them for yourself,” Qian says. “You have to get out of the county towns and go down into the real ethnic areas, the remote places. Carry some alcohol and cigarettes with you, and give them to the local people. Let them show you around and follow where they take you. That's really the way to do it.”

The intense value Qian places on fieldwork as the primary creative experience for making ethnic dance is clear when he recounts his own stories of conducting research in remote areas. Describing what he calls a “deep, deep experience” during the creation of *Man* drum dance, he says,

⁵⁸ The term “*caifeng*” (采风), meaning literally “to collect songs,” comes from the *Book of Odes*. *Caifeng* is the most commonly used term for dance fieldwork in the People's Republic of China.

You go there and you see the people dancing in the big square. You see them dancing on designs on the ground. They dance until the dust from the ground comes up around them. The shoulders are uncovered and black. And they're drinking alcohol. Two glasses of alcohol, then 'dong! dong!' -- just like American Indians, you know? And, wow, there is so much feeling. That's when you really experience the marrow and essence; it's not that kind of on the surface thing anymore. You know, 'I learned two steps and now I can start choreographing.' No, it's not like that. You have to see *why* it is danced like this. *Why* does the dancer have to drink two glasses of alcohol first? Because only after those two drinks does the rhythm and that, that, sort of *jin'r* (劲儿 physical energy or spirit) finally come out. Creative inspiration comes from this kind of experience. You teach your dancers, and you have to communicate this experience to them. And when they perform, they have to dance that kind of passion. That's what moves the audience to say, 'yes, this is a real folk dance.'

For Qian, conducting fieldwork is what allows the artistic inspiration to emerge.

When you sit with the old *yiren* (folk artiste) and he's had a few drinks and smoked a few cigarettes, and he starts singing the mountain songs. Wow, those melodies! Really, they are just too beautiful. You know, lullabies, songs about daughters going off to be married, funeral songs. I've collected all of these. There are songs to the seeds in the dirt to make them grow. Every place has songs they sing not for people but for the earth to hear, you know? They sing to celebrate the soul of the rice seedling in the earth. The fire and the water all have spirits too, and they sing songs to them. [He sings,] 'I sing that my harvest will be even better next year.' You know, these kinds of songs. They are so far from anything you've heard before. And then there are the stories they tell around the firepits, and...

In describing their fieldwork experiences, dancers offer stories of affectively rich and ethically committed pursuits that often show, at least on the part of the individual dance practitioner, a genuine attempt to pursue the paradoxical practice of preservation through development. In creating dance works based on his fieldwork, Qian, like other choreographers of Chinese folk and ethnic dance, aims to capture the essence of what he understands to be a particular way of life or sensibility and to make that understanding available, through dance form, to wider audiences. Many folk and ethnic dance practitioners see themselves as activists seeking to promote understanding and appreciation of ethnic minority or folk traditions. Many, like Qian, Siqintariha, and Modegema, are members of ethnic minority groups themselves, and they see state support of ethnic dance as an opportunity to work to "protect and develop" their own cultural traditions.

The ways in which members of ethnic minority groups come to understand their own cultural traditions, and the ways in which they practice the preservation and development of these traditions through dance is strongly shaped by the institutions, practices, and logics of state-supported dance practice within which dancers live and work. In the next section, I explore the experiences of a performer and teacher of Mongolian dance, Geganshanda (b. 1959), who describes herself as having rediscovered her own culture through her study and practice of

Mongolian dance in the state-sponsored Wulanmuqi⁵⁹ grassland performance troupe in Inner Mongolia. Founded in 1957, the Wulanmuqi is a cultural institution unique to the Chinese People's Republic Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, in which performers travel across areas with low population density, living in the homes of local inhabitants, to spread Party propaganda through traditional performance (Da 1997). As a troupe member, Geganshanda spent thirteen years, between the ages of 17 and 30, traveling across the grassland performing for small communities composed largely of ethnic minority groups. During this time, she argues, she developed a strong emotional attachment to grassland culture, as well as new knowledge of Mongolian heritage and ways of life. This knowledge and experience, she argues, provides a "cultural core" that motivates and informs her continued professional pursuit of Mongolian dance research and teaching, as well as her personal pursuit of maintaining Mongolian cultural tradition in her own life.

In organizational structure and official mission, the Wulanmuqi reflects the dualistic nature of ethnic minority cultural work in the People's Republic of China, since it seeks to preserve and adapt to local culture while at the same time shaping local culture through the importation of socialist ideology and state governance. In 1964, during the Wulanmuqi Forum held as part of the National Ethnic Minority Mass Amateur Arts Study and Visitation Performance Meeting, Vice Director of the Central Party Propaganda Bureau Lin Mohan announced:

The Wulanmuqi has accomplished two things: First, it brought socialist culture to the masses, as the needs of the masses are the needs of the Party. Second, it created a cultural organizational form that is suited to the masses, which is worth promoting... The Wulanmuqi embodies the Party's cultural orientation and conforms with Mao Zedong thought. Revolutionary (革命化), ethnicized (民族化), adapted to the masses (群众化)... the overall orientation is correct, [and] it should continue working hard in this direction. (Da 1997: 53)

The Wulanmuqi's work of bringing "socialist culture to the masses" included educating Inner Mongolian inhabitants about new Party policies, national propaganda, and public health issues. Apart from this work, however, the Wulanmuqi also became known around China and internationally for its contribution to the preservation and promotion of Mongolian traditional folk music and dance. Between 1964 and 1997, Wulanmuqi troupes toured all of China's provinces, as well as five continents worldwide, promoting Mongolian traditional culture through performance (Da 1997: 42-43).

As a member of the Wulanmuqi, Geganshanda had the dual role of bringing national culture to the grasslands, and of bringing the grasslands back to the spaces of national culture, including the state-sponsored Inner Mongolia Art University where she teaches dance, the

⁵⁹ The name "Wulanmuqi" comes from a combination of words from the Mongolian and Mandarin languages. "Wulan" is the Mongolian word for "red" and "muqi" (牧骑) is a neologism combining the Mandarin words for "to herd" and "to ride." The standard Chinese explanation of the name Wulanmuqi is "草原文艺轻骑兵," which translates roughly as "grassland culture and art light-weight cavalry," or "红色草原文艺队," which translated as "Red Grassland Culture and Art Troupe" (Da 1997). The color red is associated with the Communist Party; thus, after the 1950s many cities and institutions in Inner Mongolia adopted the word "Wulan" in their names.

national and international performance venues where she once performed, and the ethnically mixed urban spaces where she lives and raises her family. Through the experiences and training made possible by state sponsorship of cultural performance, Geganshanda became a representative of Mongolian culture mediating between two groups: the grassland inhabitants on whose lives their performances were modeled, and those far removed from the grassland but for whom a specific representation of Mongolian culture can signify national unity and Party leadership. Thus, like Siqintariha and Modegema, Geganshanda acts as a representative both of the state and of the Mongolian minority culture. In achieving this role, Geganshanda's conscious ethnic minority subjectivity has been shaped through participation in state-mediated forms of education and training, yet she has also participated in extensive personal interaction and experience with a large and varied population of ethnic Mongolians living in Inner Mongolia. Her position reflects the special in-betweenness of ethnic minority cultural workers in the People's Republic of China.

In Geganshanda's story, emotional attachment to the grassland as a symbolic and kinesthetic embodiment of Mongolian culture serves to directly generate both Geganshanda's identification with Mongolian cultural identity and her support of the state's legitimate role as a promoter and developer of Mongolian traditional culture. Geganshanda repeatedly states that she is grateful to the Party and to Wulanmuqi for giving her the opportunity to discover and experience the grassland and its cultural richness. The primary reason Geganshanda gives for feeling both grateful to the state for supporting the Wulanmuqi and committed to the preservation and development of Mongolian culture is the deeply emotional experiences she had performing on the grassland in the 1970s and 80s. These emotional experiences, Geganshanda explains, are rooted in kinesthetic experience, since they are connected to specific sights, sounds, and feelings she had while performing on the grassland during her youth. The sensory experiences that Geganshanda remembers from that time remain in her memory, and they serve as an important physiological and emotional store driving her continued dance projects.

In exploring the connection between kinesthetic and affective experience in shaping Geganshanda's work as a state-sponsored ethnic minority cultural worker, I follow on work in the anthropology of dance that has long recognized the connection between the kinesthetic power of dance and its connection to affect. In her pioneering work *The Anthropology of Dance*, Anya Peterson Royce (1977) argues that the kinesthetic dimension is what makes dance unique among the arts, and that it is the most important "expressive channel" used in dance. Citing Jack Anderson's notion of the kinesthetic production of sympathetic responses, Selma Jeanne Cohen's work on "percepts," Richard Waterman's notion of "emphatic subliminal communication," and Judith Hannah's conceptualization of the "affective" dimension of dance communication, Royce concludes that the connection between kinesthetic communication and affective production is the most important direction for future inquiry in what she calls "the meaning of dance" (192-211). Judith Hannah (1975), in her report on the 1974 Fourth Committee in Research on Dance (arguably the meeting at which the field of dance anthropology symbolically emerged for the first time), cited the "need for a language of affect" as one of the most important findings of the discussion on dance aesthetics during this meeting. Expanding on this foundational research, I show the ways in which affective dimensions of kinesthetic experience in dance contribute not only to the production and effects of dance works, but also to the molding of cultural identities, individual subjectivities, and national politics.

Geganshanda: From the City to the Grassland and Back to the City

Geganshanda is a female Mongolian dancer from the generation following Modegema. Unlike Siqintariha and Modegema, Geganshanda was not a member of Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe. She both trained and worked in the Wulanmuqi, a system of uniquely Inner Mongolian institutions for state-sponsored performance founded in 1957, which persisted through the Cultural Revolution and still existed when I conducted fieldwork in 2007-09. Geganshanda began studying dance in the Wulanmuqi during the Cultural Revolution, and the bulk of her work as a performer took place in the years immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution, during the early Reform Era. Geganshanda's formative years as a dance performer coincided with the resurgence of interest and activity in the area of Chinese ethnic dance that took place in China after 1976. This was the era in which the "older generation" of dancers like Siqintariha returned from the labor camps and resumed their position as leaders in the field. It was also the time when the Chinese Communist Party, while instituting major political, economic, and social reforms, returned to the pre-Cultural Revolution strategy of asserting its legitimacy as a protector and developer of Chinese ethnic minority culture.

When I met Geganshanda in the spring of 2009, she lived in Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia Ethnic Minority Autonomous Region, in a small apartment inside the courtyard complex of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Direct-Governance Wulanmuqi Art Troupe (内蒙古自治区直属乌兰牧骑艺术团), the performance troupe where she has been employed since age seventeen. As the "Direct-Governance" troupe, this is the most prestigious of the 46 Wulanmuqi troupes located around the Autonomous Region (Da 1997). Geganshanda worked as a performer in the troupe for thirteen years, from 1976 to 1989, and she is still affiliated as an "old cadre." Although she now works full-time teaching Mongolian dance at the Inner Mongolia Art School (a major provincial-level art university located in another part of town) she still prefers to live in her old apartment at the troupe. "The years in the Wulanmuqi are the part of my life that I look back upon most fondly," Geganshanda says, explaining her emotional attachment to the troupe, and her willingness to stay in her old apartment, which she says is cramped and outdated. "The rooms here are old and small, but I still feel the most comfortable here. The Wulanmuqi is where I built up my 'artistic life' (文化生活) and my 'cultural core' (文化底蕴)" she says. "It is my home."

I received Geganshanda's contact information from a mutual friend in Beijing, who described her as "very open" and "willing to talk about her experiences." When I speak with her over the phone, she readily agrees to share her story with me, and we arrange a time to meet at the university campus where she teaches. In her car driving back to her apartment, Geganshanda tells me enthusiastically about her thoughts on teaching and the school. "Students today are not like they used to be," she says. "You can't use brute force and sternness anymore, you have to encourage them and make them interested. I don't approve of those teachers who still use the old methods. This is a new time; it requires new ways of teaching. At least, that's my view." Geganshanda is youthful and energetic, and her voice and gestures exude a palpable excitement. She tells me about her recent trips to conduct field research in Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the country of Mongolia and her current work preparing a new set of teaching curricula based on the dances she studied there. "Mongolian dance is my love, my life, and my passion," Geganshanda says. "Just hearing about it makes my nerves start to twitch."

When we arrive at Geganshanda's apartment, I notice her clothing for the first time. She wears a pair of grey Hollister brand exercise pants, stylish black tennis shoes with a raised wedge heel, and a black turtleneck sweater. Over her sweater is a blue jacket in a simplified version of a traditional Mongolian costume. It has a high collar and black embroidery. Geganshanda's

apartment is filled with stereotyped signs of Mongolian culture. On the wall of the foyer hangs a leather shield, next to a rack of antlers with a bright blue khata scarf and charms draped over it. In the kitchen hangs a large oil painting of a grassland landscape. The foreground shows a river, a tree, and a group of grazing horses and cows, and in the background stands a group of Mongolian yurts, next to a herd of sheep, against a background of mountains and blue sky. Opposite the grassland painting is a large portrait of Genghis Khan, the recognized ancestral leader of the Mongolian people. On the shelf next to the table, I see the recent issue of *Wudao*, China's version of *Dance Magazine*. Geganshanda gestures for me to sit at the kitchen table under the Genghis Khan portrait, and she goes into the kitchen to prepare snacks. "Mongolian food is simple but full of nutrition," she says, gesturing at the table after she comes out. She has laid out a kettle of salted Mongolian milk tea, a bowl of small grains, and a plate of sweet dried Mongolian cheese. "Mongolian people rarely eat full meals, only at night," she says. "During the day we mainly drink tea." She sits down, and I ask her to tell me the story of her life.

Geganshanda was born in 1959 in Beijing. Her parents worked in the arts and languages; in Beijing her father was a translator for a broadcasting station, and her mother was an actress in a performance troupe. Geganshanda describes her parents as well-educated and "cultured," in the sense of having wide knowledge of language, history, art, and politics. Although Geganshanda's family was ethnically Mongolian, she grew up speaking mostly Mandarin. Geganshanda says,

When I first joined the Wulanmuqi, I couldn't even speak Mongolian. My parents came from the eastern part of Inner Mongolia, where there is more mixing between the Mongolians and the Han Chinese. At home, we spoke sort of a version of Mandarin with some Mongolian mixed in. It was only later, when I met my husband and lived in the troupe for many years that I slowly began to learn [the Mongolian language].

The year Geganshanda was born (1959) marked the beginning of the three-year Great Famine that followed China's Great Leap Forward campaign. When she was six years old, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was beginning, and Geganshanda's family moved from Beijing back to Inner Mongolia, following a national call to "serve the border areas." When she was about to start elementary school, Geganshanda's schooling was delayed, due to the activities of the Cultural Revolution. National politics pervaded even the language of everyday life. "Instead of calling watermelon by their normal name 'xigua' (literally 'western melon,')," she recalls, "we called them 'fanxiugua,' ('anti-revisionist melon'). Can you believe it? We actually thought that was the real name!" As a child she remembers living in constant fear of war, storing grain and staples in underground bunkers.

After her family moved from Beijing back to Hohhot, Geganshanda's father worked at the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe as a folklorist, alongside Siqintariha. He helped collect folk songs and other cultural knowledge from local folk artistes who were brought to the capital in Hohhot to participate in the documentation of Mongolian folk culture. When Geganshanda was twelve years old, her father was killed in the struggles of the Cultural Revolution. "My father was descended from a Mongolian royal family. They had a giant pasture and herds with people who worked for them and plenty of family positions, so they were basically like landlords," she explains. Geganshanda does not go into detail about the story of her father's death, and I do not press her on this topic. A victim of the extremist politics of the time, Geganshanda's father died early, leaving Geganshanda, her brother, and her mother to support

themselves. Reflecting on hardships in her life, Geganshanda says simply, “I grew up in hard times, but I’m glad for it. Only by experiencing hardship can one be tempered into a full and mature person.”

At age 13, Geganshanda entered art school at the local Wulanmuqi, where she focused on dance. The reasons for Geganshanda’s entrance into art school are complex, and probably were due in part to her family connections to the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe, and in part because entering art school meant getting free lodging, food, and vocational training with the promise of steady employment. Many dancers I interviewed who entered professional dance training before the 1990s did so because of strained family situations that made vocational dance training one of few viable alternatives to poverty. During the Cultural Revolution period, however, children from politically advantaged backgrounds also chose to enter dance school as a way to avoid being sent to the countryside to serve as “educated youth.” Since Geganshanda’s mother was an actress who performed in Cultural Revolution-era plays, Geganshanda was likely very familiar with live performance, evidently she had learned performance skills, charisma, and a graceful bearing from her mother. Probably these combination of factors led her to both have the opportunity and make the decision to enter the Wulanmuqi program.

Like Modegema, Geganshanda’s dance training in the Wulanmuqi consisted primarily of ballet and Mongolian dance. Most of her teachers were trained in Beijing, and they followed the official professional curriculum used in the Beijing Dance Academy and the Central University of Nationalities, as well as the curriculum developed by dancers like Siqintariha and her generation. When she first entered dance school, during the Cultural Revolution, Geganshanda was strongly influenced by the revolutionary ballets, which were devoid of any Mongolian dance content. Her mother was a member of a minority ethnicity theater troupe that performed Mongolian-language productions of Model Drama performances, however, including modern *Jingju* (现代京剧), sometimes known as “Modern Peking Opera,” along with other Model Drama works. During the early years of the Cultural Revolution, most Wulanmuqi troupes discontinued their regular work, either sending their members to the countryside to labor in communes or setting up temporary “Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Troupes” performing Model Dramas. However, the Party officially expressed support for the Wulanmuqi for the first time since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution with the publication on January 28, 1972, of the article “The Wulanmuqi Is Going Forward” (《乌兰牧骑在前进》) in the *People’s Daily* (Da 1997: 121). Thus, the recruitment of Geganshanda’s training class in 1972 marked the beginning of the Wulanmuqi’s return to regular operations, including a slow return to performance of Mongolian folk dance works.

Siqintariha was an important role model for Geganshanda in her early development as a performer of Mongolian dance. When I ask who she most admired in the Mongolian dance world growing up, Geganshanda immediately names Siqintariha. “Of course all the famous Mongolian dancers have their own great qualities and personal style,” she begins diplomatically, then continues:

But my favorite has always been Siqintariha. I especially love her solo work “The Song in My Heart I Give to the Party” (《心中歌献给党》). Back then I watched it again and again. Every time it was performed I went to see it, and I never got tired of it. That piece really has representativeness (代表性). It really represents

that dignified sense, uprightness, and generosity of the Mongolian woman, those kind of representative things.⁶⁰

Echoing the official logic of Mongolian dance as both authentic and innovative, Geganshanda argues that Mongolian dance, though changed over time, has maintained its connection to traditional folk culture. Whereas works from the 1950s, she says, were more directly imitative of life, those produced in the 1980s added what she calls “artistic improvement, making them more appropriate for the professional stage.” Both types of dance, however, Shanda argues, belong to what she calls “Mongolian dance,” and both embody and express the cultural heritage and ethnic knowledge of the Mongolian people.

Upon her graduation from the training program in 1976, Geganshanda was assigned to a position in the Inner Mongolia Direct-Governance Wulanmuqi Art Troupe based in Hohhot. A single Wulanmuqi troupe is composed of twelve individuals, each with a specific artistic specialty and proficiency in the following: singing, dance, playing a musical instrument. Keeping troupe numbers small and requiring each performer to be skilled in multiple arts allows the troupes to be capable of traveling long distances on small horse-drawn carts. The stereotypical image of the Wulanmuqi is of twelve performers dressed in Mongolian robes carrying an assortment of Mongolian and Chinese instruments, riding on a horse-drawn cart across the grassland. Wulanmuqi troupes spend at least one-third of each year traveling to perform for small communities and sometimes individual families who live too far from towns and urban populations to receive the local cultural services. Apart from performing to rural audiences, the Wulanmuqi also performs for government banquets, holidays, and commercial tours. While the main job of the troupe is to provide entertainment, it is also responsible for spreading information about new government policies and campaigns, as well as for providing basic public health education and treatment. The first Wulanmuqi was founded in 1957, and by 1963 there were thirty separate troupes located in the different administrative units around Inner Mongolia. As of 1997, the number of Wulanmuqi had reached forty-six, covering every geographical unit in the Autonomous Region (Da 1997).

Although the original goal of the Wulanmuqi was to use Mongolian folk arts as a way to carry out socialist national governance on the Inner Mongolian grassland, it had the added effect, for Troupe members like Geganshanda, of providing opportunities to learn about, appreciate, and ultimately, to help promote Mongolian cultural heritage. Geganshanda states repeatedly throughout our conversations that it was during her thirteen years of service as a performer in the Wulanmuqi that she learned about and came to appreciate Mongolian culture and its connection to grassland life. She illustrates this process with numerous stories, such as the following:

I remember one time we were performing in a pastoral area, and we saw some little cows and goats drinking milk from their mothers. Some of us had never seen this before. One of our Han comrades said, ‘Why doesn’t the mother cow and

⁶⁰ “*The Song in My Heart*” is a solo piece *Siqintariha* performed in 1980 at the special “Demonstrations by Old Dance Artists” event held at the First China National Dance Competition (Siqin 2008). The full name is not listed in *Siqintariha*’s resume listed at the front of her collection of essays, perhaps because its name is now out of fashion. When Geganshanda says the name, she laughs to acknowledge what she calls its “feeling of the era.”

mother goat lie down on the ground so that the babies can crawl onto her belly to drink?’ We all laughed. There was just this huge gap in culture and life.

Although this story highlights the difference between the Han and Mongolian individuals in their knowledge of life on the grassland, Geganshanda herself was not much different from the so-called “Han comrade” in the story. Having grown up in the city, in a family that had already assimilated in many ways to Chinese mainstream urban culture, she was also quite ignorant of grassland life. The scene of cows and goats milking their offspring was one of many experiences that, according to her, brought her closer to her Mongolian roots.

Apart from observing and participating in the everyday activities of her hosts during performance tours, Geganshanda argues that intimate outdoor performances were for her one of the most important ways that she connected with the grassland and its culture. Geganshanda describes a typical performance setting:

There were never more than ten people in the audience, you see. We performed in the middle and they sat around us, seven or eight people usually. Sometimes, it would be just a single herder, you know, one of those massive horse-herding men, the *maguan*, who tends an entire flock of semi-wild horses by himself. Or, sometimes it was just a few border soldiers, those people who keep year-round out in the empty desert. In an area with a circumference of about 350 kilometers there would usually be only one family, and you couldn’t even see to the next one. Before we performed, the local secretary would ride his horse out to notify people and organize the audience. Even with this kind of preparation, you still only had about seven or eight people. They would set up a few stools in front of the family yurt, and we would start performing.

Memories of the kinesthetic experience of performing on the grassland are, for Geganshanda, full of emotion. As she speaks about them, tears well up in her eyes, and she has an earnest and nostalgic tone in her voice. She recounts,

Just imagine the setting, behind you is a grassland stretching out with herds of horses. When we were in the Wulanmuqi, the blue sky was our curtains, and the green grass-covered earth was our stage. The only sets we had were the herders and their animals. The herds of horses were big then, not just a few horses like today, but thousands. They would be spread out on the grassland, and they had a kind of majesty and power. Imagine, that commanding *maguan* would ride over, sit down next to his horse, right there, and you perform for him. Just imagine that feeling. Or, when we were performing for the border guards, think of how that felt. They would be standing there at attention, and they couldn’t even look at us. They’d stand there watching the border and we’d perform next to them, and they could only hear us. You see, it’s not about the formality, or about having people come and watch and clap for you. Then, it was about being a part of nature, and just performing. We performed for the earth and the sky, for the animals. Dogs and horses would crawl over and watch us perform. Sheep and cows would all be there watching. How do you describe that kind of exchange and communication? That’s how it was. We performed out of this feeling. That’s how it was then.

Geganshanda struggles to convey the deeply complex emotional meaning of this now distant, though ever-powerful, set of life experiences and memories. In comparison to today's performance venues, she argues, there is just no equivalent setting. She says,

Of course there are good things about our modern stage technology today, but to me it's too far from nature. No matter how you hang up that grassland and the yurt [she refers here to commonly used stage backdrops that show images of typical grassland scenes], you know, it's still fake! Performers can't melt their emotion into nature in the same way. [Back then] we were actually out *in* nature, becoming one with it.

She describes the emotional difference between performing on the real grassland and performing on a stage with a mechanized grassland set. The latter, she says, is more about the “form” (形式) of performing, whereas the former, performing on the grassland, comes out of an “excitement that surges up from within” (内心的冲动).

For Geganshanda, the process of “going down to the countryside to perform” (下乡演出) helped her to cultivate deep aesthetic and affective sensibilities which she says have shaped who she is today, including her devotion to the study, practice, and promotion of Mongolian dance specifically and of Mongolian heritage more generally. Geganshanda met her husband in the Wulanmuqi, and she describes their marriage as bringing together the city life and the life of the *muqu* (牧区), or pastoral regions. Through the help of her husband, she learned to speak fluent Mongolian, and she adopted more aspects of Mongolian heritage into her daily life. “If you saw my husband now, you'd never believe he used to be a dancer,” she says, as she shows me a picture of a long-haired, heavy-set man. “I have so much emotion connected to that time,” she explains, “that is where I studied, tasted, and experienced a deep knowledge of art and culture. Thirteen years of my life, and my entire youth. There, I grew up from a naive little girl to a woman with independent ideas.”

Like many who work in the promotion of Mongolian arts and cultural heritage in China, Geganshanda analogized the cultural disappearance of Mongolian life to the environmental destruction of the grasslands, and she lamented that new generations of performers no longer were connected to Mongolian tradition the way she once did. “When I think about it today, sometimes it makes me want to cry,” she says. “The grasslands, you know, they are disappearing. They are slowly becoming deserts. The nomadic groups are settling into cities, and the herds are confined to ever smaller areas. The animals don't even feel the grasslands any more, that great expanse. It's like they are mechanized too.” Inhabitants of areas once covered in lush grasslands have now moved on to the cities, and those who have remained face increasing poverty and new ways of life. “Now, if we try to perform in the remote areas, people will just see you as a burden. They can hardly finish their own work, let alone take time to invite you into their homes and watch your performances. Now, they just turn on the TV for entertainment.” The grasslands have changed, and the lives of the people have changed. She feels tremendously lucky, she says, to have had a chance to experience the grassland and elements of Mongolian culture associated with it while they were still relatively natural. The younger generations, she says, now learn about life on the grasslands primarily through the stories of people like her.

While the specific institution of the Wulanmuqi is unique to Inner Mongolia, it is part of a much larger, nationwide phenomenon of state sponsorship of folk and ethnic dance performance

and research in which ethnic minority artists are invited to rediscover and connect with their cultural heritage through the help of the state. Individuals like Geganshanda and Qian Dongfan, who are members of minority groups educated and employed by state-owned performance troupes, develop, through fieldwork and performance experiences, sentimental attachments created through kinesthetic experience of dance research and performance. Dance practitioners describe, and most likely experience, these attachments as authentic engagements with traditional cultural forms that provide them with knowledge of and connection to ethnic minority culture. Although they recognize the help of the state in making such experiences possible, they rarely acknowledge the state's role in shaping the content of these experiences, and in the ways in which ethnic minority culture is represented in dance form. Instead, they see the state as a benefactor of minority culture, a process in which they see themselves as the ultimate sentinels of the state's project.

Describing her work as a teacher at the Inner Mongolia Art School, Geganshanda places herself in the role of the "inheritor" of Mongolian dance culture. By continually revising the Mongolian dance curriculum, adding her own content and interpretation, she argues, she is helping to carry forward the project started by Siqintariha and her generation, of protecting and developing Mongolian dance through continued innovation and research.

From the time I was young, I always appreciated Siqintariha's style. Now, after becoming a teacher at the Art School, following on my own years of experience, including both performance experience and teaching experience, I have now developed my own [system and style of pursuing Mongolian dance]. For example, in 2000, after I went to study in [the country of] Mongolia and returned with new materials, I had another major expansion in my experience. I am now creating my own set of instructional materials and choreography. As a dancer, [I feel that] the materials that one masters should be rich and varied, that's the only way to really achieve research results, and to have the qualifications to do research. Otherwise, you are just seeing things in a very superficial and limited way.

Geganshanda shows me videos of the new teaching curriculum she is in the process of developing, and she explains how it incorporates elements of the research she has conducted on different Mongolian tribes in various regions. "There are really a lot of variations in Mongolian culture. For example, when I conducted research on the Torgot tribes Xinjiang, I saw that their movements reflected similarities to Uygur dances. They embodied elements of the topography and environment of that region, which was different from those in Inner Mongolia." Just as the social and cultural climate of China's society has changed over the past thirty years, she argues, Mongolian dance, too has also changed. She argues that the Mongolian dance forms she is creating now are more suited to the tastes and values of China in the early twenty-first century.

Back when I was a young performer, especially in the late 1970s, our performances were so black and white. You know, dances about milking cows and herding sheep just looked like milking cows and herding sheep. There were a lot of symbolic and formal elements related to political content. You know, we'd sing about being a 'Red Guard of the grassland' riding our horses up to Tian'anmen and things like that. We would do these exaggerated gestures that expressed, in a very literal way, political statements, such as ethnic unity and our love for Mao

Zedong. Of course, since that time Mongolian dance has developed a great deal. Now, we dance and research Mongolian dance in a very different way. It's more subtle now, and it's more about the aesthetic value of the works, about reflecting on culture in a more complex way. People today are looking for something more rich and different. Society as a whole has transformed, and people's tastes have transformed too.

By continuing to conduct new research, through conducting fieldwork, applying her own innovations, and organizing her findings into teachable curriculum, Geganshanda sees herself pushing forward the development of Mongolian dance into a new era. Furthermore, in an era in which Wulanmuqi performers rarely go down to the countryside to perform for herdsman, and even the grassland itself is disappearing, she sees herself as a new resource for the members of a younger generation wishing to reconnect to Mongolian culture.

Minority Culture in the Classroom: Inhabiting the Virtual Grassland

Creating Chinese ethnic minority dance, a process begun in the 1940s and 50s and continuing into the early twenty-first century, enacts interventions into Chinese minority ethnic identity and culture that are simultaneously aesthetic and political. It draws upon the efficacy of kinesthetic experience produced by state-mediated work of cultural production to shape subjectivities and generate new cultural symbols, activities, and ways of relating to ethnic minority culture. These new formations could be called, using Jacques Rancière's (2004) language of political aesthetics, a new political and aesthetic "distribution of the sensible." As fundamentally political forms of aesthetic production, they serve to legitimate the Chinese Communist Party as a protector of ethnic diversity in China, even as they generate affectively rich new practices of minority ethnic experience.

Rancière's discussion of what he calls a "politics of aesthetics" in *The Politics of Aesthetics: Distribution of the Sensible* deals primarily with cultural developments in modern Europe. In the nineteenth century, Rancière argues, a new notion of art emerged in Europe, visible in writings like Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. This notion eliminated the distinction between work as labor for sustenance and work as the production of visibility. The new idea of art identified artistic practice more broadly with "production," and it broke down an old division of labor in which artisans were excluded from the political sphere. What emerged was what Rancière calls a new "factory of the sensible" (9), in which both aesthetic and political work became merged as forms of production, insofar as both were seen as participating in the politically significant reshaping of space, time, visibility, and activity. The key to the "factory of the sensible," Rancière argues, is that the work of manufacturing becomes equated with the work of producing forms of visibility. Art as production, Rancière argues, "unites the act of manufacturing with the act of bringing to light" (44).

Although he is not discussing China specifically, Rancière's notion of a new "factory of the sensible" may be applied productively to an analysis of cultural work in the People's Republic of China, insofar as China adapted the idea and practice of art as production from the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century. Rancière links the emergence of the factory of the sensible to the artistic practices of the just then emerging Soviet Union when he writes, "At the time of the Russian Revolution, art and production would be identified because they came under one and the same principle concerning the redistribution of the sensible, they came under one and the same virtue of action that opens up a form of visibility at the same time as it

manufactures objects” (45). This “virtue of action” was also practiced in the People’s Republic and specifically in the field of dance. As I have shown in the previous chapters, the Chinese Communist Party treated dancers as laborers whose work contributed to the construction of a new society and a new nation. According to the interventionist approach of Chinese socialist realist art, aesthetic representations of the world were supposed to help generate new social realities. It is precisely through the conflation of the different notions of “production” that, in twentieth-century China, the unity of art and politics are articulated in political ideology and put in practice through new institutions and ways of life.

The aesthetic and political production of new state-mediated forms of minority ethnic identity through dance take place on the stage and in the classroom. When studying Mongolian dance, students are taught to visualize and virtually embody the manufactured cultural symbols of the grassland and the ideal Mongolian man or woman. In doing so, they participate in the further promotion of these stereotyped images, while at the same time deepening the efficacy of these images through kinesthetic and emotional experience. During my fieldwork at the Beijing Dance Academy, teachers often instructed me to envision myself seeing, hearing, tasting, or feeling symbolic elements of minority culture, as if they were materially present in the classroom or on my body. Jia Meina (b. 1942) a veteran teacher of folk and ethnic dance and member of the first class of students at the Beijing Dance Academy, instructed myself and other students in her Uygur dance class to imagine ourselves wearing the tall, cone-shaped hats typically worn by Uygur dancers as we danced. “When you bring your hands up over your head, don’t let them hit your hat!” she reminded us, though our “hats” were, of course, imaginary. When we practiced our spinning movements or gestures with our hands behind our necks, she told us to imagine we had long braids behind our backs, like the ones worn by Uygur women in performance. “Remember, you have long, thin braids dangling down from your skull to your buttocks. When you spin, feel the braids spin out all around you. When you gesture with your hands behind your neck, fondle your braids ever so lightly with your fingertips.”

When I studied Mongolian dance, my teachers similarly instructed me to virtually embody the “typical” Mongolian individual, by embodying postures and movements associated with Mongolian culture, wearing imaginary Mongolian clothing, or experiencing myself standing on a virtual grassland created through my own visualizations. When teaching the so-called “basic posture” (基本体态) of Mongolian dance, one of my teachers, a graduate student at the Beijing Dance Academy, explained:

Mongolian women have a proud and strong demeanor, so you have to stand upright, with your chest lifted, your shoulders square, and your head tilted slightly back. Look at yourself in the mirror, and feel your spine arch back, your shoulders drop and your chest lift up to the sky. Feel that you are a strong Mongolian woman. Let your chin come up until your weight is tipped backward slightly but still maintaining a commanding pose. Now send our eyesight straight out into the horizon. Take up space! Imagine that between your body and your arms there is an entire grassland!

The implied horizon and the basic posture are a feature of nearly all Chinese Mongolian folk dance, for both men and women. It calls for the dancer to raise his or her sternum high and to thrust the shoulders and head back, so that the gaze is focused out and slightly upward. As my

teacher instructed us in the basic posture, she asked us to associate the feeling of this posture with a characteristic personality of an idealized Mongolian woman. She explained,

Mongolian women ride horses and brave the harsh elements, so they must stand tall and be strong. Mongolian culture reveres the sturdy and the brave. Mongolians are the descendants of Genghis Khan, the great warrior! As you stand there, tall and proud, feel the grassland stretching out around you. Imagine that you are the ruler of it, like the great Khan. Imagine that, at this moment, you stand alone on the grassland, and that great vast space stretching out before you belongs to you and only you. Reach your arms out and feel that you are embracing the entire space, as far as the eye can see. That is the feeling you should have when you are dancing Mongolian dance.

According to many of my teachers, it was important to really see, hear, and feel the imagined sensory effects of our visualizations as we danced. This virtual experiential element, they argued, was essential to mastering the folk dance techniques. For example, my Mongolian dance teacher once explained,

Look out into the distance and actually see the herds, the blue sky, and the white clouds all around you. When you dance, imagination is extremely important. You have to think that there is really a herd of sheep over there, and you have to be able to *really* see them. And above you, you have to see the sky, as if you are standing under it. This kind of imagination will naturally move your body, and it will allow you to create the correct feeling because your body will respond to the images. [...] When you are dancing, imagine you can feel the weight of heavy fur on your shoulders, and feel the sleeves hanging down to your fingertips when you lower your hands. [...] See the herds of cattle, sheep and wild horses far off in the distance, and when you beat your arms up and down, imagine the giant eagles and hawks that soar over the grassland, their wings spread wide and catching the wind as they glide above you.

Through vivid prompts by teachers, students studying ethnic dance in China are encouraged to participate viscerally in a virtual sensory experience of stereotyped representations of ethnic minority culture. In doing so, they generate kinesthetic experiences that contribute to the naturalization of these images and the cultural symbols associated with them.

In my observation of courses at the Beijing Dance Academy, I found that instruction in virtual experience of stereotyped minority culture was a part of professional dance training from the earliest stages, and it was true for men as well as for women. In June, 2009, I observed preparatory class for new students entering the Beijing Dance Academy's Professional Middle School program in Chinese dance. In this class, boys ranging in age from 10 to 12 who have been newly selected to enter the school engage in a semester-long initiation course to transition them into life at the dance academy. In their Mongolian dance class, the most important part of this process is learning to embody the gestural and rhythmic repertoire of the typical "Mongolian man." Like the Mongolian woman, the Mongolian man has a very particular and limited expression in mainstream Chinese Mongolian folk dance. He is stoic, wild, and strong, often depicted with long hair, broad shoulders, stocky body and windswept face. His primary activities

in these depictions include horse-riding and wrestling. When he walks, he often uses a wide, strutting step, often with both arms outstretched imitating the movements of an eagle.

Throughout their class, the students are taught to embody this particular image, through a carefully designed repertoire of gestures and rhythms. The students in the class begin each lesson by changing from their black ballet slippers into the knee-high black boots worn in Mongolian dance. In the intense summer heat of June in Beijing, the boots look uncomfortable and give off a foul odor. The heavy, square look of the boots contrast with the skinny frames of the gangly pre-pubescent boys, who with their pale complexions and city manners look nothing like the stereotyped Mongolian horse-herder. The boys are dressed in their stark white t-shirts and black cotton pants, and as they prepare for class, they run about the room laughing, jumping, and singing playfully. All of this -- the discomfort of the boots, the gangly appearances, the childish demeanors of city boys -- changes, however, when the music comes on and the boys begin dancing.

The first exercise is a simple routine called “*lǜdong*” (律动), or “beating rhythm.” They stand, feet together, bouncing in a rhythm that mimics the rhythmic movement of a person on horseback. Even the music seems to imitate the beating of horse-hooves against a flat ground. Their hands grab at imaginary reins, and their arms lift to shield their eyes from the imaginary sun. In one position the students stand crouching forward, with feet apart, knees bent and butts set back, as if perched on a galloping horse and leaning forward into the wind. One hand is reaching out in front of the body, appearing to grasp a set of reins. The other hand is stretched straight and low behind the back, miming the stance where he is about to smack the horse on the butt with his rope. The eyes stare straight ahead into an imagined horizon.

Several of the stances used in the basic rhythms sequences reference postures and movements associated with Mongolian wrestling. The boys stand with their legs wide apart and knees slightly bent, imitating the wide stance of the wrestler as he enters the ring. Holding their upper bodies cocked back, the boys exude an air of relaxed confidence, like a man leaning back on his chair in a bar, with their elbows wide and taking up as much space as possible. The boys’ chests are held high and broad and their heads are tilted back creating a haughty downward glance that, in the moment of performance, can be somewhat intimidating. With both elbows held out and slightly forward, each boy places his right hand at his stomach, as if grasping an imaginary belt. Despite being young, skinny, and most likely without first-hand experience of grassland life, the boys somehow exude a convincing image of being tough, weathered grassland men. As they grab their imaginary belts, ride their imaginary horses, and look out into the imaginary horizon, they manufacture, with the power of their bodies, a powerful form of kinesthetic visibility.

While the cultural symbols and forms of visibility produced in Chinese ethnic dance are most often used in ways that reinforce and legitimate state-supported ideologies and political representations, they can also be used to enact criticism of the hegemonic political culture. A thirty-year old male Mongolian choreographer in Geganshanda’s Wulanmuqi troupe complains of the stereotyped images of Mongolian people represented in mainstream ethnic dance and seeks to change them by producing alternative ones in his own choreography. “When I was a student learning Mongolian dance,” he says, “I got so sick of my teachers telling me to smile all the time. They said, ‘Smile! Smile! Keeping smiling!’ All we could ever do was smile. It was like the only emotion we were allowed to show on stage was happiness.” He doesn’t like what he calls the “*zuo zuo*,” or “artificial,” quality of many of the works of Mongolian dance he sees today, or the stereotyped visions of Mongolian men often depicted in the performances. “Most

people think of Mongolian culture as violent and rowdy. But, Mongolians are also quiet and thoughtful people” he says, describing the motivation behind a recent dance work based on a spiritual theme. “Genghis Khan’s soldiers used knowledge to win their battles, not just courage and strength,” he says. He explains that many of his views are not very accepted today and that this is very frustrating for him. Nevertheless, he argues that his aim as a future inheritor and creator of Mongolian dance is to make these alternative visions of Mongolian culture visible in dance form.

The grassland is also an important cultural symbol evoked among Mongolian artists and cultural researchers unhappy with the current situation of minority politics in China. Expressions of anger and sadness about the physical deterioration of China’s grassland environment to serve as allegorical or metaphorical discussions of the disappearance of grassland minority culture. In July, 2009, I attended the Fifth China Grassland Culture Forum in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, a conference on Mongolian minority ethnic culture co-sponsored by the Inner Mongolia Grassland Culture Development and Protection Foundation, the Inner Mongolia Musicians Association, and the Inner Mongolia Dancers Association. One day a middle-aged man stood up during a research panel on grassland music and dance to express his anger and rage about what he viewed as the destruction of minority culture through man-made environmental degradation. He pounded his fist loudly on the table and shouted, “Our grasslands are all turning into deserts! This is not natural, this is a human-made phenomenon. How can we allow this?” The loudness of his voice built as he spoke, and he was visibly shaking. He went on, “This year a grassland that was green last year is now yellow! Shouldn’t we be doing something about this? [This is] the dirt that we rely on for our artistic and cultural creation! What do we do?” Here, dirt takes on a double meaning. On the one hand, it is the physical representation of the land that is being turned, according to him through human action, from lush green grassland into barren desert. On the other, dirt here refers to the cultural traditions of grassland culture, the creative source for artistic and cultural work related to grassland peoples. It is both kinds of dirt will be ultimately stripped of their vitality, the man insists, if nothing is done.

The potential of performance to transform people and societies, and to enact political change, is what performance studies scholars call “efficacy.” In *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, Jon McKenzie (2001) argues that the field of performance studies in the United States grew out of an interest in the shift from entertainment to efficacy in performance practice, and that in the field of performance scholarship the very idea of performance became reframed as the problem of efficacy. “Performance emerges here as the efficacy of certain activities, activities capable of challenging of social norms and symbolic structures,” writes McKenzie (38). In the performance studies tradition of Western scholarship on the efficacy of performance, the transgressive potential of performance generally and dance specifically has been the most thoroughly explored since the 1970s.⁶¹ McKenzie writes, “While performance’s efficacy to reaffirm existing structures and console or heal peoples has consistently been recognized, it is its transgressive or resistant potential that has come to dominate the study of cultural performance” (2001: 30). The historical emergence of this focus on transgressive efficacy in performance studies, as Shannon Jackson (2004) has argued, is largely reflective of shifts in the practice and politics of the academy in the United States and Europe over the course of the twenty-first century, in particular the movement for

⁶¹ See, for example, the work of Rebekah Kowal (2010), André Lepecki (2006), Randy Martin (1990, 1998), Peggy Phelan (1993), and Richard Schechner (1988 [1977]).

interdisciplinarity in the 1960s-1980s, and continuing efforts to represent marginalized perspectives.

By focusing on the transgressive efficacy of performance to challenge hegemonic systems, performance studies, as a body of literature and field of discourse, has offered comparatively less insight into the ways in which performance participates in the generation and maintenance of hegemonic cultural and social practices. More of this research has instead been pursued by social and cultural anthropologists. For example, Saba Mahmood (2005), in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, shows how bodily performance helps to produce the pious feminine subject in contemporary Islam. Likewise, Louisa Schein, (2000) in *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* uses the analytic of performance to explain how minority ethnic identity is generated through the iterative practices of cultural work in contemporary China. While anthropologists have frequently used “performance” as a conceptual tool to understand the efficacy of particular practices in the making of hegemonic cultural and social forms, they have rarely afforded such attention to performance as artistic and aesthetic practice. As I have shown in this chapter, performance as artistic and aesthetic practice is also an important process through which subjectivities, discourses, and forms of experience are shaped in the production of hegemonic culture. It is through the specifically artistic and aesthetic nature of their work making Mongolian dance that dance practitioners such as Siqintariha, Modegema, and Geganshanda have helped to generate cultural symbols, kinesthetic experiences, and ethnic cultural subjectivities that support a state-mediated and Party-directed vision of ethnic minority culture in contemporary China.

In this chapter, I have sought to move beyond the performance studies tendency to focus on transgressive efficacy in artistic performance, while also moving beyond the anthropological tendency to focus on the concept of performance at the expense of performance as an aesthetic practice. The production of minority ethnic identity in the People's Republic of China is an aesthetic project, not only because it harnesses the productive capacity of artistic performance, but also because, in the context of socialist epistemology, culture and society themselves are understood as products of ongoing human creative action.

Chapter Six

The Flavor of Chineseness: “*Gudianwu*” (古典舞) and the Making of a National Dance Form



Chinese *gudianwu* dance drama *Precious Lotus Lantern*. 1957.
Photo courtesy of <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=667657171>.

“The creation of *Shenyun* was about preserving the essence of Eastern culture in our dancing, which had been severely injured by the activities of the Cultural Revolution. We asked ourselves, ‘What is that unique gaze, that movement of the hand, or that twisting of the back that makes Eastern beauty so unique? That is what is captured in the *yun* of *Shenyun*.’”

-Wang Peiyong (b. 1939), Beijing Dance Academy Professor of *gudianwu*.

“We request that the *contents* of literary and art workers express the people and thoughts of the new age, and the *forms* express the style and vigor (*qipai*) of the nation”

-Zhou Yang, “Report to the Second National Congress of Literary and Art Workers,” 1953.

Introduction

The images of dancing most often associated with Maoist China are those of women with bobbed haircuts wearing red pointe shoes and military clothing leaping through the air with bayonets in their hands. These images, while they represent an important part of Maoist dance history, and the one most popularized both in China and elsewhere, are not wholly representative of dance created in China during Mao's rule. During the early Mao period -- from the early 1950s to approximately 1966 -- a so-called "national dance form" (*minzu*⁶² *wudao xingshi* 民族舞蹈形式) was created in China, known as *gudianwu* (古典舞), or "classical dance," and it looked very different from the "revolutionary ballet" (革命芭蕾舞) of the Cultural Revolution.⁶³ Instead of bobbed hair, military costumes, and ballet shoes, the dancers in *gudianwu* works wore long hair, flowing robes, and flat slippers. Instead of bayonets, they maneuvered in their hands swords, fans, sticks, scarves, and sleeves. Rather than standing with their bodies facing directly to the audience, creating angular lines, and raising their fists into the air in acts of revolutionary defiance, dancers in *gudianwu* performed twisting, circular body movements, and they hold their hands in the traditional "lotus fingers" and "flat palms" of Chinese indigenous theater.

When the Cultural Revolution ended officially in 1976, with the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the Gang of Four, the decade-long heyday of Chinese revolutionary ballet also came to an end. Largely abandoned among professional dance programs and performance troupes in China, revolutionary ballet, or what became known as "*tu ballet*" (土芭蕾 "local ballet"), was seen as a strange relic of a period of political extremism in which China veered off of its true socialist path. Instead, in the period after Mao, dancers in the People's Republic of China returned to *gudianwu* as the focus of their research and choreographic energy. China's dance schools reopened their *gudianwu* programs, dance teachers and choreographers created new *gudianwu* works and teaching curricula, and dance scholars produced new *gudianwu* theories and research, all of which were direct continuations of the work begun in the 1950s. As in the case of Chinese folk and ethnic dance, many of the same individuals who had been involved in the making of *gudianwu* before the Cultural Revolution returned to lead the field's development in the post-Cultural Revolution era. In the Reform Era (1978-present), as in the 1950s and early 1960s, it has been *gudianwu*, not revolutionary ballet, that Chinese dancers have recognized as their national dance form.

Gudianwu, argue its practitioners, is the only appropriate dance form to represent China because it is the only one that embodies a distinctly Chinese classical bodily aesthetic. Since the 1950s, the makers of *gudianwu* have argued that ballet, while capable of training a dancer's body, expresses a distinctly European or "Western" bodily aesthetic, not a Chinese one. Therefore, they argue, ballet could never fully represent China. The use of the torso and chest are one of many differences practitioners of *gudianwu* point out between "Chinese" and "Western"

⁶² The same word, *minzu* (民族) is used in the names for both ethnic dance and national dance. The word has multiple meanings, including ethnicity, nationality, and ethnic nation. In this case, in the case of national dance, *minzu* refers to the imagined shared cultural community or heritage of all groups included in the Chinese state, as well as those who consider themselves to be Chinese outside China. The Chinese term "*zhonghua minzu*," or "greater Chinese nation," is the sense in which the term is used here.

⁶³ For discussions of revolutionary ballet in Western scholarship, see Cheng (2000), Chen (2002), Christopher (1979), Roberts (2008), Swift (1973), and Snow (1972).

bodily aesthetics. Whereas ballet emphasizes movement and agility in the limbs, while keeping the chest and torso relatively stiff, Chinese bodily aesthetics strive for fluidity and flexibility in the chest and torso, producing the visual quality of circulating breath.⁶⁴ Indirect movement is another characteristic that *gudianwu* practitioners argue makes *gudianwu* Chinese. Whereas ballet uses “direct movement,” or clear, linear motion directly from one point in space to another, *gudianwu* calls for “indirect movement,” in which a motion never connects two points with a straight line. Key strategies in the production of indirect movement include “*huxian*” (弧线), or “arc-lines,” and “*yu zuo xian you*” (“预左先右”), or “preparing to go left, first go right.” In the latter strategy, the dancer prepares a movement in one direction by backtracking in the opposite direction and then curving back. By combining these various aesthetic principles into a coherent movement vocabulary and aesthetic style, practitioners of *gudianwu* seek to produce dance that embodies the “cultural spirit” (文化精神) or “cultural essence” (文化精髓) of Chinese culture.

The makers of *gudianwu* see themselves as cultural researchers engaged in the practice of seeking to understand and preserving Chineseness in bodily form. During my field research in 2007-09 as a visiting graduate student at the Beijing Dance Academy, I was fortunate to study *gudianwu* practice and theory with many of the most renowned *gudianwu* teachers and scholars in China. Throughout this experience, I was struck by two recurring observations: first, the earnestness and enthusiasm with which my teachers and classmates pursued *gudianwu* as a form of research into Chinese cultural heritage; and second, the persistent assumption that mastering *gudianwu* made a person more Chinese. A number of my teachers and classmates spent personal time outside of class researching forms of indigenous Chinese body traditions such as *taiji quan* and *ba gua*,⁶⁵ traditional sword practice, Chinese aesthetic philosophy, and Chinese medical theory. Just as practitioners of Chinese folk and ethnic dance became excited when discussing fieldwork experiences studying with folk artists in rural areas, practitioners of *gudianwu* became most passionate when describing the connections they discovered between their dance practices and what they perceived as forms of indigenous Chinese culture, ranging from martial arts, to indigenous Chinese theater, to Taoist philosophy. When I began studying *gudianwu*, I was often told that because I was not Chinese, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for me to master the form.⁶⁶ When I occasionally captured the correct feel for a particular movement or posture, praise was almost ubiquitously a statement about my increasing “Chineseness.” Likewise, when Chinese dance students entering the university program in *gudianwu* were chastised in the classroom for not dancing in the correct way, they were often accused by their teachers of “losing their Chinese heritage.”

The project of creating a new national dance form called *gudianwu* in China in the early 1950s began with research into the movement repertoires of *xiqu* (戏曲), or Chinese indigenous theater. While *xiqu* formed the initial artistic inspiration for much of the *gudianwu* aesthetic, as

⁶⁴ The circulation of breath, or *qi*, is one of the central expressions of vitality in indigenous Chinese aesthetics, and it evokes a sense of both health and beauty. See Bush and Murck (1983).

⁶⁵ Both traditional and somewhat esoteric forms of Chinese martial arts.

⁶⁶ In this context, being Chinese meant either being of Chinese ethnic background or being a Chinese national. One of my classmates was an ethnic Tibetan Chinese national from Tibet and another was a foreign-born Chinese from Germany, and neither of these classmates was ever described as “not Chinese.”

well as many of the practical training techniques used in the early curriculum, *gudianwu* is not equivalent to *xiqu* dance. *Gudianwu* uses *xiqu* as a foundation for dance-based research into Chinese classical culture broadly conceived, in which the notion of Chineseness, variously understood and defined, serves as a guiding aesthetic principle for new artistic creation. In the making of *gudianwu*, practitioners continually debate and redefine what constitutes the correct aesthetic bodily expression of Chineseness, and in this way, Chineseness is converted from an anthropological category into an aesthetic one. Chineseness is understood in the field of *gudianwu* as something that can be both researched and created. On the one hand, practitioners of *gudianwu* treat Chineseness as an historically existing cultural entity whose existence and development be traced to antiquity, possibly even locatable in the genetic make-up of all Chinese people. Yet, at the same time, practitioners of *gudianwu* also treat Chineseness as a basis for future cultural creation at the hands of artistic inventors whose cultural sensitivity, study, and awareness makes them capable of taking Chineseness in new and productive directions.

For practitioners of *gudianwu*, the realness of Chineseness as an actually existing quality of a cultural tradition or group of people is never questioned, and the continued promotion and preservation of Chineseness is taken for granted as an absolute value. Within this framework, however, the definition, characteristics, and boundaries of Chineseness remain highly contested. It is this continued contestation, in fact, which serves to reconfirm rather than to question the significance of Chineseness as a site of research and innovation. It is this continued contestation that drives the active pursuit of artistic creation, scholarship, and curricular advancement in the field of *gudianwu*, thereby serving to further entrench the epistemological realness of Chineseness as a simultaneously historically and aesthetically constituted cultural entity.

National Forms and Broken Inheritance (1950-1953)

The founding acts in the creation of *gudianwu* are usually credited to three influential individuals: first, visiting dancer from Korea Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi (b. 1911, known in China as Cui Chengxi 崔承喜), second, the Chinese indigenous theater expert, performer and playwright Ouyang Yuqian (b. 1889), and, third, Ye Ning (b. 1919), a Chinese specialist in dance theory and dance education. According to the established Chinese *gudianwu* historiography,⁶⁷ the first recorded article on *gudianwu* is Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi's "The Future of Chinese Dance Art," published in the China People's Daily on February 18, 1951. In this paper, Ch'oe calls for the development of a new Chinese dance form based on study and research into the movement repertoires of *Jingju* and *Kunqu*, to prominent forms of *xiqu* (Cui 1951). In 1950-1951, Ch'oe invited expert *xiqu* performers to work together with members of the Beijing People's Art Theater Dance Troupe in creating new dance teaching curriculum for this new form. They produced three short sets of course materials based on the movement patterns used three female *xiqu* "character roles" (行当) -- *huadan*, *qingyi*, and *wudan*. In 1951-52, Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi was invited, at the request of Ouyang Yuqian (then President of the Central Drama Academy), and with the support of the China Ministry of Culture, to lead the "Cui Chengxi Research Course for Training Dance Cadres" held at the Central Drama Academy, in which she extended this work on *xiqu* movement.⁶⁸ One year later, in August, 1953, the Group for Research on Chinese *Gudianwu* was

⁶⁷ For a thorough summary of extant research materials on early *gudianwu* see Che (2006).

⁶⁸ For a summary discussion and participant memoirs of this course, see Tian and Li (2005).

established at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing, led by then Ye Ning, who was then Director of the Central Drama Academy Theater Troupe Dance Team. The Group was composed largely of students from Ch'oe's research group (Li *et al.* 2004).

Early *gudianwu* performers relied primarily on the movement language of *xiqu* for creating their dance works, to such an extent that early *gudianwu* is sometimes known as “*xiqu* dance” (Che 2006). For women, this style is represented by the fluttering circular walks, the asymmetrical one foot placed behind the other stance, and the dainty “lotus flower” finger positions. For men, signature *xiqu*-derived movements include the raised flex foot step, the open fist torso figure eight, and the flat-handed “cloud hands” air circles. The earliest dance works created in the *gudianwu* style, of which the 1957 *Bao Lian Deng* (《宝莲灯》 *Precious Lotus Lantern*) is the first full length “dance drama,” use stories, characters, and plot devices taken directly from the *xiqu* tradition (Yu 2006: 51).⁶⁹ *Precious Lotus Lantern* uses movements, roles, and costuming from *xiqu* to tell a story of forbidden romance between a human mortal and a goddess who lives in a mountain temple. *San Sheng Mu* (Third Sacred Goddess), the work's female lead, dresses in a long pastel-colored robe with an elaborate hairpiece decorated in flowers and beads. As she dances she glides long, silk ribbons in circular motions through the air with her hands. Her head sways gently from side to side, forming, in harmony with the curves in her torso, the recognizable “three curves” shape of female figures in classical Chinese art. Her eyes move from side to side, and her soft breath is visible in each movement. While there is no singing in the piece, the entire aesthetic of the work, including plot, costume, settings, and characters is strongly influenced by Chinese indigenous theater. Watching the work, one has a sense of watching a *xiqu* performance in which words and song have been substituted by movement.

Xiqu provided the makers of *gudianwu*, according to early practitioners, a resource for learning about classical Chinese bodily aesthetics in their contemporary living form. Ouyang Yuqian, himself a renown *xiqu* performer, argued that in *xiqu* one can find historical relics of ancient Chinese dances that have long disappeared from practice. Although the dances of ancient China themselves may have disappeared, he and others argued, their aesthetic inheritance can be located in and extracted from *xiqu*. “Within the art of *xiqu* is preserved a rich amount of ancient Chinese dance,” writes Ouyang in 1959. Furthermore, *xiqu* was, according to Ouyang, a sophisticated bodily aesthetic practice that was unique to China, and this made it an appropriate resource for drawing inspiration in the making of *gudianwu*. “That distinctive rhythm and elegant meter, those healthy and beautiful body shapes, that formidable expressive power... this is something that exists in no other place in the world” (Ouyang 1959: 350, quoted in Che 2006: 21). From studying *xiqu*, Chinese dance scholar Yu Ping argues, *gudianwu* derived important aspects of its Chinese bodily movement aesthetic. He writes, “In summary, sedimented in the morphology of *xiqu* dance is our nation's ‘*yuan liu zhou zhuan*’ (圆流周转 ‘round stream circulating’) time-space movement sensibility and *de yi wang xing* (得意忘形 ‘gain meaning by forgetting form’) human body aesthetic vision” (Yu Ping 1998: 33, quoted in Che 2006: 16).

Although the founders of *gudianwu* began their effort to create a national dance form by studying *xiqu*, their goal was always to go beyond the making of “*xiqu* dance.” Instead, they aimed to use *xiqu* “as a foundation,” -- combined with other elements, such as ballet, Chinese

⁶⁹ See a video of the 1959 film production of *Precious Lotus Lantern* here: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNTQwMTY1NDg=.html (part 1), http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNTQwMTY2MTY=.html (part 2)

martial arts, etc. -- to create an independent new dance form that, while remaining essentially Chinese, would be unlike anything that had come before. After it was founded in August, 1953, the Group for Research on Chinese *Gudianwu* conducted a period of intensive research into the training methods and dance elements of *xiqu*. The Group's members studied *xiqu* basic training exercises and learned to perform select sections of canonical *xiqu* works that were deemed to have strong "dance character" (舞蹈性), such as: 《游园惊梦》, 《钟馗嫁妹》, 《思凡》, 《小和尚下山》, etc. Furthermore, breaking into small research teams, the Group's members visited *xiqu* schools and performance troupes around China to conduct an investigation of the traditional methods of *xiqu* training, or what was known as "*keban xunlian*" (科班训练) (Li *et al.* 2004). At the close of these two projects, the Group came to the following conclusion:

The development of *xiqu* has over 800 years of history. It has a complete system with very rich training materials and a strict process. However, it only serves to cultivate *xiqu* performers. Dance training can absorb experience from [*xiqu* training] but cannot mechanically copy it. [We] must do our work to investigate the principles of dance technique, to peel away dance from the *chang, zuo, nian, da* (singing, doing, speaking, and fighting) of *xiqu*, and to create a new *gudianwu* form, gradually developing a dance training method. (Li *et al.* 2004: 7-8)

According to this determination, *gudianwu* was to be created not as *xiqu* dance but rather as an independent new form. "They advocated for using *xiqu* tradition as a foundation, and dance training as a starting point, to make Chinese *gudianwu* emerge from *xiqu* and become independent," writes Li Zhengyi, one of the Group's original participants (Li *et al.* 2004: 6). Che Yanfen (2006) writes of the relationship between *xiqu* dance and *gudianwu*: "In the early period of the making of Chinese *gudianwu*, *xiqu* dance provided [no more than] a quickly-produced initial form. Today when people use the term *xiqu* dance it has a historically specific meaning -- it refers either to *gudianwu* at a particular points in its 'story,' or to *gudianwu*'s 'genetic base'" (Che 2006: 17). It was on the "foundation" or "genetic base" of *xiqu* dance that *gudianwu* emerged as a new national form.

During the early Mao decades nearly all of China's literary and artistic genres faced the problem of creating so-called "national forms." As Leo Ou-Fan Lee (2002) points out, the problem of the "national form" emerged as one of the most controversial and politically sensitive topics of official debate in early socialist China, and it remained an unresolved dilemma among writers and artists throughout the Mao era. In a speech at the CCP sixth plenum of 1938, Mao Zedong called on party members to "make Marxism concretely Chinese," to abolish "foreign-slanted pedantry and obscurantism" and to instead replace them with a "fresh and vivid Chinese style and manner, of which the Chinese masses are fond." Party members, Mao argued, should work to bring together "national forms" with "international content," stating, "we must weld the two closely together" (quoted in Lee 2002: 250). This speech, Lee argues, sparked an ongoing debate among members of China's cultural circles over what exactly was meant by "national forms" and how they should be pursued in socialist China. One side, represented by Lin Bing, called for a rejection of the May Fourth revolutionary tradition as "foreign-slanted pedantry" and a return to traditional Chinese popular art forms. Another side, represented by Hu Feng, argued that the May Fourth tradition was, or soon would be, the China's "national form," and that it should be pursued over regressive feudal tradition. The compromise, represented by Guo Moruo and Zhou Yang, stated, according to Lee, "that one should assimilate the 'superior elements' of

traditional art forms, while the ‘new forms’ arising from New Literature should also be retained and further developed” (Lee 2002: 249).

Applied to the problem of creating a national form in dance, the debate over Mao’s 1938 speech helped produce the epistemological paradox in which Chinese tradition came to be understood as something dynamic, changeable, and preservable only through innovation and intervention. Chineseness, or the “vivid Chinese style and manner” to be created in the new national forms, was something to be generated, not simply preserved, in the view proposed by Guo Moruo and Zhou Yang. Through a careful process of research, comparison, and selection, one was to identify the “superior elements” within Chinese tradition, and one was to combine these, through enlightened innovation, with so-called “new forms.” The problem of which traditional forms could be considered “superior,” was, according to Lee, never made clear, even in Mao’s 1942 Talks at the Yan’an Forum, which helped end some of the other debates facing the socialist literary and artistic worlds at the time. “[At the Yan’an Forum in 1942] Mao chose to sidestep the problem, which had been debated heatedly during the ‘national form’ controversy, as to whether the existing traditional folk arts contained too many ‘feudal’ elements” (Lee 2002: 255).

Left undefined in official Party policy, the question of what could constitute “superior elements” of Chinese popular traditions became a central question for the making of a national form in dance, as it did in many other artistic and literary genres. In dance, the problem of carrying on and further developing the superior traditions of the past was exacerbated by the fact that the great imperial dance traditions of ancient China had almost completely died out after the tenth century. This is what practitioners of *gudianwu* call the problem of *duandai* (断代), or “broken inheritance.” According to the theory of broken inheritance, the only remnants of Chinese ancient imperial dance that still existed in the early and mid-twentieth century had to be extracted from living traditions such as *xiqu*, martial arts, or folk dance, or reconstructed based on historical evidence that was at best highly fragmentary. Chinese dance historian Wang Kefen, in her authoritative *The History of the Development of Chinese Dance* (2004), describes the Tang-Song transition (tenth century C.E.) as the decisive “turning point” in the development of Chinese ancient dance:

With the final collapse of the Tang imperial court, dance as an independent type of performance art gradually transitioned from a period of great prosperity to one of decline.... the major characteristics [of this period] are: unprecedented prosperity for folk song and dance (民间歌舞); the further development of plot and character, fostering the later development of *xiqu* art and multiple other forms (such as the ‘great songs’ 大曲); the decline of pure dance and the strengthening of theatricality in dance. Many canonical dance performance works of the preceding dynasties were lost forever, a great many traditional dance techniques and tricks were absorbed and developed into the newly emerging arts of Southern dramas and Northern variety plays (南戏杂剧), and the dance that was absorbed into *xiqu* continued in its forward development. (Wang 2004: 272)

Given this historical situation, creators of *gudianwu* in twentieth century China, unlike cultural workers in most other fields, had no obvious existing Chinese form which to make their selections and launch their development. In working to create a national form by extracting movement patterns from *xiqu*, dancers were in quite a different predicament from painters, for

example, who had the living tradition of Chinese ink painting, or from musicians, who had living traditions of indigenous Chinese musical composition and performance.

When faced with the problem of developing new national forms in China during the 1950s, practitioners of most artistic and literary genres found themselves choosing between elements from multiple living traditions, often a Chinese one and a non-Chinese one. In 1953-1957 the debates over how to revive and develop *guohua* (国画), or “national painting,” compared the relative merits of Soviet style oil painting with traditional Chinese painting, as Julie Andrews (1994) shows in *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979*. After 1952, Andrews argues, what she calls “the mandate to perpetuate the nation’s cultural legacy” dominated art theory in China (111). This “mandate” called for the preservation of the Chinese artistic legacy while adopting Soviet socialist realism. Since the mandate did not specify which cultural legacies should be perpetuated and how they should be made compatible with socialist realism, there was much debate over how the mandate should be carried out. In his report to the Second National Congress of Literary and Art Workers held in September, 1953, Communist Party cultural official Zhou Yang called on literary and art workers to continue and develop the legacy of the national heritage by combining new contents with Chinese forms. He states, “We request that the *contents* of literary and art workers express the people and thoughts of the new age, and the *forms* express the style and vigor [*qipai*] of the nation” (Andrews 1994: 119). The poet Ai Qing, in contrast to Zhou, argued that national heritage could only truly be maintained and developed if both contents and forms were made anew. “Only if we continue the most precious part of our national painting heritage and then create things with new contents and new forms can we call this completely new Chinese painting,” Ai writes in August, 1953 (Andrews 1994: 111). Thus, in the field of *guohua*, a fierce debate ensued over how to preserve Chinese painting traditions while still remaining appropriate and relevant in the new political era.

In dance, the equivalent to Soviet oil painting was Soviet ballet, but there was no equivalent to *guohua*. With no living tradition of Chinese dance in existence in the twentieth century, the makers of *gudianwu* found themselves taking on a different set of challenges from those faced in painting and most other art forms. While seeking to draw inspiration and specific movement repertoires from *xiqu*, the makers of *gudianwu* did not consider *xiqu* dance alone a viable option for China’s national dance form. Because *xiqu* performers relied largely on singing, together with bodily expression, to convey the artistry and meaning of a work, *xiqu* movements alone were too subtle and unexpressive to serve the purposes of dance, which had to convey emotion, plot, character, and meaning all through the body exclusively. While Chinese folk and ethnic dance were considered important to the making of a national dance form, they too were seen as not a suitable Chinese traditional alternative to Soviet ballet. Not only were these forms considered too popular to represent China’s classical heritage, they were too varied in style and form to represent the cultural heritage of China as a whole. With no traditional Chinese alternative, the Chinese dancers who set out to create *gudianwu* in the 1950s did so with the explicit goal of creating a wholly new national form. In creating *gudianwu*, they aimed to produce an entirely new Chinese artistic form that, while preserving Chinese national heritage, would offer a Chinese equivalent to Soviet ballet.

Due to the historical differences between the making of national forms in the various genres of literary and artist production in China during the 1950s, the very idea of “Chineseness” was different in different projects. In painting, for example, Chineseness became associated with specific materials (ink, Chinese pigment, Chinese brushes), specific themes (plum blossoms, stylized animals, mountains), and specific techniques (holding the brush, applying paint,

designing compositions, interpreting subjects, etc.). These signs of Chineseness could all be identified with existing painting practices, and their products could be examined and compared with those of other traditions. Likewise, in music, Chineseness was associated with a specific set of traditional musical instruments (bamboo flute, *guqin*, *erhu*, etc.), specific types of composition and melody, and specific techniques of playing and singing. In dance, Chineseness took on a very different meaning. In dance, since the primary tool is the human body, debates over the material definitions of Chineseness in *gudianwu* return to two subjects: biological and physical variation in human bodies (ethnic identity, selection of dance bodies, extension of the body through props) and training. Since there were no extant examples of Chinese traditional dance works thought to be equivalent in stature to those of Soviet ballet works, Chineseness was rarely defined by reference to specific dance works. Finally, given the problem of “broken inheritance,” there was no clearly identified repertoire of dance techniques that could be said to constitute a Chinese traditional form.

As in the field of *guohua*, the field of *gudianwu* in the 1950s was characterized by continued disagreement over how best to perpetuate Chinese tradition in artistic practice. Unlike in *guohua*, however, the foundational questions at issue in *gudianwu* revolved not around the nature of the genre of dance, but, rather around the question of what constitutes Chineseness. Rather than asking “what is dance?” or “how should dance be pursued in a socialist realist way?” rather, *gudianwu* practitioners asked “what is Chineseness?” and “how can we practice dance in a Chinese way?” Practitioners of *gudianwu* largely accepted the definition of dance and its appropriate use in socialist realism that had already been worked out by the Soviet ballet masters. What mattered to them instead was how to make dance Chinese, because this is the part of the overall idea of “national form” that they were most lacking. Much in the way that musical instruments and paintbrushes became experimenting grounds for battles, exchanges, and cross-pollinations between “Chinese” and “Western” or “Soviet” traditions, the body of the dancer became an experimenting ground for the creation of a new definition of Chineseness. In this scene of creation, it was not a question of using which Chinese material, content, or technique to develop an existing Chinese form. Rather, it was a problem of using dance as a means of experimentation and research to discover how to make a body more Chinese.

Dialectics of the Ballet Body

Gudianwu development between 1953 and 1980 can be divided into four periods: Emergence (1953-1957), Reform (1957-1966), Rejection (1966-1976), and Revival (1976-1980), each of which marks a different set of debates and conclusions regarding the correct approach to creating *gudianwu*. During the Emergence period (1953-1957), teachers and students at the Beijing Dance School devised and carried out a new curriculum for “basic training” in *gudianwu*, and they experimented with choreography in the new dance form, culminating in the performance of China’s first full-length *gudianwu* dance drama, *Precious Lotus Lantern* 《宝莲灯》, in 1957. After a series of research and criticism meetings held in 1956, *gudianwu* entered its Reform period, in which elements of Soviet ballet were gradually inserted into the basic training curriculum of *gudianwu*, to solve problems of “scientificity” (科学性) and “systematicity” (系统性) said to be plaguing the then existing curriculum. *The Mermaid* 《渝美人》, created first in 1959 and then re-staged in 1963, is the representative work from this period. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) *gudianwu* was rejected as “feudal,” and it was replaced by revolutionary ballet, the most famous examples of which include *Red Detachment of Women* 《红色娘子军》 and *The White-Haired Girl* 《白毛女》, neither of

which are generally considered examples of the *gudianwu* repertoire. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976-1980, training in *gudianwu* was rehabilitated at dance training and performance programs around the country. A new *gudianwu* teaching curriculum, known as *Shenyun* (身韵, literally “body-rhyme”), was designed by teachers at the Beijing Dance School to strengthen the “national character” (民族性) of *gudianwu* and reduce the influences of ballet aesthetics on the form. *Gudianwu* dance drama enjoyed an unprecedented explosion in popularity and new creation, exemplified by works such as *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* 《丝路花雨》 and *Princess Wencheng* 《文城公主》, both of which premiered in 1979.

Since the early 1950s, when *gudianwu* was first being created, practitioners of *gudianwu* have grappled with the problem of the universalized Western body. In dance, as in other fields in which the human body is a site for knowledge-making and intervention, the problem of the universalized Western body occurs when Western forms of embodiment, knowledge about, or ways of shaping the body are extracted from their cultural milieu and treated as universal. In the making of *gudianwu*, Chinese dancers confronted the problem of the universal Western body when Soviet ballet training was introduced by Soviet experts, and supported by Chinese cultural leaders, as being better suited to “the needs of dance,” the “needs of the human body” than the new *gudianwu* training methods. This view of the ballet body can be seen in comments such as the following, made by a young teacher of *gudianwu* employed at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2008. When asked why he believes ballet is necessary for training *gudianwu* performers, he answered,

Ballet is based on several hundreds of years of careful research and experimental development. Why should we not take advantage of this knowledge, just because it is Western and not Chinese? We can see from our experience that ballet develops the muscles and tendons in a way that is necessary for dance. Of course, we can use this for our own purposes, but it is still necessary as a foundation. Chinese training methods are only a few decades old, and they still cannot compete with the level of training achieved by ballet. The choice to use ballet is very practical. It is simply the only effective way of training the bodily capacities needed for good dancing.

Here, the teacher employs a logic in which ballet is universally applicable for the training of all dancing bodies. This teacher, like all other teachers of *gudianwu* I met and studied with at the Beijing Dance Academy, expressed a fiercely passionate devotion to the importance of preserving Chinese qualities in *gudianwu*. His support for using ballet as a method for training Chinese dancers was therefore founded in the idea that ballet was a necessary tool for promoting Chinese dance forms. Without ballet training, he argues, Chinese dancers would not be equipped with the physical capacities objectively required for being a dancer, and, without these capacities, they would not be able to represent the Chinese cultural tradition on the world stage.

Throughout the 1950s, Soviet ballet masters served as instructors and advisors at the Beijing Dance School, and their approaches deeply informed the development of the *gudianwu* training curriculum, as well as the aesthetic sensibilities of students and teachers. Specific elements of ballet training, such barre exercises, piano accompaniment, and a compartmentalized approach to the body all found their way into the *gudianwu* curriculum. Although these changes were usually explained as being necessary for practical or scientific reasons, as I explain below, they also produced a sense of appreciation for the aesthetic of ballet, often in which ballet was

sometimes taken to be the ultimate measurement of human beauty. Wang Peiying (b. 1939), a member of the Beijing Dance School's 1954 entering class, and later a director of the *gudianwu* program, describes the leg extensions and pointed feet of ballet as a kind of ultimate human form that transcends boundaries of cultural aesthetics. She says,

From the point of view of the human body, it doesn't matter whether it's modern dance or ballet or Chinese dance, I think it's the same. All require straightness, right? No one would say that dance requires one to stand on stage with bent legs. It just doesn't look good! [...] I think many of our male students, when they stretch their legs and point their feet tight, they really are beautiful! That extension!

Wang is a strong proponent of Chinese aesthetics, and at other times in our conversations she expresses equally glowing descriptions of what she considers to be the most beautiful aspects of Chinese-style movements and techniques embedded in *gudianwu*. Whereas she describes characteristics such as “*yunwei*” (韵味), one of the most important aesthetic The fact that she describes ballet movements as , however, shows that she justifies the use of ballet in *gudianwu* based on the idea that it possesses an objective or universal kind of artistic value.

Apart from the training and bodily aesthetic of ballet, the creators of *gudianwu* also learned from their Soviet instructors specific understandings of dance choreography, which impacted both the creation of dance works and their critical evaluation. The three most important early full-length *gudianwu* dance dramas, including *Precious Lotus Lantern*, *Small Dagger Society* and *The Mermaid*, were created either under the direct supervision of Soviet choreography instructors or by recent graduates of programs led by Soviet teachers. Structures and principles of ballet choreography became the norm for new representative *gudianwu* works, and they shaped the way these works were critically evaluated. An essay published in *Wudao (Dance)* magazine in 1958 criticizes what the author describes as the “unsatisfying” partner dance scenes in the 1957 *gudianwu* dance drama *Precious Lotus Lantern* (Feng 1958). Summarizing and explaining this author's remarks, Chinese dance critic and historian Yu Ping (2004) writes,

In fact, similar to the most ancient of narrative ballets, *La Fille Mal Gardee*, as our nation's first attempt at creating a large-scale national dance drama (民族舞剧), *Precious Lotus Lantern* is incapable of satisfying the audience's demands for appreciating dance. [Long writes] ‘For example, in the performances of Three Sacred Goddess and Liu Yanchang in the first scene are limited only to hand movements and miming gestures, [and] there is not a single section of partner dancing (双人舞) that is worthy of full enjoyment and mutual expressions of emotion.’ The criticism of the so-called ‘dance’ of *Precious Lotus Lantern* points out an important gap in our learning from Soviet experience in the creation of dance dramas, that is, our lack of sufficient attention and research into the important key movement element of ‘partner dance’ in classical ballet. We can [choose to] not follow the three-part Adagio, Variation and Coda [in English in original] to create the coordinated dances of the male and female leads, but we cannot fail to design partnering lifting techniques and partnering movements of

emotional expression that comply with national personality and national aesthetics. (Yu 2004: 53)

Applying the category of ‘partner dance’ to *gudianwu*, both Long’s 1958 critique and Yu’s 2004 historical interpretation impose a set of choreographic standards from ballet onto the creation and performance of *gudianwu* works. In using the balletic definition of partner dancing, along with its related expectations and standards of excellence, they discount the value of indigenous notions of how partner dance should be created and evaluated.

An example of such an indigenous notion of partner dance emerged during a lecture on popular Confucian philosophy given by Yu Dan at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2008. Making a comparison between ballet and Kunqu, Yu argues that Chinese indigenous performance creates relationality through the space between characters. This type of choreographic aesthetic, she argues, reflects aspects of Chinese indigenous cosmology and classical thought. She states,

In the singing and dancing between the *Xiaosheng* and *Xiaodan* [in Kunqu performance],⁷⁰ one person is always standing; between the two people there is always a certain coordination. [The aesthetics of Kunqu] express a fusion between human and earth. It’s like in the story of Pangu [the creator of the universe in Chinese mythology]. Because in the culture of Pangu, humans are between Heaven and Earth, constantly undergoing mutual birth and mutual concession.

In Yu’s explanation, the body of Kunqu, unlike the ballet body, is “inward-oriented, reserved, and characterized by fluid, soft fullness (内联, 含蓄, 圆润).”⁷¹ It represents, she argues, a relational rather than independent, reserved rather than extroverted, ideal of the relationship between human beings and between the human being and the world. Throughout their attempts to create a national dance form with Chinese characteristics, *gudianwu* practitioners sought to maintain and value the types of indigenous Chinese aesthetics that Yu describes here. However, because of the hegemonic status of ballet, they were constantly forced to justify their decisions and choices against existing standards adopted from ballet that were taken to be more scientific, more beautiful, more objective, and more appropriate both for dance and for the human body.

The role of the universalized ballet body in the making of *gudianwu* shares important features in common with that of the universalized biomedical body in global medical practice. As medical anthropologists and historians of medicine have shown, Western biomedicine has often attained a hegemonic status in relation to local or indigenous medical knowledge and practice based on claims to universal applicability and objective efficacy for all human bodies.⁷² In both the case of *gudianwu* and indigenous medical systems, Western (or in the case of 1950’s

⁷⁰ The roles of the young scholar gentleman and young virtuous lady in Chinese traditional opera.

⁷¹ The term *yuanrun* (圆润) is sometimes translated as “mellow and full.” However, in this context, it is important to see the meaning of the term’s component parts, “round” and “moist,” together with the idea of softness and fullness that it conveys.

⁷² See, for example Adams and Pigg (2005), Bates (1995), Cohen (1998), Good (1994), Harding (1998), Lock (1993), Marglin and Marglin (1990), Nandy (1990).

gudianwu, Soviet) approaches to knowledge about and intervention on the human body are stripped of their embeddedness in Western cultural systems and instead seen as universal and objective. As in the case of the global spread of the biomedical body, the universalized and hegemonic character of the Western or Soviet ballet body is inseparable from political and economic power. When the Soviet ballet body was adopted as a universal body in the Chinese dance world of the 1950s, China was politically and economically dependent on the Soviet Union. Apart from its connection to the Soviet Union, the ballet body also resonated for many dancers with experiences of ballet as a part of a European colonial culture in places like Harbin, Tianjin, and Shanghai. As in the case of Western biomedicine, a discourse of scientificity and objectivity was used by early *gudianwu* practitioners to import features of ballet into the *gudianwu* curriculum. This contributed not only to the increasingly balletic quality of *gudianwu* but also to a further entrenchment of the global power of the ballet body.

The universalizing status of the ballet body in the Chinese dance world was not limited to the early nation-building period of the 1950s. After 1966, when revolutionary ballet was implemented as the official dance form in place of *gudianwu*, ballet was again promoted using a universalizing language, although this time it took the shape of statements about objectively defined “artistic quality.” Cultural leaders such as Jiang Qing argued that ballet was the “highest form of modern artistic production in dance,” and it was claimed that as such, ballet was the most appropriate medium in which to represent China’s advanced revolutionary culture (Xiong 2009). Whereas the leaders of the Cultural Revolution treated *gudianwu* as inextricably connected to Chinese feudal culture, and thus unacceptable as a revolutionary art form, they decontextualized ballet from its European imperial origins and saw instead as a universal expression of human artistic achievement that could be used for Chinese revolutionary purposes.

After 1976, when revolutionary ballet was rejected as a national form, and *gudianwu* was experiencing enthusiastic revival and government support, many *gudianwu* practitioners still argued that ballet should be used for basic training of *gudianwu* dancers, even as they advocated for a more Chinese “style” (风格) or “spirit” (精神). Without a foundation in ballet, these individuals argued, *gudianwu* dancers would lack in the objective qualities deemed necessary for the professional dancer’s body, which they argued were necessary for any dancer in any aesthetic tradition. Ballet was once again treated as a scientific approach to the effective training of the human body. Once developed as a tool for dance, trained bodies could, its proponents argued, be used for all types of dance creation, including those with a distinctive Chinese style. Debates over the question of ballet training became so contentious at the Beijing Dance Academy (formerly the Beijing Dance School) that the *gudianwu* program split into two separate majors, one that used a fusion of ballet and Chinese basic training methods, and one that used an entirely new curriculum said to have eschewed all elements of ballet.

It was largely due to the role of the ballet body as a standard for dance training in the making of *gudianwu* that Chineseness emerged as an aesthetic, rather than an anthropological category in the making of a Chinese national dance form. Rather than arguing for Chinese characteristics on the basis of their significance as scientific, systematic, and historically valid approaches to the making of dance, practitioners promoted Chineseness through the notion of a unique national aesthetic for dance and the need to promote Chinese artistic and cultural styles. Through the notion of Chinese “style” and Chinese “spirit,” the creators of *gudianwu* struggled to meld what they saw as distinctively Chinese ways of using the body and producing artistic dance works with what they saw as objective knowledge about the human body and Western or Soviet definitions of what dance is and should be. Since they adopted the training standards and

definitions established by ballet, the makers of *gudianwu* pursued Chineseness as an added artistic sensibility to be generated using what were seen as the objectively appropriate and useful tools of the balletic body.

In the following two sections, I examine briefly the early relationship between the ballet body and the making of *gudianwu* at the Beijing Dance School between 1953 and 1976, in *gudianwu*'s periods of Emergence, Reform, and Rejection. In my fieldwork studying *gudianwu* at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2007-09, teachers, classmates, and researchers often referred to this history as a way of justifying their actions and perspectives in the present. In particular, the division that took place in the Department of *Gudianwu* after 2000 was based in a fundamental disagreement over the adoption of ballet methods in the pre-Cultural Revolution period. Therefore, apart from offering evidence and elaboration of the problem of the universal ballet body in the early making of *gudianwu*, the following section provides important background for the discussion of post-Cultural Revolution *gudianwu* and its contesting productions of an aesthetic of Chineseness, which is the focus of the second half of the chapter.

The Un-Scientificity of Chineseness (1953-1956)

In the autumn of 1953, when Ye Ning's Group on Research in *Gudianwu* was conducting its investigation into *xiqu* training, the Ministry of Culture asked Ye Ning to host a visiting ballet expert named O. A. Yealina (Chinese name *Yilina* 伊丽娜) from the Moscow Dance Academy. Yealina was taken to observe dance training and productions at several of the most important dance institutions in Beijing, including Central Song and Dance Troupe (中央歌舞团), the All-Army Song and Dance Troupe (总政歌舞团), the Beijing Military Area Song and Dance Troupe (北京军区歌舞团), the Youth Art Theater Dance Team (青年艺术剧院舞蹈队), etc. Yealina watched *xiqu* training and performances, and she observed the final performance report from Ye Ning's Group on Research in *Gudianwu*. Based on Yealina's positive assessment of China's dance developments, including her conclusion, "China was entirely capable of establishing a dance school," the Ministry of Culture finally took action to establish the Beijing Dance School in early 1954 (Li *et al.* 2004: 8).

The decision to put Soviet ballet masters in charge of general advising for the Beijing Dance School was consistent with China's politics at the time, although it angered members of the Chinese dance world who had prior experience setting up dance training programs and who did not want ballet to be given such a prominent role in the new School. A treaty signed in 1950 between China and the Soviet Union called for sending 20,000 Chinese to the USSR for training and 10,000 Russian technicians to China to advise production and institutional growth in a range of fields, especially in education and heavy industry (Pepper 1996).⁷³ Thus, inviting Soviet ballet instructors to serve as advisors for the Beijing Dance School was consistent with this nationwide policy of learning from the Soviet Union. Wu Xiaobang, the "Father of Chinese New Dance" was one of many critics of this decision. Although Wu had lobbied for the establishment a centralized, state-sponsored professional dance school in China, he turned down the offer to serve as the School's President. "I personally saw him tear up the letter," said Sun Ying (b. 1929), during an interview. Sun was a student of Wu Xiaobang's, a member of the first cohort of teachers at the School, and a key participant in Ye Ning's 1953 Research Group. According to

⁷³ This policy of learning from the Soviet Union, known as the "*yi bian dao*" (一边倒 "fall to one side") policy continued until the Sino-Soviet split occurred in 1960. For a detailed study of the influence of this policy on Chinese education, see Pepper (1996).

Sun, Wu's rejection of the post was an implicit criticism of the leadership roles being given to Soviet ballet teachers at the time. "Dai Ailian became the School's President," Sun explained, "and, you know, she supported ballet. But she was more of a figurehead." Dai was a foreign-born Chinese herself trained in ballet, and she supported the use of ballet for basic training of Chinese dancers.⁷⁴ She and Chen Jinqing (b. 1921), an enthusiast of German modern dance who like Dai and Wu had long been engaged in China's revolutionary dance activities, formed the Chinese leadership of the School.

In February, 1954, dance teachers were recruited to begin preparing a curriculum for the new Beijing Dance School, which was to open with a full roster of students in September, 1954. Reflecting the important role that Yealina played in the recruitment of entering students, the Beijing Dance Academy Annals (1997) state: "Based on Yealina's advice, in the first year the School recruited students of different ages to fill each grade of the six-year program, 198 students in total..." (2). Apart from personally teaching the ballet classes required of all new teachers, Yealina also participated in the designing of the School's course structure. The four areas of dance courses to be offered at the School included ballet, Western character dance, *gudianwu*, and Chinese folk and ethnic dance. While the ballet and Western character dance courses were to use curricula introduced by Soviet instructors, the Chinese folk and ethnic dance and *gudianwu* courses were to be taught using new curricula developed by the teachers in the group. Members of the group assigned to *gudianwu* had only five months to prepare a six-year basic training curriculum that was to be instituted when the school opened in September. "The young teachers were under enormous pressure during those five months," recounts Xiong Jiatai (b. 1938), a member of the first class of students admitted to the Beijing Dance School who stayed on after graduation to serve as a teacher in the *gudianwu* program. "They did their best to create a curriculum, and the main requirement was that it reflect the unique characteristics of Chinese style (体现民族风格特点). However, being that they had few examples to work from, severe time constraints, and limited experience, the curriculum they produced inevitably had many problems" (Xiong 2009).

Initially, the teachers in the *gudianwu* group, which was headed by Ye Ning, were determined to use only Chinese elements in the *gudianwu* curriculum. Guided by the 1953 mandate to preserve Chinese national characteristics through the creation of national art forms, they adopted training techniques and movement repertoires from *xiqu* and Chinese martial arts. The basic training, mat exercises and *shenduan* (身段) exercises from *xiqu* were selectively cut down and combined into a single course curriculum. Movements taken from different character roles of *xiqu* were combined or altered to create a coherent set of standards for men's and women's versions of the new basic *gudianwu* positions. Traditional movements such as the "cloud hands" (云手) used in taijiquan and *xiqu* were enlarged and made more fluid and dynamic to make them useful for dance. Throughout the new curriculum, musical accompaniment was to be composed of Chinese folk music, using instruments such as the *erhu*, a two-stringed instrument used in Chinese indigenous music and theater.

Despite the clear intention to follow Chinese models, the group in *gudianwu* also adopted aspects of ballet training. These were usually explained as practical necessities for accomplishing the larger goal of producing a national form. As described in Li *et al.*'s (2004) *History of the*

⁷⁴ In her position as Director of the Drama Academy Dance Troupe, Dai had used a combination of ballet and European modern dance to create a basic training program for Chinese dancers (Li *et al.* 2004: 3). For a biographical account of Dai Ailian, see Glasstone (2007).

Development of the Teaching System of Chinese Classical Dance, the version of the history officially taught at the Beijing Dance Academy, the decision to adopt the structure of ballet was one of timing and need. They write,

The teacher training class only ran for five months, and the *gudianwu* group, in addition to taking the *gudianwu* basic training course also took Soviet expert Yealina's course in the structural methodology of the ballet basic training curriculum. Because the School was going to open very soon, and China was in great need of a systematic training curriculum that progressed from basic to deep and from simple to complex, under the advice of *gudianwu* course supervisor Ye Ning [that we] decided to learn from the structural methodology of ballet basic training in putting together the *gudianwu* curriculum. At the time, our thoughts were very clear, we needed to establish *gudian* dance based on the foundation of the *xiqu* tradition. However, in actual practice, it was not that simple. (Li *et al.* 2004: 9)

Over the following two years, the teachers at the Beijing Dance School and adopted more elements from ballet into the *gudianwu* curriculum. These elements ranged from the use of ballet barre exercises to the introduction of piano accompaniment in place of Chinese folk instruments to the breaking down of whole-body movements derived from *xiqu* and martial arts into exercises designed to train individual body parts in a progressive order. Arm movements and foot positions were created based on the arm and foot positions used in ballet, and in an effort to produce a more “systematic” course structure, the teachers, following the ballet course structure, organized the *gudianwu* into categories of exercises such as barre work, traveling combinations, turns, and leaps. When Chinese movements did not fit easily into the ballet-based categorization system, or were difficult to analyze in parts, or teachers disagreed on how best to teach them, they were often abandoned, resulting in a phenomenon Li *et al.* call “cutting the feet to fit the shoes” (削足适履) (2004: 16).

The largest introduction of ballet-based elements into the Beijing Dance School's *gudianwu* curriculum took place at the end of a five month series of twenty-eight evening meetings, known as the “Scientificity and Systematicity” (科学化、系统化) meetings, which took place between March and August, 1956. Out of the twenty-eight meetings, twenty-five were spent having members of the ballet teaching group, supervised by Yealina, demonstrate ballet training methods to the teachers in the *gudianwu* teaching group. The remaining three meetings were spent with anatomy experts who conducted research into the movements from a perspective of human anatomy. Reflecting the officially accepted and oft-repeated explanation of the decision to incorporate ballet elements into the *gudianwu* curriculum in 1956, Li writes, “Through ‘scientificity and systematicity’ work, [we] went one step further in learning from the experience of ballet, strengthening the scientific systematicity of the *gudianwu* curriculum” (Li *et al.* 2004: 14).

Most interviewees who were members of the early *gudianwu* program, when reflecting on the adoption of elements of ballet in 1956, employ the terminology of “scientificity” in explaining this decision, and they argue that training methods from ballet were necessary to protect the physical safety of the students. “The original curriculum started with very difficult movements, and students could be injured if they did not possess the necessary bodily strength and skills to complete them,” he explained during his course for graduate students at the Beijing

Dance Academy in 2009 (Xiong 2009). Wang Peiying, the member of the 1954 entering class quoted above on the beauty of ballet leg extensions, describes the need for ballet to correct what she describes as “unscientific” elements of traditional *xiqu* training. She states,

With jumps for example, you can’t just start immediately with a big jump. You need to have students start with barre exercises, because at first children cannot stand steady. In the past, China didn’t have these [methods], it would just begin with the ‘*shuang fei yan*’ (双飞燕, double flying swallow)⁷⁵ -- a big jump! That is not scientific. So, from the perspective of the human body, I feel that ballet is -- after all, they developed it for so many years -- it is very scientific.

Training strategies such as the use of the barre had to be imported from ballet, argue Xiong and Wang, in order to increase the appropriateness of the training methods for the human body, and to avoid injury. Wang’s statements in particular show a bias toward ballet training, since they imply that traditional *xiqu* training methods were also unscientific. Wang cites the long development of ballet training as a reason for its scientificity, even though *xiqu* training methods had arguably developed over an even longer period of time.

Both Chinese and Revolutionary (1957-1976)

Shortly after the changes adopted in the wake of the Scientificity and Systematicity meetings of 1956, *gudianwu* practitioners began to notice and be concerned about the impact that the introduction of ballet techniques had on the “*minzu tedian*” (民族特点), or “national characteristics” of *gudianwu*. “During this period,” Xiong (2009) explains, “teachers in the program in Chinese dance became more aware of the need to distinguish between adopting lessons from ballet and taking on the aesthetic standards of ballet. We had to be careful to use ballet only as a means to our own ends (为我所用), without adopting its aesthetic vision.” Reflecting on the problems that resulted from the “cutting the feet to fit the shoes” process of “scientizing” and “systematizing” *gudianwu* according to the standards of ballet, Li *et al.* write,

Some things were neglected in the process, for example: complete movements; coordination between the hands, eyes, body, and steps; standards for *yunlü* (韵律); some very subtle processes [of movement]; *yunlü* and rhythm requirements. Expectations for the *shen* (神 spirit), *xing* (形 form), *jin* (劲 force), *lü* (律 pattern) and other stylistic elements of *yunlü* were not standardized in classroom practice. We didn’t pay enough attention to the development of special abilities that were necessary for Chinese *gudianwu* movements and technical tricks... [and] we didn’t preserve some of the lessons of traditional training. (Li *et al.* 2004: 16)

In their emphasis on indigenous Chinese notions of movement quality, such “*yunlü*” and “*shen, xing, jin, lü*” Li *et al.* here draw attention to the growing concern of the time with losing the physical abilities to embody Chineseness. This concern motivated much of the reforms that took

⁷⁵ A high difficulty jump used frequently in Chinese dance, it requires the dancer to jump off of and land on two feet. The dancer jumps vertically and stretches the legs out to the sides so that, while the dancer is in mid leap, they form a straight line horizontal to the ground.

place in *gudianwu* during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and it was the foundation for the large-scale Revival of *gudianwu* in the post-Cultural Revolution period.

In September of 1957, after more than a year of deliberation, the Beijing Dance School decided to “divide the disciplines” (分科), or to create two separate programs based on the division between Chinese and European dance. The decision was meant to reduce what were increasingly seen as contradictions between ballet training and Chinese dance training, and to create a more systematic way of preparing students to be performers in different kinds of dance dramas. In the spring of 1957, graduating students from the “choreography training class” established in the fall of 1955 created *Precious Lotus Lantern* as their graduation project. The work maintained a clear connection to indigenous Chinese aesthetics, in its movement vocabulary, story, characters, costumes, and music, and it demonstrated successfully that *gudianwu* could be used for full-length narrative dance dramas. The creation of so-called “*minzu wuju*” (民族舞剧) or “national dance dramas” became the official goal of the *gudianwu* program, and the dividing of the disciplines was meant to aid in this effort. Before the dividing of the disciplines, all students learned both Chinese dance and ballet. However, after the dividing of the disciplines students were placed into one of two separate programs -- “Chinese National Dance Drama” (中国民族舞剧科) or “European Ballet Dance Drama” (欧洲芭蕾舞剧科) -- in which they studied separate courses and performed in separate dance dramas.

In order to strengthen the national character of the Chinese national dance drama program, and to increase the choreographic repertoire of *gudianwu*, teachers in the new program participated in a number of special training sessions with specialists in various fields of Chinese indigenous performance. Experts in traditional opera were again invited to work with the instructors and to introduce more elements of *xiqu* into the curriculum. During the Chinese New Year holiday in early 1958, teachers from the program in Chinese dance travelled to Sichuan and Chongqing to study local *Chuanju* (Sichuan local *xiqu*) and martial arts. At the *Chuanju* school, they learned the *Chuanju* piece 《百字韵》, as well as finger techniques, *huadan fan* technique, handkerchief, water sleeve, and the basic training curriculum for the different *huangdang* (character roles) in *Chuanju*. With martial arts instructors, they studied traditional movement patterns and sword sequences including 《绵拳》 《青龙剑》 《飞凤剑》 《背腿连拳》. (Li *et al.* 2004: 22-23). Apart from local *xiqu* and martial arts, *gudianwu* instructors also began to experiment with blending elements of Chinese folk dance in their classroom routines. For example, in a routine called *Shanbei Fengguang* 《陕北风光》, devised for her female *gudianwu* class, Li Zhengyi incorporated hand gestures and poses from the Dunhuang cave paintings, swaying arm movements from Tibetan dance, and the “three nods” head movement from *Huagudeng*, a popular form of Han folk dance. (Li *et al.* 2004: 32-33). The goal in this new research, they argued, was to discover and develop a “Chinese style” (民族风格) that transcends the boundaries of any single existing indigenous form. By analyzing a range of styles and practices of indigenous performance, *gudianwu* instructors and choreographers searched for commonalities that could become general rules to create new works with a distinctly Chinese character.

Chen Ailian (b. 1939), argues that the students trained in the Chinese dance program at the Beijing Dance School before the 1957 dividing of the disciplines possessed a dual-character movement capacity that was not found in the later generations. “We were capable of both Chinese dance movements and ballet, and this is something that became rare after the dividing of the disciplines.” After the dividing of the disciplines, she argues, dancers were trained in either ballet or Chinese dance and they thus became increasingly specialized. Chen graduated from the

program in Chinese National Dance Drama in 1959, along with Wang Peiying and Xiong Jiatai, both quoted above. Theirs was the first group to graduate after the 1957 dividing of the disciplines, so they had benefited from both the combined and the specialized programs. Between 1954 and 1957, they had studied in the four areas of ballet, Western character dance, *gudianwu*, and Chinese folk and ethnic dance. After the dividing of the disciplines, they were assigned to the program in Chinese dance, and they spent the years 1957-1959 deepening their abilities in Chinese dance, through new classroom routines such as *Shanbei Fengguang*. In assessing the accomplishments of the “class of 1959,” Li *et al.* argue that this group not only represented the standard for the new “national dance drama performer,” they had also succeeded in going being the earlier use of *xiqu* movements, helping to create “China’s national dance language” (2004: 26).

Chen and her classmates performed many of the lead roles in the 1959 national dance drama, *The Mermaid*, which was choreographed by students in the second cycle of the same choreography class that had produced *The Precious Lotus Lantern* in 1957. *The Mermaid* was approved by the Ministry of Culture to be part of the national ceremonies held in honor of the Tenth Anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, and it was performed for many of China’s top Party and state leaders, including Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yi, Peng Zhen, and others (Li *et al.* 2004: 35). Chen Ailian played the role of the Mermaid, using her training in both ballet and Chinese dance. Reflecting on the creation of the piece and its significance in the history of *gudianwu*, Chen states,

The Mermaid was special in that it combined the best of ballet and Chinese dance. Most of the lead roles were performed by students of the Chinese dance group, like myself, and there was only one lead role performed by a student in the ballet group. So, you can see how important the Chinese elements of the piece were. All of us had the ability to dance both forms, so the work was really innovative.... *The Mermaid* was very popular, and different groups tried to re-stage it several times. Later, when the National Ballet of China did a re-staging, I went to help with the rehearsals. The sad thing was that those ballet performers couldn’t do many of the Chinese movements. They tried to learn them, but it was unsuccessful, so finally they just changed the choreography and just cut those movements out. But, of course it wasn’t as good after that. The same thing happened when the Chinese dance department tried to re-stage it as well. The Chinese dance majors had trouble performing the difficult ballet movements, and they ended up changing the choreography too.

Its unique combination of ballet and Chinese dance elements makes *The Mermaid* one of the only full-length dance dramas to capture, as a complete work, the dynamic process of creating *gudianwu* as a national dance form in China in the 1950s.⁷⁶ As Chen describes, the movement vocabulary of *The Mermaid* uses elements from both ballet and Chinese dance forms. Chinese Yi minority folk dance appears in at least two scenes (Yu 2004: 74). The famous “Coral Dance” 《珊瑚舞》, which has been compared to the dance of the four swans in *Swan Lake*,

⁷⁶ Unfortunately, no existing recording of the 1959 version of *The Mermaid* is available electronically.

uses elements of Chinese folk dance, and the “24 Mermaids” and “Fighting” scenes in Act Three each make extensive use of techniques from *gudianwu* and martial arts (Li *et al.* 2004: 36).

The Mermaid is difficult to categorize, even according to the complex notions of dance genre existing in China at the time it was created. It is often described as “China’s Swan Lake,” because it was created in the same year as the first full classical performance of *Swan Lake* by a Chinese cast of dancers in China, and because its creators used *Swan Lake* as a model when they produced the work (Yu 2004: 72). *The Mermaid* has been described as both the first example of “Chinese ballet” (Yu 2004: 73) and evidence of “a new period of development... in the *gudianwu* school” (Li *et al.* 2004: 35). It represented one of many efforts in the pre-Cultural Revolution period of Maoist China to adopt elements of ballet as a means to producing a distinctly Chinese national dance form. Li Chengxiang, a member of the choreographic team that produced *The Mermaid*, argues that the team’s goal, devised in large part by their instructor and director, the visiting Soviet ballet master Pyotr Gusev (Chinese name *Guxuefu* 古雪夫) was “to do an experiment for the development of Chinese dance drama, to explore the creation of a new dance system -- a classical ballet system that blends, in a mutually complementary way, Chinese *gudianwu* and Western ballet” (Li 1997, quoted in Yu 2004: 73). In this new system, Li writes, quoting Gusev, “ballet is just a kind of technique; it serves a special purpose of embellishing specified national characteristics” (Li 1997, quoted in Yu 2004: 77).

In the spring of 1963, *The Mermaid* was staged for a second time as the graduation performance of the 1963 graduating class of students in the program in Chinese National Dance Drama at the Beijing Dance School. This performance marked the end of major experiments with *gudianwu*-based dance drama in the pre-Cultural Revolution period. Shortly after the performance of *The Mermaid* in 1963, China’s entire political direction for the arts and cultural industries shifted, and the approach to creating a national dance form changed with it. On August 16, 1963, Zhou Enlai gave a speech entitled “On the Problem of the *Geminghua* (revolution-ization), *Minzuhua* (nationalization) and *Qunzhonghua* (Mass-ization) of Music and Dance,” launching what became known as the “*San Hua*” (三化) or “Three -izations” Campaign in China’s music and dance world. The campaign called for a more critical approach to the adoption of Western forms, and it called on Chinese artists to preserve and inherit Chinese national traditions in a way that was relevant to the masses and to the contemporary problems of social revolution.

As a direct result of the “Three -izations” Campaign, the makers of *The Mermaid* criticized their previous approach to national dance drama choreography and called instead for a new approach, to be represented by a new dance drama, *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse Nianzi Jun* 《红色娘子军》). In the first issue of China’s *Dance* (*Wudao*) magazine in 1964, an article appeared entitled “Criticize Western Dogma, Explore the New Principle of National Dance Drama” by Wang Shiqi, a member of the choreographic team for *The Mermaid*. Wang writes,

In studying and researching the experience and principles of the art of European dance drama, and in the process of exploring and creating our own national dance drama, there still exist a number of problems. Of these, the most serious is the problem of the artistic dogmatism of blind worship (盲目崇拜) of the West.... The problem of the revolution-ization, nationalization, and mass-ization of national dance drama, actually, is a question of whether Chinese national dance drama should have a strong sense of the times (时代性) and the characteristic of struggle

(战斗性), and the question of whether it should, on the foundation of national traditions of dance and theater, be established and developed.... The problems existing in the creation of *The Mermaid* are extremely serious. Mainly it reflects an inferiority complex and a tendency toward blind worship of the West. It lacks in understanding and appreciation of national cultural traditions and the rich precious stores of ethnic and folk dance traditions, [and] it shows a belief that Chinese national dance cannot develop without ballet; this is pure national/ethnic nihilism.... The new principle of socialist national dance art must first begin with exploring how to make works that reflect the content of life in the socialist age, that create new heroic images of the worker, peasant and soldier masses, and that express the themes of realistic revolutionary struggle.... If only we can break out of the superstition of Western dogma, fully liberate our thoughts, build a brave heart, and set up lofty aspirations, we will definitely be capable of finding the new principle of national dance and [thereby] climbing to the highest peaks of dance drama art. (Wang 1964, quoted in Yu 2004: 79-80)

Responding to this call for a new approach to the making of national dance drama, Li Chengxiang, together with the composers from *The Mermaid*, and two choreographers who had returned from studying in the Soviet Union, set to creating *The Red Detachment of Women*.⁷⁷ Based on a guiding principle of “*po jiu li xin*” (破旧立新), or “break the old and set up the new,” they created what they called yet another “new dance language” (Li 1965, quoted in Yu 2004: 80). They adopted the pointe technique, foot and legwork, extensions, leaps, and turning movements of ballet, along with what they called ballet’s “tightened and turned out characteristics” (Li 1965, quoted in Yu 2004: 81). To add revolutionary and national qualities, they replaced the hand motions of ballet with clenched fists and flat palms, and they adopted elements of Chinese dance such as the “*liangxiang*” (亮相), or “flash pose” of *xiqu*, as well as acrobatic movements drawn largely from martial arts. Overall, dancers’ movements and costumes have a rigid, linear, populist, and militaristic look that lacks the graceful delicacy and aristocratic quality that had previously been found in works of both classical ballet and *gudianwu*.

While the choreographers of Chinese national dance drama were instituting these major changes in approach and aesthetic in the wake of the “Three-izations Campaign,” teachers in the Beijing Dance School’s Chinese dance program also prepared for major changes. In April, 1964, Kunqu opera expert Fang Chunyun was invited to help advise in reform of the *gudianwu* curriculum to further strengthen its national characteristics. Fang felt that ballet’s influence had produced too strong an emphasis on technical tricks in Chinese dance training, and that it had resulted in the training of students with “dead facial expressions” who “were not capable of performing.” He recommended that the teachers eliminate ballet-inspired barre exercises such as *cadi* (an exercise similar to *tendu* in ballet), that they change emphasis from pointed feet to flexed or natural feet, that they attend more to the creation of *yunlü* (韵律), or “rhyme-pattern” through integration of hand, eyes, body and feet movements, and that they introduce more performance training instead of focusing so much on technical tricks (Li *et al.* 2004: 50-51).

⁷⁷ See a video of the 1970 film version here:
http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNTM4MDMxNTY=.html

Also beginning in April, 1964, at the same time as Fang's visit, students from the Beijing Dance School began participating in the creation of the major song and dance spectacle *The East Is Red*, which was to be performed in celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the People's Republic of China. Following on the principles of the "Three-izations Campaign," *The East Is Red* emphasized the use of Chinese dance and musical forms to express revolutionary and contemporary themes. The emphasis on revolutionary struggle led teachers in the *gudianwu* program to seek assistance in adding more elements of Chinese martial arts to their curriculum. Thus, in 1964, they also invited martial arts specialist Zhang Qiang to lead *gudianwu* teachers in systematic study of traditional martial arts training and routines. During the following year, martial arts movements and techniques were added to the *gudianwu* curriculum, and new classroom routines were created that reflected the lives of contemporary people, with a focus on revolutionary themes. In quality of movement, *gudianwu* adopted a more powerful, dynamic, and bold aesthetic, and many of the "*minzu jiqiao zuhe*" (民族技巧组合), or technical tricks routines made up of Chinese-style leaps, jumps, flips, and spins, were created at this time (Li *et al.* 2004: 52-54).

Despite the continued efforts, throughout 1964-1965, of *gudianwu* instructors to combine Chineseness with revolutionary characteristics, the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 led to a wholesale adoption of the new aesthetic of "revolutionary ballet" -- represented by *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl*, at the expense of the *gudianwu* project. Beginning in 1966, *gudianwu* instructors, performers, and choreographers were accused of being "revisionists" and "anti-revolutionaries," and those who were not seriously injured or driven to suicide during struggle sessions were sent to a rural area near Shijiazhuang, Hebei, to participate in reform through manual labor. While some, like Wang Peiying, were eventually rehabilitated to perform in the revolutionary ballets, most spent at least several years in the countryside undergoing manual labor. The oldest and most staunchly committed to their views spent up to twenty years participating in manual labor, completely disconnected from the professional activities of dance.⁷⁸ In May, 1970, the Beijing Dance School shut down completely, and *gudianwu* was officially condemned as "the product of 'emperors, generals and ministers, gifted scholars and beautiful ladies'" (Li *et al.* 2004: 57). Many of my interviewees described this period as "the wasting of one's youth" (荒废青春), and a time when the research and achievements of *gudianwu* during the pre-Cultural Revolution period rotted away and were nearly forgotten.

Although revolutionary ballet can be seen as a continuation of a continued process of reform and revision in the making of a Chinese national dance form, practitioners of *gudianwu* describe it universally as a complete break with the efforts of the pre-Cultural Revolution period. During interviews, many older practitioners of *gudianwu* scoffed at what they called the "unprofessional" quality of revolutionary ballet performance during the Cultural Revolution, when, as they said, "anyone would learn a few movements, set up a propaganda troupe, and try to be a dance performer." Regarding the professional performers of revolutionary ballet, and the artistic quality of the works as dance dramas, dancers of all ages typically expressed respect and admiration. "Of course the revolutionary ballets are works of art of very high quality," they typically remarked. However, when discussing the capacity of these works to represent an authentically Chinese aesthetic sensibility, they typically faltered. For practitioners of *gudianwu* in the post-Cultural Revolutionary period, as for those participating in the making of *gudianwu* in the 1950s and early 60s, it was the specific quality known as "*yunwei*" (韵味), or "the flavor of

⁷⁸ Sun Ying, whose work I discuss further below, falls into this category.

yun,” that dancers most clearly associated with the inheritance of a national tradition in dance. It is this characteristic that my teachers at the Beijing Dance Academy emphasized day after day, in hours of classroom training when I spend two years studying *gudianwu*. Thus, it is to this particular notion of *yunwei*, and its connection to a notion of indigenous Chinese dance aesthetics as the basis for “national characteristics” in Chinese dance, that I now turn.

“*Yunwei*” (韵味), The Flavor of Chineseness

In 1976, the deaths of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and the denouncement of the Gang of Four marked a turning point in the history of the People’s Republic, as well as the beginning of the Revival period of *gudianwu*. In 1974 the Beijing Dance School had already begun recruiting a new class of students. Teachers were rehabilitated from the labor camps, and curriculum were slowly revived and relearned. A nationwide education reform took place in 1978, designed to meet the need especially for higher education. As part of the reform, the Beijing Dance School in 1978 was converted from a vocational arts school to a university, becoming the Beijing Dance Academy and Attached Dance Middle School. In 1980, the Academy recruited the first class of students in China ever to receive a university degree in dance, and the majors offered at the university level included *gudianwu*. Just as at the opening of the Dance School in 1954, teachers in the Department of Chinese Classical Dance in 1978-1980 worked to create a new curriculum for university students in *gudianwu*. This program became known as *Shenyun* (身韵), or “Body Rhyme.” The focus of the *Shenyun* curriculum was to strengthen the national characteristics of *gudianwu* through an emphasis on a single quality: *yun*.

Yun is a difficult quality to describe, as it appears in many genres of Chinese artistic practice, including poetry, music, painting, calligraphy, martial arts, and performance (Bush and Murck 1983). It is translated literally into English as “rhyme,” but this conveys only one aspect of its meaning in Chinese aesthetic theory. Apart from rhyme, *yun* also implies a sense of vitality. Ming Dynasty literary critic Lu Shiyong, describing the quality of *yun* in literary works, writes, “That which has *yun* lives, that which lacks *yun* dies; that which has *yun* is elegant; that which lacks *yun* is vulgar; that which has *yun* resounds; that which lacks *yun* sinks; that which has *yun* is far-reaching, that which lacks *yun* is limited.”⁷⁹ In discussions and classroom training with *gudianwu* instructors, they often described *yun* using a metaphor of aroma or flavor. Jin Hao, a professor in Dance Studies at the Beijing Dance Academy and co-author of the textbook for bare-handed *Shenyun* (see Tang and Jin 2004), explains,

When we speak of *yunlü* (韵律 principle of *yun*), we borrow from the idea of taste or flavor. ‘Oh, this food really has flavor!’ we say. China is a country of food, you know, we Chinese love food. So, when we talk about the flavor (of *yun*), that has many components. The strength of the dancer’s movement, the rhythm of breath, etc., the combined expression of all of this, that is what in *Shenyun* we call *yun*.

Shao Weiqiu, a professor of *gudianwu* at the Beijing Dance Academy, and a specialist in *Shenyun*, explains,

⁷⁹ “有韵则生，无韵则死；有韵则雅，无韵则俗；有韵则响，无韵则沈；有韵则远，无韵则局，” Lu Shiyong 《诗镜总论》 (*Shi Jing Zonglun*). See Ding (1916).

Yun is like the irresistible aroma that pours out from a freshly cooked dish of food, when the vegetables and meats have just fried to the perfect temperature and their juices and oils run together. That is what we mean when we say dance is about creating ‘*yunwei*,’ (韵味 ‘flavor of *yun*’); cultivating *yun* is about making that irresistible aroma pour out of your dancing.

Su Ya, also a member of the Beijing Dance Academy *gudianwu* faculty, used the metaphor of comparing tea to plain water to explain the meaning of *yun* to students in the classroom. When students’ movements lacked *yun*, she described them as being flavorless, “like plain water.” “Don’t let your dancing be like plain water!” she would remind us in class. “Where is the *yun*? Where is the flavor of *yun*? Tea has that flavor that emerges from the long soaking of tea leaves. You want your dancing to have that kind of aroma.”

By far the most common way that practitioners of *gudianwu* explained the concept of *yun* was as a signifier of Chineseness. “The creation of *Shenyun* was about preserving the essence of Eastern culture in our dancing,” explains Wang Peiyang, professor and former Chair of the Department of *Gudianwu* at the Beijing Dance Academy. “That had been severely injured by the activities of the Cultural Revolution. We asked ourselves, ‘What is that unique gaze, that movement of the hand, or that twisting of the back that makes Eastern beauty so unique? That is what is captured in the *yun* of *Shenyun*.’” Comparing the fiery looks and strong lines of the dancers in *The Red Detachment of Women* to the circling movements and floating qualities of those in *The Precious Lotus Lantern*, that latter are described as embodying *yun*. Contemporary *gudianwu* choreography such as the *Shuyun* (*Rhyme of the Book*) competition piece by Wang Lei described in Chapter One usually create a direct connection between the movement quality of *yun* and stereotypical images of Chinese classical culture. In *Shuyun*, Wang plays the role of a Chinese Literati who falls into a drunken rapture while practicing his calligraphy. Through a combination of flowing robes, swirling movements, and a ubiquitous visual sense of breath, Wang at once combines the “type” of the Chinese scholar of classical poetry and painting with the “movement vocabulary” of *yun*. Through the cultivation of *yun*, practitioners of *gudianwu* argue, Wang’s performance comes to look and feel Chinese.

During the 1980s, under the leadership of Beijing Dance Academy instructors Li Zhengyi, Tang Mancheng, and Guo Dakun, among others, the Department of *Gudianwu* produced a university curriculum called *Shenyun* that included three new courses: bare-handed *shenyun*, sword dance *shenyun*, and water sleeve *shenyun*. After being implemented at the Beijing Dance Academy in 1980, *Shenyun* has since spread to dance institutions around China. Beyond being a curriculum for dance training, *Shenyun* is also a field of theoretical research into Chinese movement aesthetics. When I conducted fieldwork visiting dance schools, the *Shenyun* aesthetic formed the centerpiece and capstone of *gudianwu* education and choreography around the country. Through the design and teaching of particular exercises and dance sequences, researchers, instructors, choreographers and performers in *gudianwu* develop a movement curricula that turn classical aesthetics into embodied movement.

While studying at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2007-09 I participated in *Shenyun* courses that were taught using the curriculum developed in the early Revival period of *gudianwu*, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Through firsthand experience as a student in these classes, I experienced the process of learning to acquire what my teachers called “the flavor of *yun*.” It is through the bodily experience of trying to achieve the flavor of *yun*, and through classroom interactions in which teachers explained the meaning of *yun* through a combination of

words and movements, that I came to appreciate the specifically aesthetic nature of Chineseness as it is understood by practitioners of *gudianwu*. Because of the centrality of this personal classroom experience in my own understanding of *gudianwu*, I foreground these experiences in the following section, through ethnographic description. The embodied nature of dance makes it such that reading, talking and watching alone -- the usual activities of anthropological and historical research -- are not sufficient for gaining a deeper understanding of dance as a cultural and artistic practice. By turning to a more personal and ethnographically descriptive mode here, I aim to highlight the importance of embodied research as a central practice for anthropological study of dance, as well as to provide insight into the cultivation of *yun* as an embodied practice.

In one of my first classes on *Shunyun*, professor Peng Alan (b. 1932) introduced class in with the following explanation:

The purpose of the Shenyun courses is to strengthen our grasp of Chinese movement, and to bring up the level of *gudianwu* from a basic training curriculum to an academic field of study at the university level. We all know that Chinese culture is very different from Western culture, and as university dance students we must understand and, more importantly, be able to embody, Chinese culture through our dancing. Without Chinese culture in our dancing, what is the point of doing *gudianwu* at all?

As she says this, I sit cross-legged on the floor along with my classmates, twelve girls ranging in age from seventeen to nineteen, the freshman cohort in the *gudianwu* performance major at the Beijing Dance Academy. My hands rest relaxed on my knees, and I begin a breathing exercise called *tichen* (提沉 rising and sinking), accompanied by Chinese folk music played on the piano. The rising and sinking sequences are one of the foundational exercises in the *Shenyun* curriculum. They were designed to isolate and train fluidness of the upper body and spine, and to teach the cultivation of *yunliu* (pattern of *yun*), through integration of the eyes, breath, hands, and body.

“Start from the sinking position (chen). Breathe out and let your upper body relax, allowing your head to tip slightly forward.”

I sit straight up with my hands folded behind my back, then breathe out slowly, allowing my chest and spine to soften and shoulders to curve slightly inward. I close my eyes and feel my chest slacken. After years of training in ballet, competitive ballroom dance, and some modern dance, my spine is used to being held upright even when the muscles around it are relaxed. This feeling of allowing my spine and chest to slouch inward creates a strange sensation in my body. I feel at once lazy, peaceful, and soft.

“Now, as you begin to inhale, feel the energy in your abdomen come together into a single point, at the dantian (丹田);⁸⁰ feel the breath at the base of your back (腰), as if your back is breathing.”

I let in a first small puff of breath. Conjuring up a wealth of images provided by teachers on Taoist meditation practices, qigong, and Chinese traditional medicine, I feel my breath gather like a ball of glowing energy in my abdomen. I suddenly feel a subtle sensation in a spot somewhere between my navel and tailbone.

⁸⁰ The *dantian* is a point approximately three inches below the navel, the traditional source of *qi* energy in Chinese medicine and cultivation practices.

“Continue to breathe in slowly, and allow your breath to creep up your lower back, livening your spine, vertebrate by vertebrate. As your spine uncurls, feel the glow of your breath rise through your body, beaming out through your chest and eyes, until it sprouts out the top of your head. We call that the shao (梢 tip or end, usually of a tree). When you reach the very top, look up in the direction of the shao, and continue the movement through your eyes. Send your gaze up and out, stretching into the distance.”

As I lift my gaze, I think of what Shao Weiqiu, one of my other *Shenyun* teachers, said about the eyes in Chinese classical dance:

The eyes are the gate to your heart. Dancing is both the outward movements of your body and the internal movements of your heart, so your eyes are indispensable. Sending your gaze out is called *fangshen* (放神 casting out the spirit). When you cast out the spirit, it is as if your eyes are burning with heat and light. As you breathe in, feel the temperature rise and your eyes light up like light bulbs. It's as if your soul is streaming out through them.

Casting out and bringing in the spirit are important techniques in *xiqu*, and it is required in the *liangxiang*, or flash poses used in the revolutionary ballets. The difference between this type of movement in *Shenyun* and the one found in the revolutionary ballets, is that this one has an airy, light quality. Though intense, it is devoid of harshness or militance. It resembles very much the breathy eye movements found in the soft expressions of Three Sacred Goddess in *Precious Lotus Lantern*, but not the impassioned stares of Qinghua in *The Red Detachment of Women*.

Apart from the training of breath, another way in which practitioners of Chinese classical dance cultivate *yun* is by imitating animals and other non-human movement. In these sequences, the goal is to capture the holistic movement pattern, or *yun*, of the phenomenon that is evoked in the metaphor associated with the step. In the movement “swallows darting through the forest” (燕子穿林), for example, begins with a lunge and turning movement, ending with one's right hand reaching up toward the back corner of the room. This is where the “flight” movement begins. In bare-handed *Shenyun* class, Xiong Jiatai explained the movement as follows:

“That moment at the top of your inhale when you are facing the back corner, your feet together, chest arched up and looking up at your right hand, that is the moment when the swallow hangs suspended in the air, gliding. You too must remain there, suspended, though not still. As you breathe in, rotate and twist your torso to create the verticle circle (liyuan) and then the figure-eight movement (bazi yuan).”⁸¹

I feel the verticle circle and figure eight movements articulate through my spine, pushing my chest up toward my upraised right hand. Then, after a brief upward arc, my hand loops around and spirals quickly down past my chest and left side, along an invisible line that resembles one side of a DNA triple helix. As it shoots down, my right hand peirces a horizontal circle in the air mimed by my left hand. This horizontal circle helps exaggerate the vertical path produced by the movement of my right hand. As my right hand zips past along its curving route, it is like a swallow swooping down from the treetops, swerving to dodge trunks and branches.

⁸¹ My teacher Xiong Jiatai demonstrates as he explains the step. He was born in 1938 and was recruited as a student in the Research Group in Chinese Classical Dance when the Beijing Dance School opened in 1954. Despite being seventy-one, he personally demonstrates all of the steps in class.

My body moves out of the swallow's way, then follows it around and down, continuing to rotate to the left until I am squatting facing again the front of the room. I sit, legs bent and spiraled into a corkscrew, in the final position, with my right hand low and pointing forward palm down, still in the orchid-finger position. I imagine the swallow gliding on in the direction of the mirror, streaming on a bed of air just above the forest's underbrush.

"The genius and beauty of this movement is that it really does imitate the shape and feeling of a swallow's path as it darts through a forest," says Professor Xiong. "Creating the vertical circle in your chest at the moment that the swallow hangs in the air is very important, because that is what sends your hand curving up before it loops back. If you've ever seen a swallow and watched its movement, this is exactly what it does. It rides on a puff of air, gathering energy before changing directions to speed down. The figure-eight movement is also important, because that helps to determine the spiraling path that your hand will follow down, mimicking the swallow's path through the trees. Your body must be able to twist around and carve itself away leaving space for your hand to pass. The mutual 'giving in' of your body and hand is like the relationship between the sparrow and the trees. The sparrow must curve its path to avoid the trunks and branches, but at the same time the leaves on the branches may scatter away in the wake of the sparrow's flight. When you are able to express these patterns from the natural world in your dancing, this is when the dance will move people. Because we all recognize the essence of a natural principle that you have captured in your movements."

Tang and Jin's (2004) textbook on *Shenyun* argues that the "swallows darting through the forest" sequence contains many of the most important rules for movement in Chinese classical dance. These rules are frequently quoted by teachers and students in the Chinese classical dance classroom, and they serve as guiding principles when correcting and refining movements, and making decisions for choreography. "'Desire left first right' (*yu zuo xian you*), 'meet diagonal forward must have diagonal back' (*feng chong bi kao*), 'desire high first low' (*yu gao xian di*), and 'meet open must have closed' (*feng kai bi he*)" all appear in this figure, the book states. Each of these principles expresses a different set of oppositional relations -- left and right, forward and back, high and low, open and closed. A movement in one direction always requires a movement in its opposite. "Swallows darting through the forest is the model movement in which all of these laws or principles of 'mutually-opposing, mutually-creating' (*xiang fan xiang cheng*) are combined together into a single body," Tang and Jin write (Tang and Jin 2004: 61).

The idea of "mutually-opposing, mutually-creating" is foundational to traditional Chinese cosmology, as well as to movement aesthetics in Chinese classical dance. According to the traditional Chinese philosophical principle of *yin-yang*, or the unification of opposites, phenomena as various as seasonal time, organ systems in living bodies, medicinal properties of herbs, and architectural design are all explained in terms of binary relations of mutual opposition and production. "We can explain many of the movement principles of Chinese classical dance by way of the *yin-yang* concept of mutual opposition and mutual creation" my informants often told me.

While learning Chinese classical dance, I found that the importance of grasping *yin-yang* relations became most salient when learning to use props. Silk sleeves, metal swords, fans made of wood or bamboo covered in thick paper or silk, even larger-than-life calligraphy brushes and imitation weapons all become extensions of the human body, as well as integral parts of the

dance technique.⁸² Although I had some control over the movements of these items when I danced with them, either directly through my hands or indirectly as part of my clothing, this control was never complete. The props, as objects with definite physical properties, have movement tendencies and potentialities of their own, depending on their particular positions and relations in space and time. Learning to wield these props expertly means not only embodying *yin-yang* relations within one's own body, but doing so in relation to these objects. "Dancing the sword well means finding out how to allow the sword to move along its own path," Professor Zhang, resident sword dance expert at the Beijing Dance Academy, constantly reminded us. "When the sword is *yin*, the body can be more active, as *yang*. But when the sword is *yang* the body must move with it, not against it." As extensions of the dancer's body, as well as non-human objects, the props come to represent and enact the traditional Chinese philosophical principle of "*tian ren he yi*," or a coming together of the human with the rest of the universe.⁸³

"When dancing the water sleeve," explains Professor Shao in her wildly popular water sleeve class, "you have to constantly keep in mind the principle of yin-yang, or 'two heads' (liangtou). Embodying yin-yang will allow you to follow the natural laws acting on the sleeve's movement. This is necessary for your body and the sleeve become one unit in motion, which is what produces beautiful dancing."

In water sleeve class our specially-tailored shirts have sleeve extensions made of white silk that are ten feet or more in length and almost two feet in width. When we are not moving the sleeves rest like puddles of pearl on the floor. When we dance the sleeves fly through the air producing ripples, arcs, and explosions. They resemble the costumes of ghosts and magical characters in Chinese traditional opera.

"The principle of 'two heads' is simple to understand but not easy to apply." Professor Shao goes on to explain. "For example, when you flick your fingers to cast the sleeve out, its energy clearly moves forward. But, at the correct moment, you have to provide the right amount of force in the opposite direction, to bring the sleeve back." Professor Shao demonstrates the casting out of the sleeve. With a deft flick of the hand she sends her silk sleeve billowing out in a straight line almost parallel to the floor in front of and diagonal from her body. Just before the sleeve's tail has uncurled completely, Professor Shao rotates her hand and tugs back quickly from her elbow. The force produced by this nimble action is transmitted to her sleeve, so that as its last kernel of outward motion is used up, the sleeve is already returning back. Through an upward parabola, the sleeve returns to her hand and, as if by magic, lands in a neatly folded pile like the tight ruffles of a Victorian noble's lace collar, in the space between her thumb and palm. "In this case embodying the natural principle of yin-yang means applying an opposing force with your elbow just before the sleeve reaches its final extension, so that the energy of the sleeve's return cycle is born out of the peak of its casting out cycle. The two cycles are connected like a circle with two heads -- they are opposite each other but also born out of one another."

⁸² *Shu Yun* (《书韵》) and *Shan Wu Dan Qing* (《扇舞丹青》), discussed in Chapter One, offer good examples of the expression of *yin-yang* relations through the use of props. See video links in Chapter One.

⁸³ My informants often used the philosophical phrase "*tian ren he yi*" to describe the coming together of human and universe that is expressed in Chinese classical dance. For more on the importance of this concept in traditional Chinese movement culture more generally, see Liu (1996).

I try out the casting out and returning in movement with my right hand. I have clearly not yet fully embodied the yin-yang relationship. My sleeve is clumsy and obstinate.

“It is very important to grasp the correct timing in this cycle. Yin-yang is not just about relationships; it is also about timing,” Teacher Show reminds us. “Because in a world that is always in motion, timing is essential.” She demonstrates the full cycle again, so that we can appreciate her subtle management of time. “Now see what happens if my return movement with the elbow is just a bit too late.” She demonstrates again and this time the sleeve falls mid-cycle limp on the floor. “You see, this time the sleeve died mid-cycle. It died because the timing was not correct. Now see what happens if I pull back on the sleeve too early.” This time the sleeve’s graceful mid-air unfurling is cut short. Mid-cycle it is yanked back, the tail thrashes outward, unweildy, and instead of making a parabola back to Professor Shao’s hand, it falls short, again landing on the floor. “You see, this also does not follow the natural movement of the sleeve. Not only does the movement appear awkward and ugly, the sleeve is difficult to control.”

I try the movement several more times, with only slight improvement.

“This is the basic idea for managing the physical dynamics of the sleeve’s motion. However, we all know that dancing does not end here. To dance well, we must employ also the motion of our hearts. This is what we call shenyun,⁸⁴ the movement rhyme of the spirit.

Spirit (*shen*) is an extremely important concept in all three schools of Chinese classical dance. “If the heart does not move, the form is not created” (“*xin bu dong, xing bu cheng*”) is one of many oft-repeated mottos used by Chinese classical dance practitioners to describe the relationship between spirit and form (*shen* and *xing*). *Xing* refers to the form or movement produced by the physical body, and *shen* (or sometimes *xin*, meaning “heart-mind,” as in the example above) refers to the inner activities stirring inside the human heart and psyche. To truly exude the irresistible “fragrance of *yun*” so sought after in Chinese classical dance, dancers must embody the aesthetic principle of vital energy not only in their physical movements but also in the movements of their spirit.

“You must remember that all of your movements in Chinese classical dance are infused with inner activity (neizai huodong),” Professor Shao explains. “By inner activity I mean the movements of the spirit. Whether this is emotion, imagination, or simply breath, this is what makes you embody yun with the whole of your being, not just with your physical body. In sleeve dancing, it is really your heart that moves the sleeve. Even when your body and your sleeve become still, your heart is still moving. These creates the poignant empty spaces or “liubai” (literally “leave white”) that are so important in all of Chinese classical art.”

Professor Shao often discusses the importance of what she calls the “inner activity” of the dancer. In her view, the particular coming together of inner and outer activity, or of the heart’s activity with that of the physical body, required in Chinese classical dance, is part of the process of putting the body into a state of resonance with the universe. The interanal motions of the heart and the external motions of the body’s physical form are both layers of the same cosmic rhythm. Like the *liubai* technique used in traditional Chinese landscape painting, Professor Shao argues, Chinese classical dance places great emphasis on the inner activities of the artist, and the potential for these inner activities to fill artistic space that is intentionally left free of formal

⁸⁴ The romanization of this term is the same as *Shenyun*, the name of the curriculum. However, they are two different words. Here the character *shen* meaning spirit (神) is used instead of the character *shen* for body (身). Though both are transliterated as “shenyun,” the one used here means the *yun* of the spirit, the name of the curriculum means the *yun* of the body.

content. “Chinese aesthetics have always emphasized the *xu* (the virtual, implied, or abstract) as much as or more than the *shi* (the real, tangible, straightforward). Chinese classical dance is the same. There must be enough that is left unsaid, or as empty space. When classical dance is not successful, it is usually because it is too *shi*, and there is not enough space for imagination.”

“I am going to do the casting out of the sleeve again,” says Professor Shao. “This time I am just casting out, not bringing it in, but I am going to add the movements of the whole body (shenfa), as well as breath (qixi) and emotion (ganqing). See if you can tell the difference.”

As she demonstrates I watch intently, imagining myself executing the movements as she does them. Professor Shao stands facing us with her feet together and arms at her sides. She breaths out, relaxing her chest and knees and lowers her eyes to a spot on the floor several feet in front of her body. As she breathes in and rises through her ankles and feet, she lifts up her hand slowly and her eyes rise up from the spot on the floor. I see in her eyes a glow of anticipation, the “heating up” (*jia wen*) she often talked about. Just before her body reaches its highest point, when her hand is near waist level, a flick of the left wrist and hand send the sleeve billowing out in the familiar diagonal streak. Her breath and eyes seem to follow the fabric, stretching beyond it toward something out in the distance. As the sleeve unfurls and hangs in the air Professor Shao too holds her breath, suspended, looking out with her burning gaze. Professor Shao once said that in Chinese opera there is a saying, “a lifetime of drama is in the face, a face of drama is in the eyes” (“*yi sheng xi zai lian shang, yi lian xi zai yan shang*”). The eyes, she says, are the window to the spirit. As gravity pulls on the sleeve, there is an unmistakable sense of longing in her expression, as if her extended arm and sleeve are reaching out for the hand of a loved one who has just turned away. As the figure of the loved one disappears, her expression changes from anticipation to loss. She lets out a small puff of air (*a qikou*) and gradually sinks down through her knees and ankles, her gaze dropping slowly to follow the falling piece of fabric. As the sleeve lands on the ground, motionless, her eyes lower slowly back to the spot on the ground, they too defeated.

Professor Shao’s demonstration incorporates all of the most basic elements of *yunlü* (pattern of *yun*) as it is taught in Chinese classical dance. In the casting out and returning in of the sleeve, we see dancer’s embodiment of the physical principle of yin-yang relations. The prop is a mediating tool through which the dancer learns to harmonize with natural principles, making them part of his or her own physicality through the dynamics of the sleeve. In her use of the gaze, which she calls the “sending out and returning of the spirit” (“*fang-shou shen*”), we see the incorporation of the “motions of the inner world” into the dance, as a layer of reality that, along with the physical form, is coordinated with the rhythms of the world. Just as in traditional Chinese cosmology, breath or *qi* is the organizing principle of Professor Shao’s movements. It is the specific “rhyme of *qi*” (*qiyun*) that serves as the coordinating force for the movements of the spirit, the body, and the sleeve. Through *qikou* (individual puffs of breath), these movements are also put into relation with the music, which too becomes an inherent part of the dance. The flavor of *yun* is what seeps out of Professor Shao’s dance as a result of the coordination of these many elements.

Conclusion: Performing and Contesting Chineseness

In 1985, a new full-length *gudianwu* dance drama, *Tongque Ji* 《铜雀伎》⁸⁵ premiered in Beijing. It was performed by the China Opera and Dance Theater (中国歌剧舞剧院), which was then and still is China's most prestigious nonmilitary state performance troupe specializing in *gudianwu* performance. *Tongque Ji* is the first full-length original dance drama featuring what is now called the "Han-Tang style" of *gudianwu*, promoted by *gudianwu* luminary Sun Ying (1929-2009).⁸⁶ Like many other *gudianwu* dance dramas released after 1978, *Tongque Ji* is performed in the style of "*guzhuang xi*" (古装戏), or "ancient costume plays," a type of theater that depicts historical characters in historical settings, using costumes, stories, and aesthetic elements attributed to China's imperial past. Ancient costume plays were suppressed after the "Three-izations Campaign" of 1963, and they were almost entirely outlawed during the Cultural Revolution in 1966-76. Like many performance forms that were unavailable during the Cultural Revolution due to political constraints, ancient costume plays enjoyed a sudden and strong resurgence after 1978, which continues in the early twentieth century.

While *Tongque Ji* belongs to a larger trend of the resurgence of ancient costume drama in Chinese dance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it nevertheless produced one of the most lasting and divisive controversies in the field of *gudianwu*. Like the controversies that plagued the making of *gudianwu* in the 1950s, the controversy that emerged around the 1985 production of *Tongque Ji* has to do with the relationship between Chinese dance and ballet, and it once again takes up the question of how to appropriately represent Chineseness in dance movement. In short, Sun Ying challenged the legitimacy of the *Shenyun* curriculum, arguing that it was not a correct representation of Chinese cultural tradition. Instead, he promoted his own vision of *gudianwu*, what is now known as *Han-Tang Gudianwu*. The controversy resulted, in 2000, in a split in the Department of *Gudianwu* at the Beijing Dance Academy into two programs -- *Shenyun*-style and Han-Tang style -- and it continued to resonate in classroom discussions and dance scholarship when I conducted fieldwork in 2008-2009. In 2009, Sun Ying restaged *Tongque Ji*, as part of the celebrations held in honor of the 55th Anniversary of the Beijing Dance Academy. In the production of this performance, its critical reception, and the politics of the Academy that surrounded it, the controversy remains unresolved.

By offering different answers to the question of the ideal Chinese national body, the participants in the *Tongque Ji* controversy return, in the Reform Era of the 1980s, to a set of debates from the era of socialist Chinese nation-building of the 1950s -- in which many of them personally participated -- when the field of *gudianwu* was first being created as a state-sponsored "invented tradition" aimed explicitly at creating an aesthetic expression of a unified Chinese cultural essence in dance form. Throughout these debates, the nature of Chineseness and its expression in bodily movement has constantly been both contested and performed. Rather than weakening the strength of "Chineseness" as a concept, however, it has been precisely through its contestation, especially in the continual remaking of the "classical" aesthetic of *gudianwu*, that the realness and relevance of Chineseness as an aesthetic, political, and professional category has

⁸⁵ A literal translation of the title is *Tongque Performer* or *Dancer of Tongque*. I have suggested the alternative translation *Sorrows of the Tongque Stage*. I used the latter translation in the English version of the performance's official playbills when the drama was re-staged by Sun at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2009.

⁸⁶ Sun Ying's work *Longzu Fengyun* is discussed in Chapter Three.

remained itself unquestioned. While the debates contest and differently perform Chineseness, they never question the importance of this category for what they do as dancers and dance-makers. Thus, gudianwu as a field remains devoted to the central problem of embodying essentially Chinese national bodies, regardless of major changes in China's economic, artistic, and cultural scene, as well as changes in the field of gudianwu itself.

Set in the court of second century Wei kingdom ruler Cao Cao, *Tongque Ji* tells the fictitious story of the perils of two dance performers employed by Cao Cao and his successors to perform on the imperial Tongque Stage.⁸⁷ In the story, a pair of life-long dance partners is separated and tragically punished under the harsh rulership of Cao Cao's successor Cao Pi. Wei Sinu, the male dancer, is violently blinded, ruining his potential to ever again perform successfully the drum dance duet with his beloved female partner, Zheng Feipeng. Zheng, insistent on reuniting with her crippled loved one, traverses the harsh Northwestern territories on foot, facing storms, impoverishment, and harassment by bandits and beggars. Upon finding Wei, Zheng is sentenced to death, after being accused of desertion and intentional destruction of official property. In the final scene, Wei sits delirious beating his drum while Zheng is marched off to the execution ground (Chen 2009).

The controversy incited by the 1985 production of *Tongque Ji* stems not from its content, as tragic depictions of the suffering and perils of the underclasses was a common theme in both Mao era and post-Mao theatrical performance. Rather, the controversy is over the embodied aesthetics of the dance movements employed to tell the story. As Chinese dance scholar Yu Ping (2004) writes in his authoritative history of the Chinese dance drama, "On the 'classical' ladder [of dance drama creation], *Tongque Ji*... expresses the most thorough consciousness of innovation" (119). According to Yu, *Tongque Ji* shows the "motivation and accomplishment" of choreographer Sun Ying to "completely change the movement method and aesthetic direction of gudianwu" (Yu 2004: 133).

Sun Ying had long been a renegade in the field of gudianwu. In 1954, Sun was selected along with several other young dance teachers to help create the first curriculum for gudianwu, which was to be used in training the first generation of professional dance students to study at the Beijing Dance School (now the Beijing Dance Academy) when it opened that year (Li 2004). Sun was the student of Wu Xiaobang, a progressive early Chinese dance pioneer who created revolutionary dance pieces in the 1930s-40s and staunchly opposed the use of Soviet ballet for teaching Chinese classical dance. A member of the generation that suffered most during the Cultural Revolution, Sun Ying spent over twenty years between 1957 and 1979 in the countryside undergoing such re-education through manual labor. During this time, he was ostracized from the dance world (Sun 2005, 2008).

Once he returned from the labor camps in 1979, Sun Ying -- though already fifty years old -- was determined to implement his ideas of making gudianwu more Chinese, specifically by ridding it of what he saw as foreign elements introduced via ballet. In the early 1980s, working as Head Librarian at the Beijing Dance Academy (according to Sun, the gudianwu establishment allowed him to participate in research only, not in the actual practice of gudianwu training at the Academy), Sun published a series of articles (Sun 2006) in which he offered scathing critiques of the established tradition in gudianwu -- what he calls the "integrated approach" because it

⁸⁷ A historic imperial performance venue built by Cao Cao at the end of the Han Dynasty, in the second century A.D., located on the banks of the Zhang River in the Ye Prefecture of what is today Henan Province.

integrates elements of Chinese and Western dance forms -- which developed out of the Scientificity and Systematicity Meetings of 1956. Gudianwu had sustained its own attacks while Sun was in the countryside -- especially during the Cultural Revolution, when it was largely suppressed -- and it was undergoing a period of reflection, re-emergence, and reform, during which the future of the field was largely in question (Li 2004).

The most heated debates over *Tongque Ji* and Sun's approach appear in a series of articles published in *Dance Magazine* (《舞蹈》) in 1986, immediately following the 1985 premier of the work in Beijing. In this series, Sun Ying argues with gudianwu hegemon Guo Dakun, who is a staunch supporter of the integrated approach. In an article entitled "From Inheritance and Dynamism, Discussing *Gudianwu's* Development -- A Deliberation with Comrade Sun Ying," Guo denounces Sun's approach outright, calling it a flawed approach based on "incorrect ideas resulting in incorrect conclusions" (Sun 2006: 125). In another article "The Grounds for Differentiation Between the Historical Periods of Natural Feet and Bound Feet -- A Response to Comrade Guo Dakun," Sun expresses equally staunch disagreement with Guo and the integrated program he represents. "I still oppose [Guo Dakun]!" writes Sun, "[I] still do not agree with the 'integrated' method of doing things" (Sun 2006: 125).

The fundamental question debated by Guo and Sun in their articles is that of which types of corporeal expression and bodily movement should or can represent the classical spirit or essence of Chinese culture. The notion of "classical spirit" (古典精神), is a key concept in the making of *gudianwu*, and it is the basis for the use of the word "*gudian*" (古典) in the name of the dance form. The term "*gudian*" refers to an inheritable cultural essence of the Chinese people that transcends historical period and political difference. "The term '*gudian*,'" writes Ye Ning, leader of China's first Group for Research on *Gudianwu* founded 1953, "does not disappear along with its historical period. Rather, it is passed on to future generations, becoming a treasured inheritance" (Ye 1999: 181). Su Ya, a young scholar who received her PhD in Chinese aesthetics and taught *gudianwu* theory at the Beijing Dance Academy when I studied there in 2008-09 corroborated Ye Ning's notion of *gudian* as an inheritance of Chinese culture that transcends difference. "*Gudian*," Su argues, refers to a "cultural psychology" that has "sedimented over three to five thousand years of history. [It is] that root [that is] in the blood, body and mind of every Chinese person, long ago achieved innately, reproduced through the process of every generation" (Su 2009).

In both the integrated approach and Sun's approach to *gudianwu*, bodily movements are said to both contain and express the so-called "classical spirit" of Chinese culture. Li (2004) writes of the *Shenyun* (身韵)⁸⁸ curriculum developed by the integrated school:

[We seek to,] through the content of *Shenyun*, grasp the unique aesthetic characteristic of our ethnic tradition, and to make it manifest concretely in the movement patterns and principles of the human physique, to make students, through study, master that cultural essence (Li 2004: 119).

Like the promoters of the integrated school, Sun Ying argues that his Han-Tang school of *gudianwu* also expresses the essence and spirit of Chinese culture in its bodily aesthetics. The

⁸⁸ Note that this is different from and not related to "Shenyun" (神韵), the internationally touring Chinese cultural show that is purportedly affiliated with anti-PRC activist groups such as the falun gong.

movements and techniques used in Han-Tang *gudianwu*, Sun writes, contain the Chinese “ethnic/cultural image” (民族形象) and “ethnic/cultural personality” (民族性格) (Sun 2006: 53), and they contain “the creative wisdom and artistic quintessence of our [Chinese] ethnicity/nation” (Sun 2006: 127).

In his support for the innovative movement repertoire introduced in *Tongque Ji*, Sun cites repeatedly his desire to rid *gudianwu* of the elements of ballet, which he sees as corrupting the Chinese heritage of the dance works made in the integrated school. In “The Grounds for Differentiation Between the Historical Periods of Natural Feet and Bound Feet,” Sun cites Yandi and Huangdi, the mythical ancestors of the Chinese people, to criticize the integrated school’s approach. Sun writes, “‘This is just ignorance and confusion,’ grumbles the soul of our ancestors Yan and Huang, their hearts filled with a sense of injury. ‘Our sons and grandsons! Is this really all we left you?’” (Sun 2006: 127). In the quote above, Sun aligns himself and his approach with the pure or correct source of Chinese cultural inheritance, represented by the mythical figures Yandi and Huangdi. The national body represented in *gudianwu*, Sun argues, should be that inherited from the ancestors of the Chinese people, not one corrupted and ruined by integration and compromise with foreign elements.

In the history of *gudianwu*, cultural nationalism and the pursuit of a culturally, rather than politically, defined national identity and “search for roots” appears not as a new phenomenon but rather as a continuation of work conducted under strong Party support, begun in the 1950s and continuing today. During my fieldwork at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2008-09, I frequently witnessed debates between students, teachers, and scholars that echoed the ideas rehearsed in the mid-1980s over *Tongque Ji*. When *Tongque Ji* was revived in 2009, the department of *gudianwu* was the only one to produce two full-length works, representing the ongoing division within the field. One, *Tongque Ji*, represented the Han-Tang approach, and a second represented the integrated approach, or what is now known as the Shenyun school, based on a new program created by Guo and his followers in the early 1980s, on the basis of “returning to the essence of Chinese culture” (Li 2004). In the program for the 2009 re-staging of *Tongque Ji*, Sun writes,

Without the addition of ballet movements or the copying of modern dance concepts, this work utilizes a wealth of Chinese resources, in an effort to create an ethnically unique form and style, promoting a particularly Chinese kind of beauty and expounding on the sentiments of Chinese history. Amidst the current fashion of adopting Western aesthetics in the creation of dance dramas, this work follows a different course; and in so doing it is a tribute to the great forefathers of the Chinese people. (Beijing Dance Academy 2009).

Rather than being a new instantiation of Chinese cultural nationalism, reflective of fundamental questioning of the Party and its “right to name the nation” in the Reform Era, rather, I see this statement and the debate it represents an ongoing process of contestation that has characterized dance making throughout China’s socialist era. Through debates like the one over *Tongque Ji*, China’s “national body” is continually redefined in new forms. Yet, in the very act of seeking and redefining Chineseness, and of contesting its appropriate expression, the very existence and significance of Chineseness as a unifying concept and practice is continually strengthened and re-asserted.

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Appendix

Notes on Fieldwork

Living Deeply

I had just returned “home” from the field. A deluge of intrusions into some private realm of experience, the outside world was like a television set blaring commercials that I could not turn off. I suddenly despised the sound of English. Each word in the ambient environment seemed to chip away at an edifice of language and thought structures I had invested years of painstaking effort to build up. I found myself silently doubling conversations into Chinese in my head. An echo of the field still present somewhere, this inner dialogue helped me feel I was preparing for some far off day when I would return to the field. When, I did not know. Long silences with friends were punctuated by, “Em, is everything okay?” I would nod, smile, and look out the window. In those silences, I tried to hold onto something that was slipping away -- the feeling of being *there*.

The only word I can think of to describe this feeling is homesickness. I felt homesick for the place and for the life I had lived. It hurt when those around me seemed unaware of that place or that life’s existence, and I grasped onto encounters in which people did seem to understand. My legs ached, and I began stretching compulsively. I felt like a racing dog trained and used to running, now suddenly retired to a comfortable rug next to a fireplace. As I sat there soaking in the warmth of the flames, my legs seemed to be slowly atrophying. I had a strange recurring dream in which one of my arms became detached from my body. Like a phantom limb I could still feel it, but it would not move. The arm just sat there like an object. Friends apologized for my loss, but I refused to admit the arm was really lost forever. The dream ended when I grabbed the arm and pressed its shoulder against my own. It reattached and I wiggled my fingers in relief.

I imagine this aching for the field is something many ethnographers experience, as do other people who live deeply in more than one world. Being in the midst of this aching sensation, at this very moment, it occurs to me that it is not the living *in* the field that matters, but rather the living *of* it. Living in a place does not guarantee engagement with it. To engage, one must live a life that is, in some important way, of that world. One must share with one’s informants the banalities of daily experience, as well as common dangers, desires, affinities, and frustrations. One must be vulnerable, relying on one’s informants for satisfaction of basic social needs, such as compassion, respect, humor, and camaraderie. One’s informants are also one’s co-habitants in a shared life, in which there are shared stakes. The ethnographer often at first lacks an ordinary contributing role in society. However, with ingenuity and resourcefulness she finds ways to enter into meaningful relationships of exchange with those around her. This engagement is part of the work of good ethnography.

Ethnographers experience aching for the field because we live deeply in the life that is the field. We slip back and forth between distinct worlds, learning to express, feel, move, act and be of them. Ethnography is the process of using the medium of one’s own life to produce knowledge. As a process it strives for wholeness and experiential depth. Sincerity, openness, humility and robustness are the tools of our method. When successful, we achieve a uniquely complex form of empathetic knowledge, and homesickness.

Orientation, Scope and Preparation

If ethnography is the process of using the medium of one's life, in its multiplicity and wholeness, to produce knowledge, then research design in ethnography means choosing what life to live in the field. Ethnographic fields in anthropology have traditionally been defined by groups of people. In this approach, the field and the life to be lived in it can be chosen by determining who the inhabitants of the field will be, and what parts of their lives one wants to or it is realistically possible to share in. Today many anthropologists feel that ethnography in this traditional sense is no longer the focus of anthropological research. For them, the field is defined by problems, practices, or discourses, rather than by localized communities. I believe that ethnographic research can still be done with people as the field's constituent determining subject and with prolonged engaged living in localized communities as the foundational practice of research. In this methodological approach, problems, practices, and discourses are of course important subjects of ethnographic research, but ultimately it is a group of people, connected by shared life experiences, that defines the field. The particular concerns and living conditions of this group of people in turn determines the problems, practices, and discourses that are of interest to the anthropologist. The people who define and populate my ethnographic field for this project are China's professional dancers. They were cohabitants, classmates, friends, interlocutors, teachers and collaborators in my life in the field. I learned to live a life that overlapped in important ways with some part of theirs. In this shared experience and mutual engagement, I produced knowledge about them, their experiences, and the world they inhabit.

To figure out how to live among China's professional dancers, I needed to first learn something about them. Thus, before going to the field I read up on dance in twentieth century China. For example I read memoirs of Wu Xiaobang, pioneer of politically-engaged revolutionary dance in the 1930s and 40s and Li Cunxin, a Chinese ballet dancer who emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1980s. I attended performances in Berkeley by the National Ballet of China, U.S.-based Shen Wei and Yin Mei, and Taiwan Cloud Gate's Lin Huai-min, as well as local Bay Area Chinese dance troupes. I read reviews online, attended talks by the artists, observed rehearsals, and waited around after performances to ask questions. During preliminary research trips in the summers of 2005 and 2006⁸⁹, I slowly began getting to know dancers in China. I attended performances, participated in dance classes at small studios in Beijing, and befriended members of the dance community I met through these activities. In 2005, I became an instructor at the Dancing Heaven ballroom studio in Beijing, where I met my first contacts at the Dance Academy, which later became my primary site of research and residence during fieldwork. In summer, 2006, I conducted my first formal interview with a professional dancer in China, a twenty-something recently married female dance college graduate who was teaching at a university in Beijing and trying to decide what to do with her life. Through the slow process of participating in the China dance community, I became part of that community myself.

It may be useful to note that this research project was not my first to look at the values and experiences of professional dancers. In 2002 I conducted ethnographic research in Aix-en-

⁸⁹ The purpose of these first two summer trips was primarily to participate in intensive full-time language study. I used evenings and weekends to conducted preliminary research.

Provence, France, also among dancers.⁹⁰ Through the trials, errors and minor victories of this earlier project, I learned basic skills of ethnographic research -- how to locate, take advantage of, and document opportunities to engage. I also learned a great deal about European contemporary dance. Significant knowledge of and reflection on dance worlds outside China, combined with being a dancer myself, provided useful cultural capital in my interactions with Chinese dancers.

In the process of conducting preliminary research, I determined that I was primarily interested in the world of dancers living in socialist China, not Chinese dancers living under other political regimes. I decided to exclude Chinese dancers born and educated in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States or otherwise outside mainland China. My research subjects thus, in theory, include all professional dancers raised, educated and living in mainland China. For the purposes of my project, professional dancers includes performers, choreographers, dance teachers and retired dancers. During preliminary research I also discovered that a single common experience unites the large majority of professional dancers in mainland China. That shared experience is professionalized dance education, based on the model of the Beijing Dance Academy. On average, mainland Chinese dancers leave regular school to enter full-time dance training programs between the ages of 9 and 13. They leave their families and home communities to live and study at dance school until sometime between age 15 and 21, when they graduate and begin work as dancers, teachers, or choreographers, often in the same institutions where they lived and studied as students. The most formative years of the mainland China professional dancer's life are thus spent in dance schools.

I decided that to understand and enter into the world of China's professional dancers I needed to understand, and if possible personally experience, dance education in a professional dance school in China. Even more so than the theater or the rehearsal room, the dance school, and in particular the dance studio, was the primary space of my ethnographic experience. Dancers spend an enormous amount of their lives in the studio. Students I knew and observed usually entered the studio between seven and eight o'clock each morning and left after nine each evening, with only short breaks for meals, "cultural classes" (non-dance related curriculum) and perhaps a midday nap. In that simple cube of space, defined by a floor, four walls, a mirror, and the human activities taking place in it, a whole world exists. Apart from the architectural space, a virtual visual space exists beyond the mirrors through reflections provided in them. An additional expansive realm of exists in the phenomenological and psychological inner world of the dancer. This field of sensation, imagination, intention, and evaluation is the space of the dancer's subjectivity. These multiple spaces constitute the studio as a site of ethnographic experience. It is the metaphorical millstone, the place where, through determined polishing, work accumulates and moulded creations emerge from the unformed. The studio is the space where dancers are born.

For my primary research site, I chose the Beijing Dance Academy, nicknamed *Beiwu* (pronounced 'Bay-woo') by my informants. *Beiwu* is the oldest and by far the most influential of China's professional dance schools. It is the center of a network of institutions, knowledge forms and individuals that make up China's world of professional dance. The epitaph carved into a giant rock at the school's entrance reads: "Cradle of Dancers." Apart from being the birthplace of dancers, Beijing Dance Academy is the birthplace of dance as a professional industry in China's

⁹⁰ Wilcox, Emily (2005) *Dance as l'Intervention: Health and Aesthetics of Experience in French Contemporary Dance. Body and Society, Special Issue: Dancing Bodies*, Bryan Turner, ed. London: Sage Publications.

socialist era. Though its physical location and architectural structures have undergone continuous change and renovation, many individuals, institutional ties and values have remained present throughout the school's existence, making it a continuously existing place. Established as the Beijing Dance School in 1954, *Beiwu* was founded to produce dancers for China's socialist national construction. The Beijing Dance Academy remains the only institute of higher education devoted exclusively to dance in China. Dancers, dance teachers and choreographers all around the country are graduates from the Academy or have teachers who graduated from it. Those who didn't study at *Beiwu* in their youth almost without exception make pilgrimages there in adulthood, for conferences, job fairs, honorary banquets, short-term training and extended learning degrees. Curriculum materials (教材) published by the Beijing Dance Academy define official requirements for courses and pedagogy used in schools around the country, and aesthetic styles of new dance works created at the Academy set the standard for competitions and performance events drawing participants from around China. The concept of "*xueyuan pai*," the stylistic hegemony associated with professional dance training, as opposed to folk training, for example, is unequivocally associated with the dominant position of the Beijing Dance Academy vis-a-vis all other institutions of dance in China.

Because it is a highly prestigious and bureaucratically "central" institution, the Dance Academy was not easy to access as a site for ethnographic field research. Negotiations for me to live and study at the Academy in a capacity I thought adequate to conduct research lasted several years and almost failed on several occasions. It was only through extreme perseverance and a very specific vision that I was able to become a regular student there, with access to participate in and observe professional classes. I was determined to be in classes with professional students in the regular bachelor's program at the Academy. Therefore, when the Office for External Affairs proposed that I enroll in a short-term extended learning program, I refused, saying this did not fulfill my research objectives. Enrolling as a regular graduate student, the only existing role that seemed appropriate and that would provide the access I needed, would have required staying for 3 years and fulfilling coursework requirements unrelated to my research. Only after I made personal connections with individual professors at the Academy and got support from the head of the graduate program did the administrators in the Office of External Affairs finally agree to create a special one-year position for me, under the condition that I paid tuition and did not receive a degree. Nearly two years after negotiations began in the summer of 2006, I entered the Dance Academy's Department of Graduate Studies in the spring of 2008, with the special title of "visiting advanced graduate student."

When I began studying at the Dance Academy in spring of 2008, I had already been living in China for ten months. I began studying at the Academy in April of 2008 and moved there in June of 2008. I lived and studied at the Academy until the end of November, 2009, for a total of three semesters⁹¹, or nineteen months including summer and winter holidays. Including the time leading up to and during my primary period of full-time dissertation fieldwork, I lived in China for a total period of 29 consecutive months. During this time, I left China only three times, once for a two-day conference and twice to visit family and friends, for a total of six weeks altogether. While living in the field, I made a serious effort to speak only Chinese and to socialize

⁹¹ My original agreement to be at the academy for two semester was extended when I was invited to work as Head Interpreter for an international choreography research project hosted at the Academy in the fall of 2009. I was given the position of special visiting student in exchange for this work.

primarily with Chinese acquaintances. I had three Chinese roommates while living in the field. During my time in the field, my capability in Mandarin language reached a level of professional fluency such that I gave academic talks, published articles in Chinese and was frequently worked as interpreter and translator for activities related to my research.

Apart from learning about and getting to know Chinese dancers, participating in activities in the dance world and negotiating with administrators for permission to study and do research at the Academy, I also did several other kinds of preparation before beginning fieldwork. For language preparation, I completed the equivalent of four consecutive years of coursework in Chinese language at UC Berkeley and three consecutive summers of two-month full-time intensive language programs in Beijing. In 2007-08, the year immediately preceding my primary fieldwork period, I withdrew from graduate school to complete a year of advanced language training at the IUP institute for Chinese language in Beijing. In the spring of 2007, I passed doctoral exams based on coursework in sociocultural anthropology, medical anthropology, performance studies and China studies and secured funding for more than two years of international research.⁹² Finally, I prepared physically to take part in daily dance classes with professional dance students. My foundation in dance included six years of classical ballet, eight years as an extremely involved student, competitor, performer and coach in university ballroom dance teams, and one semester of training in modern dance. Between 1999 and 2008, I won awards in amateur-level ballroom dance competitions in the United States, England and China. In 2002, I performed in and helped organize in a two-week ballroom dance performance tour around China with the Harvard Ballroom dance team, and in 2005, I appeared as a professional dancer in the Hollywood film *Rent*.

Embodied Research

While studying for nineteen months at the Beijing Dance Academy, I used my physical body to research the corporeal aesthetics of dance in China. During this time, there was rarely a day, except when traveling, that I did not spend between two and six hours personally participating in dance classes and practices. The majority of time was spent learning Chinese dance forms. In Han-Tang Chinese classical dance, named after the Han and Tang dynasty culture by which it is inspired, I channeled two-thousand-year-old literary maidens and scholar-officials through subtle breath, a softened spine, stamping feet, and “*doujian* (抖肩)” or shoulder shivers. In *shenyun* (身韵) Chinese classical body rhythm, I learned to embody the movement essence of Ming and Qing era martial artists and opera singers, from retiring curves of the *qingyi* (青衣), or virtuous females of the opera tradition, to the explosive sweeping moves of dragons and warriors. Doing Chinese classical dance I felt spiraling energy that circled from the ground up, twisting through my torso and shooting out my head, eyes, and the tips of my lotus-shaped fingers. Movements in Chinese classical dance aim to manipulate and create “qi-fields,” (气场) which are sometimes made visible in a spinning and slicing metal sword grasped in the dancer’s hand or in billowing white silk sleeves stretching out beyond her arms. More than props, the sword and sleeve became extensions of my body, carrying its pulse into space. Corporeal aesthetics in Uyghur, Han, and Mongolian folk dance were completely different from those of Chinese classical dance. In learning these forms, I strove to capture the swinging of imaginary waist-length black braids on my back, spun fans and handkerchiefs in my fingers while balancing

⁹² Funding for my field research in China was provided by the Blakemore Foundation, U.S. Fulbright IIE, and the UC Pacific Rim Research Program.

on wooden stilts tied to my ankles with long red silk ribbons, and created the majestic scape of imaginary grasslands by outstretching my hands and embracing earth and sky to the far reaches of the horizon. The richness and depth of experience I achieved through study of Chinese dance is alone enough to fill an ethnographic monograph. For this, I am indebted to the guidance of a small army of extraordinarily gifted and generous teachers, to whom I remain eternally grateful.

In the dance academy,⁹³ bodies are subject to constant scrutiny. By making physical participation an important part of my research, I exposed my body and psyche to this scrutiny and its effects. As the only non-Chinese student in my classes, my body attracted even more interest than average. Teachers, classmates and people I did not even know frequently made comments about my physical appearance. I was more muscular, larger, and less flexible than the Chinese dance students in my classes, for whom extreme thinness, flexibility and lack of any muscular definition are considered the ultimate expressions of beauty and femininity. Thankfully some of my other physical characteristics were considered extremely beautiful in local aesthetic values. People frequently complimented my tall stature, "tall" nose, white skin, curvaceous figure, large "blue" eyes (my eyes are unequivocally brown by American standards), "blond" hair (again, I'm considered a brunette in the U.S.), and long eyelashes. As in American dance communities, weight is a constant concern among dancers in China. Because meeting people was an important part of my research, and food is the most important context for socializing in China, I often found myself being invited to, or inviting others to large and delicious banquet-style meals in restaurants or in friend's homes. Offering and accepting food was a sign of friendship and caring, and I enjoyed taking part in that exchange. The Chinese dance I was learning was much less aerobic than exercise I was used to in the U.S., so I was getting less of a workout than I was accustomed to, despite being in the studio for many hours each day. These factors, and perhaps the stress of living in a foreign country and being constantly on the go for field research opportunities, conspired to my gaining weight in the field. Although I was still slender by American standards, I was not thin enough to meet the extreme expectations of the dance school, which are even stricter than in American dance schools, given that Chinese body types are thinner on average than European ones. Classmates and friends sometimes poked at my body saying I was "very fat" and offered advice on how to lose weight.

Ethnicity is an important part of bodily scrutiny among Chinese dancers. Although they accepted in theory that people of any ethnic background can learn any dance form, my informants nearly all felt that ethnicity influences dance ability. It is frequently stated in China that ethnic minorities are "natural dancers" and that Han Chinese "cannot dance." Chinese dancers who had studied ballet and ballroom their entire lives often told me that being Chinese made it impossible for them to ever really master these "Western" dance forms. While it was considered difficult for Han Chinese to authentically dance ethnic minority dance forms, or for Chinese dancers to achieve excellence in Western dance, these were both common practice and thus very accepted in China. A white person learning Chinese dance was much more of a spectacle. Chinese dance was completely new for me, and adjusting to this completely new movement style took several months, if not the entire time of my fieldwork. One memorable day early on in my research, my teacher in Dunhuang-style dance paused in the middle of class, pointed to me in the back row and said, "Look, everyone! We should all admire the courage and

⁹³ Using the term "dance academy" without capitals, I refer both to the particular spaces of the Beijing Dance Academy and to similar spaces in hundreds of schools around the country for which it is a model.

positive attitude of our foreign student Wei Meiling [my Chinese name]. With no dance training at all, she still has the desire to come to the Dance Academy to study!" By deciding to learn Chinese dance, I agreed to accept frequent minor humiliations that no amount of cultural, linguistic or dance training could have prevented. Because my personal views about the naturalness of ethnicity differed from those of my informants, I also could not help being upset by these comments, both personally and theoretically. I understood the cultural context of their perspective, but somehow being an anthropologist and American, I found it difficult to accept them. Even the most generous and open-minded of my teachers sometimes used me as an example of what they called "Western aesthetics" (西方审美). My movement was variously described as "more direct," "stronger," "straighter," "more upward in orientation," "having an arched lower back" "having a higher chest" and "less retiring" than my classmates. Since I was trying my hardest to not stand out, it was annoying to hear comments like this often multiple times each day. I always wrote down these comments in my notes, and they have turned out to be of great value. In retrospect these moments reveal most clearly the core values of Chinese dance aesthetics and their link to a deeper sense of Chinese cultural essence.

Apart from Chinese dance, I also regularly practiced ballroom style Latin dance and hip-hop while in the field. Having studied Latin dance for 8 years before beginning fieldwork, my engagement with it was much closer to the engagement my informants have with their training. I had enough experience to be my own worst critic, and I expected myself to do well in a way that was different from learning Chinese dance. Being partners with Chinese dancers allowed me to interact with them through dance, and to develop the uniquely close friendships that dance partners often have. My partners and I practiced regularly, took lessons with private coaches, and participated in performances and competitions. When conditions were right, we would feel transcendence in the exhilaration of reaching and sometimes even exceeding our personal best. My ballroom dance teachers pushed me to improve, and our classes were often one-on-one, providing a different type of interaction than in my larger Chinese dance classes. Because dance is at once athletic and aesthetic, the joy of achievement is compounded by peaks of both biological adrenalin and aesthetic self-appreciation. When conditions are less than perfect though, which is most of the time, the dancer is at war with her own body. Practicing the same movements again and again in constant repetition she learns that habit is the most difficult thing to break. No matter how good one becomes, it is never the end of the road, because even just maintaining current ability requires daily practice. A few days missed can undo weeks of work, and when that bad habit is finally broken, another more nagging one is discovered. Studying a dance form I already new in the field allowed me to compare teaching styles between China and other places such as Europe and the United States and to develop professional relationships with partners, classmates and teachers. Most importantly, being engaged in a dance practice I was familiar with allowed me to share in my informants' experiences of working each day toward a physical goal that it feels one may never reach.

Hip-hop, like Chinese dance, was something I learned in China for the first time. It felt more familiar in the beginning than Chinese dance, probably because I had ambient exposure to hip-hop music and culture. The aesthetics of the Chinese hip-hop world, as was the case with ballroom dance and ballet, are strikingly similar to those I was familiar with in the U.S. Teacher Gao, my first hip-hop teacher in China, is an energetic young man with a goatee whose most typical outfit is a pair of oversized white basketball shoes, a squarish giant baseball cape turned to the side, a blue jean muscle shirt open at the chest, and sagging jeans with graffiti tags slanting down the legs. Teacher Gao started each class with a series of head, torso, hip, and knee

isolations. These were followed by the “7 bodies,” beating up and down forward and back and through numerous kinds of body waves. Breaking the body down into robotic moving parts and slowly increasing the movement range of each part is the signature of hip-hop. Classes met every evening for two-week blocks, so the times I was enrolled it was a way of life. Descending the stairs after a long day of interviews and Chinese dance, the beckoning bass of American R&B top forty singles sounded a sweet beckoning call. Usually more than 30 students crammed into the tiny underground studio, members of China’s infamous post-80s generation, dressed in baggy sweats and thumping to Maria Carey, Chris Brown, Janet Jackson, Justin Timberlake, and artists too new and hip for me to know the names of. Each class left my clothes completely soaked in sweat, and walking back up the stairs afterward I would feel sore in places I didn’t know existed. This gritty dance of the darkness and underground was so different in feel from my ever breathy and ephemeral Chinese dance classes, which took place appropriately in the daytime brightness, in high-rise studios with large open windows open and a light breeze always flowing in and out. Yet, for many of us in the hip-hop class (they were often, like me, students of Chinese dance at the Dance Academy) the two worlds were not all that different, or separate.

Another important form of embodied research in which I engaged extensively in the field was watching dance. Dance seeks to infuse rhythm and poetry into the already electrified processes of bodily existence and relations between bodies, spaces and things. I used my body to “tune in” to the metered energetic frequencies bursting out from the stage and from the dancers’ bodies. Studying Chinese dance forms gave me corporeal access to the performative language practiced by individuals trained in these dance forms, which includes the majority of professional dancers in China today. Just as I rarely went one day without dancing, I rarely went two days without watching a formal performance of some kind. Classical dance dramas, dance competitions, tourist site performances, ethnic arts celebrations, traditional opera, ballet, modern dance, government galas and corporate-sponsored variety shows combined constitute the diverse spectrum of professional dance performance in China. When I left the field the piles ticket stubs and performance programs filled a large cardboard box.

Watching performances was an important way of engaging in the dance community. Unlike much other research on dance, this work focuses not on dance works but on the human subjects of dance -- dancers and their values and life experiences. Thus, the performances I saw every other day are not the primary subject of research, but rather one tool among many for being involved and sharing in the lives of Chinese dancers. Performance works were a common topic of conversation among my informants. Therefore, seeing these dances, either on stage or online, was essential for my participation in many conversations. Performance works are also a meaningful part of the mental component of processes of training and human emergence that I witnessed and experienced in the studio each day. When learning a particular movement, one often imagines the movement as performed by a dancer in a well-known work, or in a performance one has just watched the other day and that is still fresh in one’s mind. Teachers, informants and classmates often made reference to dance works in describing the qualities of movement they were striving toward in the studio. Many of my informants described watching dance performances as “re-charging” (充电), or getting new ideas and inspiration for the ongoing creative work that their career entailed. Performance in major dance works is often a formative experience for a dancer. When asked about important turning points in their lives and careers, dancers often spoke of training for an important competition, participating in a government-sponsored performance in honor of an important local or national event, or being involved in the creation of a full-length dance drama or other new artistic work for the stage. To gain a better

understanding of the creative and performance process this involved, I regularly observed rehearsals and, in a number of cases, participated in dance performances and competitions myself.

Fieldwork requires a constant process of sensitization and desensitization. I found this particularly difficult when taking notes on performances and classroom observations. Watching something new for the first time I was often overcome with stimuli too complex to write down. I would be engrossed in watching and absorbing, not wanting to look down for fear of missing something. Sometimes I tried to take notes without looking down, which ended up as barely readable scribbles or cryptic lists of keywords. Other times I made drawings instead of attempting description. After being exposed many times to the same material I would feel unsure what it was important to record. Familiar expressive forms, though still engaging and fascinating, would begin to seem commonplace, too redundant to carefully document. Since I had seen something before I would assume I had already recorded it, though after reviewing my notes I would find this was not always the case. As I became more knowledgeable about Chinese dance forms, I'd realize things now obvious to me would not necessarily be obvious to my readers, and I would be torn about whether to record these elements from my point of view or assume I would remember them later. Details that once seemed new and fresh would fall into obscurity a memory constantly being contaminated by the present. At the same time, accumulated experience had the advantage of making me ever aware of new things. I constantly feared that the details of what I was seeing would fall away and be revised in the passing of time and re-cycling of images and feelings. Therefore, I sometimes forced myself to record thorough description and sketches, precisely what I saw in a performance, to ensure I would have notes to look back on later. To make up for the inherent limitations of my own understanding and judgement, I would also ask for reactions and impressions from my informants and friends, who often accompanied me at shows. Sometimes I focused on the experience of watching, taking no notes during the actual performance, and then wrote general impressions and records of subsequent conversations afterward. These different kinds of impressions and records make up the mixed set of imprints of embodied observation experience that I brought home from the field.

People and Relating

When I tell people in China or the U.S. that this is a project about Chinese dancers, often their first question is what kind. 'Do you study ballet dancers, modern dancers, Chinese folk dancers, ballroom dancers, hip-hop dancers, or Chinese classical dancers?' they ask. Grouping dancers in this way fits the highly specialized categorization of majors offered at the bachelor's level at the Dance Academy, but it does not fit the historical reality of dancers' actual lives. Thus, whenever possible, I avoid these distinctions. My research shows that most dancers in China study and perform in multiple dance forms during their lives. Zou Yang, male, born 1975 is a typical example. From age 12 to age 17, he majored in dance at the Fuzhou Arts Middle School, where he studied a mix of ballet, Chinese folk and ethnic dance, and Chinese classical dance. At age 19, he tested into the Beijing Dance Academy Chinese classical dance department for a two-year bachelor program. While studying in Beijing he became one of the top students in his class, eventually taking third place in the national Peach and Plum Cup Dance Competition, for a classical sword dance solo. Upon graduation, Zou Yang performed Chinese classical dance in the Beijing Dance Academy Youth Company, then went to Japan for a year to study Broadway performance, where he danced in the musical *Cats*. After returning from Japan, Zou Yang taught Broadway-style dance in the then new Department of Musicals at the Dance Academy, until he

became entranced with competitive ballroom dance. Zou Yang and his partner Shi Lin, formerly a classical dancer in Tang Dynasty court dance revival shows, became among China's first couples to enter the top 48 in the world for Open Professional Latin at England's Blackpool Dance Festival. Now in their early thirties, Zou Yang and Shi Lin are married and run two private ballroom dance studios in Beijing. They also teach students in the ballroom dance program at the Beijing Dance Academy Middle School.

Interviewing dancers about their life stories was an extremely important part of my research experience. It allowed me to go beyond the current world of Chinese dancers, which unfolded daily before me in spaces like classrooms, theaters, competition venues, and the Dance Academy cafeteria. Through detailed first-hand descriptions and stories, I entered imaginatively into other Chinese dance worlds and personal experiences of other times and places. Between January, 2008, and July, 2009, I conducted 170 life narrative interviews with current and retired professional dancers ranging in age from 18 to 92 and in birthplace from twenty Chinese provinces. Out of 170 interviewees, 143 are graduates of early-specialization professional arts academies and 30 were born before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. Of these interviewees 75 are women and 95 are men. I met my interviewees in a variety of ways. Some were my instructors, some enchanted me with their performances on stage or in the classroom, some were introduced to me by friends, some were famous individuals I sought out through intermediaries, finding them at events, or by directly knocking on their office doors. Many were people I met in the elevators, hallways and lobbies of the dancer-populated spaces I tended to spend time.

I determined potential interviewees by one major characteristic: they depended on dance expertise for their livelihoods. Apart from this detail, I tried to get as much variation as possible, in age, family and educational background, institutional affiliation, current dance specialty and personal interests and experience. People often assumed that I only wanted to interview famous people, but in fact, I insisted, I was just as interested, if not more so, in learning about the lives of very average Chinese dancers. Each time I met a new potential interviewee, I began by introducing myself, describing my project and saying that I would be interested in conducting an interview to learn about his or her professional life story. I presented my name card and sometimes got one in return; more often I had them write down a name and phone number in my little black book, and perhaps save it into my cell phone. Of course, because I lived at the most elite dance institution in China, and usually the first people introduced to me when I visited other companies and schools were leaders in their institutions, many of my informants are quite famous in the China dance world. Occasionally I flipped through my book or cell phone contacts in the presence of a friend. Seeing the names, the friend would exclaim, "wow! You *know* so-and-so?" Toward the end of my fieldwork I was carrying a telephone book for a China dance hall of fame that extended beyond Beijing to cities around the country.

Formal interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and six hours. Most interviews lasted approximately two hours. Interviews took place either in the interviewee's home or office or in a public place such as a restaurant or coffee shop. Before beginning the interview, I gave a brief explanation of my project and obtained consent for use of the information provided in my final work. Though I had no set list of questions, I always began by asking what year and where the interviewee was born, what his or her family background was, and under what circumstances dance first came into his or her life. This usually led to a recounting, in chronological order, of the unfolding story of the interviewee's life. The story focused mainly on professional activities, though not exclusively. I asked questions based on the story that was presented. They usually

sought out further clarification or description, for example, “what was a typical day like for you at that time?” or “what were the factors involved in making that decision?” More often I tried to get into the experience that the interview described and ask about things that seemed unusual or surprising. Sometimes, when there was a pause in the conversation, a simple “And what happened next?” was enough to push the story forward. Allowing the interviewee to control the direction of the story maximized my learning, since things the interviewee regarded as most important were in many cases topics I would never have thought to ask about. Sometimes I knew the general contours of a person’s life from a C.V. published on the Internet. If I interjected to ask about something on the C.V., the common answer was, “hold on, we haven’t gotten there yet!” Occasionally an interviewee felt I was asking for too much detail at a particular point in story, slowing the pace. “If I tell you about all of this, we’ll never get to the later stuff, and that’s interesting too!” he would exclaim. If time seemed to be running out and there were particular themes I knew I wanted to touch on before the end, I would ask the interviewee to discuss those specific subjects. Sometimes I would ask to set up a second interview. In many cases, especially among older interviewees whose life stories were simply too long to tell in two hours, we talked over several meetings.

Over 120 of the interviews have full audio recordings. I chose not to videotape interviews because I felt video technology was cumbersome and intrusive. Interview opportunities often arose spontaneously, and the audio recorder was easy to have ready for use at all times. I always obtained permission to audiotape, and there were only two cases in which interviewees chose not to be recorded. In two other cases, problems occurred with the recording device and recordings were lost. Other cases in which there is no tape recording for an interview are those in which interviews took place in situations that were too loud (such as in some restaurants or walking on the street), not appropriate (in large gatherings, for example), or in which interview material accumulated over many casual meetings. A number of interviewees are friends with whom I talked and spent time frequently. In these cases, a so-called life narrative “interview” may actually represent knowledge about a person’s life gathered over years or months through various kinds of conversations and encounters. These relationships with people developed through frequent encounters over extended periods of time were often more valuable than formal interviews, or valuable in different ways. I feel these long-term relationships are one of the most important means of doing research in ethnography, and to account for these engagements merely as “unrecorded interviews” is to undervalue the craft of ethnography and the very richness and profound forms of knowing that it has to offer. Long-term relationships in the field provide different types of knowledge than interviews and require a great deal more work. I used both long-term relationships and formal interviews in my work as two different but complementary methods of relating to people and understanding their stories.

Learning through the medium of human relationships allowed me to see informants from multiple perspectives. Zhao Yuewei, my twenty-two year old dance partner at the Academy, was a very different person in different social contexts. In the private Beijing studio where we first met, he was the arrogant but reserved student from *Beiwu*, negotiating for status among the many students who worked as part-time instructors for extra money. At his home in Huludao, a mid-sized industrial city five hours from Beijing, where Zhao Yuewei has his own family-run dance school, he is the charismatic, outgoing and warm Teacher Zhao, stern and confident role model to over one hundred admiring young students. Back in class at the Academy, Zhao Yuewei fades into the woodwork, soft-spoken and deferential, plagued with self-doubt, worrying that his modest family background and stop-start educational history makes him unable to live up to the

standards of his classmates and his school. Even a series of interviews could not have provided the kind of insight I had into Zhao Yuewei's life by being his colleague, dance partner, classmate, friend, and co-worker. Sitting on the couch in Zhao Yuewei's home in Huludao, I watched his beloved mother in her long underwear quietly squatting at the corner of their apartment, brushing her long hair back to keep it from falling into the water where she was washing the day's clothes in a plastic basin set on the floor. At that moment I felt why home was so important to him. Riding on the night bus from Huludao back to Beijing in the middle of the night on Sunday with sore feet, after an exhausting weekend of teaching, dreading the wake-up call for morning class, I felt the split between Zhao Yuewei's two worlds. In the seat next to him on an airplane, taking silly photos together of foreign tropical-looking landscapes out the window and singing along to music on an ipod split between our two ears, we shared giddy excitement for our first all-expenses paid commercial performance together. In this moment I felt Zhao Yuewei's youth, and the unexpected opportunities of a wide-open future.

It is often in the banal spaces of everyday life that the brilliance of our informants manifests itself. One day I was practicing a sword dance routine outside on the grass field at the Academy with my friend and classmate Liang Yujian. He watched me for a while, squinting his eyes, and then said, "I think I know what the problem is. You are breathing with your mouth and nose, but you need to breathe with your whole body." Another day I was walking back to campus after a post-class lunch with my Han-Tang classical dance teacher Chen Jie and other classmates. At lunch we'd been chatting about what makes Han-Tang dance different from other kinds of Chinese classical dance, and while we walked back Chen Jie returned to the topic. "You know, with Han-Tang I feel we are not trying to recreate something from the past. What we do comes from a modern origin. It is oriented to the past. I see Han-Tang as the fruit of our imaginative yearning for the past." It is also in these everyday spaces that the persistent and nagging concerns, stakes, and commitments of our informants reveal themselves. One day I sat in a restaurant across from my late-twenties choreographer friend Peng Huan while we waited for some other friends to arrive for a going away party. "How have you been lately?" I asked her. She said, looking out the window, "you know the state-run performance companies around the country are changing structure (改制), right? Well, it's happening this spring. In a few months, a huge number of the troupes in the south are completing their switch and they aren't going to have as many regular employees as before. It'll be mostly contract work. This is really going to have an impact on people like me. A *lot* of people are going to lose their jobs." I was in the Dance Academy's second-floor cafeteria one late afternoon to get a quick meal before heading out to a performance. I saw a student from the ballroom program sitting alone and sat down with him to eat. We chatted for a while about the Latin dance World Champions from South Africa who had just visited to teach at the Academy a week before, and the upcoming competition in Shenzhen. Then the classmate looked up from his food and said, "you know, if I had it to do over again I wouldn't choose dance. I mean, I might dance as a hobby, but I wouldn't want it for my career. I chose this route when I was 10, when I didn't know any better, and I gave up other opportunities, like regular school. Now I'm stuck with this, even though I'm only 18. Actually, I'd really like to be a lawyer, or a secondary school literature teacher, but it's too late."

Travel and Imagining

Because of the importance of relationships built up over time, and encounters made possible by long-term engagement, I stayed at the Dance Academy, living, taking classes, and conducting research for the majority of my time in the field. However, when it was possible to do

so without missing too much class or important events, I also made frequent trips to research sites outside Beijing. Out of the 170 life narrative interviews I conducted with professional dancers, 65 were conducted in what Beijingers call “outside places” (外地), or places outside Beijing. These trips and the research they made possible served a range of different purposes. During the 2008 Chinese New Year holiday I spent three weeks in a small town called Wanyuan located in the mountains of northeast Sichuan, in Western China. The area around Wanyuan was described to me later, jokingly, as “a place so remote they’ve never heard of Mao Zedong.” I attended the two weddings of a close friend while I was there, one held in the town of Wanyuan and the other in the rural mountain village where my friend’s spouse’s family lives. I celebrated the New Year holiday going back and forth between these two families, as well as the family of my friend’s middle school dance teacher, Mrs. Wang, a vibrant woman in her late forties who became one of my first formal interviewees. Mrs. Wang and her husband Mr. Yuan met in the early 1970s working as performers in a local socialist performance troupe (文工团) that was set up by young *zhiqing* (young intellectuals) from Chongqing. Mr. Yuan was a singer and Mrs. Wang a dancer. Mr. Yuan is now manager of a nightclub near Quanzhou, in Fujian Province, on the opposite side of the country. This was the first year he wasn’t able to come home for the New Year. With my friends busy preparing for their weddings and Mrs. Wang home for the holiday alone except for the company of her college-age son, I spent many evenings in the home of Mrs. Wang, watching television, snacking on popcorn and chatting about her life experiences.

Being fluent in Chinese made it possible for me to do all of my interviews independently, except when curious friends came along to listen out of their own interest. Since she is a teacher and former performer, Mrs. Wang, unlike many other people I met in Wanyuan, speaks fluent Mandarin, the Chinese lingua franca in which I was trained. I adjusted to Mrs. Wang’s Sichuan accent, but I soon realized there was a much more important linguistic hurdle to be crossed. That is, speaking about the recent past in China requires knowledge of a whole array of terms and sayings from a socialist world that no longer exists today. Mrs. Wang came from a family labeled as “*hongwulei*,” literally, “members of the red category,” or people with good family backgrounds. Mr. Yuan belonged to “*heiwulei*,” literally “members of the black category,” or those with bad family backgrounds. Mr. Yuan’s father had been a “*lazhuangding*,” or temporarily enlisted soldier for the KMT during the anti-Japanese war. Since these terms are no longer in parlance in China today, I had to learn them in practice by asking for explanations during interviews. Even Mrs. Wang’s given name, “*Chaoying*,” came from a politically charged and now obsolete saying from The Great Leap Forward era, “*ganmei chaoying*,” or “catch up to the United States and surpass England.”

Through the stories of Mrs. Wang and other dancers I interviewed during subsequent travels, I learned of a shared national experience of performers in socialist performance troupes all over China during the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s. Most of the people I interviewed in Beijing often grew up or spent significant parts of their lives in small towns and rural areas far from the capital. Therefore, even interviews conducted in Beijing led us, at least in imagination, to the outer places. Having spent time in these areas, visiting schools, theaters, homes, temples, worker’s unions, fields, trains, creekside paths and mountain roads gave me the experiential, linguistic and cultural resources necessary to follow along in my informants’ stories and descriptions. Each interview was a virtual tour through other places and times. In many cases these interviews serve as records of the personal experiences of individuals who are reaching the end of their lives. Through interviews, which were sometimes supplemented by materials in published historical records and memoirs offered to me as gifts by my informants, I was able to

see more deeply into the personal realities of a world of early Chinese socialism that no longer exists today. I often felt extremely exhausted after interviews. I realized this exhaustion came from the work of virtual travel; I was constantly mobilizing my entire capacities to put myself in the places and situations that my interviewee described. Each interview required immediate memorizing of place names, persons, relationships, detailed timelines, the names of previously unfamiliar institutions, historical events, and so on. Only through this process of imaginatively entering into the world of the interviewee and keeping careful track of each detail was I able to follow with appropriate questions and push the story forward. It was very obvious to me that my ability to engage during interviews impacted the quality of the material being offered to me. My questions exposed everything. When my knowledge and imagination kept pace, my interviewee seemed excited to be able to share his or her story. Details became more vivid and explanations more nuanced. When I was tired, or distracted, or simply did not know enough to follow along, I sensed a frustration in my interlocutor, which was often accompanied by a holding back.

The interview is produced through interaction between two active parties. This interplay is a crucial place in which the ethnographer's experiential knowledge -- the slow amassing of formal and non-formal encounters usually described as "participant observation" -- directly influences the material gained via the more formal research avenue of the interview. In interviews, I strove to maintain a balance between insider and outsider. If I displayed myself as too much of an insider, I faced the risk that interviewees would not explain and describe, either because it seemed redundant or because politics of position made it uncomfortable to do so. However, if I displayed myself as a complete outsider, lacking the capacity to understand and virtually experience what is being described, this frustrated all but the most generous of interviewees. I chose candidness whenever possible. I did my best to reveal the knowledge I had and ask about the knowledge I didn't, and to position myself as politically uncommitted, not responsible to or completely loyal to any one "school" or group.

The co-productive nature of interviews meant that each interview appointment had to be prefaced with adequate preparation on my part. Doing an interview without this preparation was almost a waste of time, because adequate engagement would be difficult to achieve without it. First, it was very important that I got enough sleep the night before an interview. I tried not to schedule more than two interviews per day, unless there were special circumstances that made it absolutely necessary, such as being on a research trip with limited time. More than two interviews per day was too tiring, and it influenced the quality of interviews scheduled later in the day. I also made sure to do the "homework" of researching the person I was about to interview. Through Internet searches, conversations with mutual acquaintances, or quick literature reviews, I always made sure to get at least a basic understanding of the professional history of the person I was about to meet, and when possible a cursory knowledge of the institutions or representative works associated with her or his career. I felt this kind of preliminary work was a basic courtesy to my interviewee, and it showed respect for the people I was asking to open up their life experiences to me. I tried sincerely to strike a balance between displaying basic knowledge about a person and his or her accomplishments and pretending to know more than I did. This was not always easy to negotiate, because even as I tried to display respectful acquaintance with the accomplishments of my interviewee, I also needed to display enough ignorance to call for comprehensive explanation. One of the biggest challenges I faced toward the end of my fieldwork was resisting the temptation to speak out when I thought I knew exactly what a person was talking about. Making this claim, something like "Oh yes, I completely agree! It's that same problem of such and such that everyone seems to be talking

about” would often stop a person from further explanation, thus depriving me of both a useful and quotable articulation of a particular feeling or phenomenon, and the possibility of realizing that I was wrong and the person actually meant something quite different from what I thought.

My visits to outside places were concentrated in four regions and provinces: Sichuan/Chongqing (Western China), Liaoning (Northeast), Fujian/Guangzhou (Southeast) and Inner Mongolia (North). Of these, the Special Autonomous Ethnic Minority Region of Inner Mongolia was the only area I chose to visit out of pure personal interest in the place and its people. In preliminary research I developed an affinity for Mongolian music and dance and an interest in the history of grassland culture and the people who claim descendance from the great warrior and leader of one of the largest empires in human history, Ghengis Khan. During my field research period, I visited Inner Mongolia four times, first for tourism, then to attend the birth celebration of the child of a performer I met during the first trip, then to attend the annual Inner Mongolian provincial dance competition, and last to attend a conference on grassland art and culture. Each trip lasted between several days and over a week. Through these repeated trips, I became acquainted with Mongolian dancers and choreographers in Beijing, who became some of my closest friends. The other places that became important research sites outside Beijing started out as hometowns of friends or locations of important dance festivals. I first travelled to Chongqing at the end of my trip to Wanyuan in 2008, then again in 2009 to visit the home, former school and former place of employment of my Han-Tang Chinese classical dance teacher Chen Jie. Sichuan and Chongqing have the unique characteristic of being very far from coastal cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, with their own unique local cultural tradition, but also being intimately involved in centrally important socialist revolutionary history. Chongqing has one of the longest-standing state-sponsored song and dance troupes, and it was the site of a battle that determined the end of the war of Liberation in 1949. The province I visited most outside of Beijing was Liaoning province, because it was the home of my dance partner, Zhao Yuewei. Apart from multiple stays for weeks at a time in Zhao Yuewei’s home in Huludao, I also made a special trip to the provincial capital, Shenyang, to visit his former school and interview teachers there. Liaoning was one of the first areas occupied by the Communist Party in the 1940s where much early revolutionary dance was created. Shenyang, along with Shanghai and Harbin, has among the longest traditions of ballet training in China. People from this region, and the Northeast in general, are taller on average than people in other parts of China, making them suitable for dance. Thus many of the dancers I met around China came from this region. Guangzhou in southern China is the site of a month-long annual modern dance festival and dance camp, which I attended in the summer of 2008. I spent the 2009 Chinese New Year holiday at a friend’s home in the southern coastal province of Fujian, where I stayed for three weeks conducting visits and interviews with professional dancers and performance companies in Fuzhou, Quanzhou and Xiamen. With close ties to Hong Kong and Taiwan, Guangzhou and Fujian are important examples of southern regionalism and experimental development very different from that taking place in Beijing, the nation’s political center. Guangzhou was home of China’s first modern dance company after the economic reforms of the 1980s and continues to be home of China’s largest concentration of modern dancers outside Beijing. Fujian has some of the best-preserved local performance arts in China, including *liyuanxi*, China’s oldest traditional opera form, as well as a still vibrant tradition of inviting local dance troupes to perform at village temples and holidays.

In each of these “outside places,” and in several other locations I do not mention here because visits were too limited or brief, I connected with individuals like Mrs. Wang, who were

willing to share their stories with me. After the introduction of a friend, or participation in some official event got me into a place, I relied on further introductions and new friendships in order to conduct research. As an ethnographer, I felt that one of the most important skills was the ability to meet and create a rapport with strangers. Each time I visited a new place, I had to learn a whole host of faces, names, places, histories and relationships. Perhaps more importantly though, I had to be brave enough to go to strange places and trust people I had just met. I remember very clearly the feeling of fear that struck through me on my first day in the field in Aix-en-Provence, France, when I began my very first fieldwork project many years ago. On the night of the very day I arrived, I ended up alone in a car with a guy I had just met at a bar. As we drove extremely fast down a highway to meet other people I'd just met at some club in the middle of nowhere far outside Aix-en-Provence, I kept thinking what a vulnerable position I had put myself in and that if my mother knew about this she would be so upset. In the end, the people I met that night turned out to be very trustworthy and some of us remained close friends for the rest of my trip. This basic attitude of trust and adventure, though of course always tempered by a proper amount of care and self-protection, is one of the ethnographer's most valuable tools and methods. I had that same feeling, in the pit of my stomach, weaving through massive crowds on the back of a motorcycle on the packed streets of Quanzhou the night of Yuanxiaojie (post-New Year's Lantern Festival), and when being asked by police to debord a bus in the middle of a sand dune filled desert in western Inner Mongolian. These small risks all led to great ethnographic experiences, as did something even more important -- a basic willingness and enthusiasm to open up part of myself to my co-habitants and informants, to bring into being, along with them, the life of the field.



Fieldwork in Inner Mongolia, 2008.