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Choreographing Postsocialist China: New Experiments in Screendance Since the Early 1990s

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Choreographing Postsocialist China:

New Experiments in Screendance Since the Early 1990s

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Culture and Performance

by

Jingqiu Guan

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Choreographing Postsocialist China:

New Experiments in Screendance since the Early 1990s

by

Jingqiu Guan

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Sean Metzger, Co-Chair

Professor Victoria Marks, Co-Chair

This dissertation project investigates the aesthetics and cultural-political implications of new experiments in screendance carried out by four different generations of dance artists in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the early 1990s. This rapidly developing and ever diversifying field of kinesthetic and cinematic practices is often referred to in Chinese as *wudao yingxiang* (舞蹈影像 dance-moving image). Circulating at local or international dance film festivals and exhibitions, in museums and gallery settings, on television, on the Internet, and through social media platforms, these experimental dance-moving image productions take part in the expanding global screendance scene and contribute to shaping imaginaries of Chinese identities and lived experiences in and beyond postsocialist China.

Through film analysis, choreographic analysis, ethnography and archival research, this study sheds light on the unique role of dance-moving image in engaging with and intervening in China's social cultural transitions through both filmic representation and corporeal embodiment. This project focuses on three specific modes of dance-moving image productions, namely dance television, experimental dance documentary, and experimental dance shorts, each embodying a diverse range of artistic imagination or conceptual innovation. These case studies complicate the dominant narrative of screendance in English-language literature by delineating different historical processes taking place in mainland China.

This dissertation presents three key arguments. First, *wudao yingxiang* in China is not a monolithic art genre nor should it be seen as merely a Western import. Rather, different modes of dance-moving image practice emerged out of interconnected yet distinct artistic genealogies and respond to different sets of social historical conditions in China. Second, I reveal how the growing dance film practices are not isolated from the global screendance scene but take part in transnational cultural flow. In this exchange, dance filmmakers negotiate with the productive tension between establishing culturally distinct expressions of screendance and adopting Euro-American aesthetics in particular. Third, this project, while presenting both works created by male and female choreographers, highlights the significant contribution of female artists in shaping the field of screendance in the PRC and in constructing the imaginaries of Chinese cultures and memories through screen choreography.

The dissertation of Jingqiu Guan is approved.

Janet O'Shea

Emily Wilcox

Victoria Marks, Committee Co-Chair

Sean Metzger, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandmother, Yao Xiuling, and my parents, Suixiong Guan and Xiaoyan Qiu, who have always encouraged me to pursue knowledge.

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Acknowledgments

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Vita

EDUCATION

2014	**University of Iowa**	MFA in Dance Performance
2012	**Harvard University**	Ed.M in International Education Policy
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PUBLICATIONS

2019 "Navigating State Ideologies through Aesthetic Experimentations: Dance on Television at the Turn of the Century in China," *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* Volume XXXIX: 42-45

2019 "Review: The 2018 Jumping Frames International Dance Video Festival in Hong Kong," *Journal of Media Practice and Education* 20(1): 126-128

2018 "Choreographing 'ChinAfrica' through Transnational Encounter," *The International Journal of Screendance Studies* 9(Spring): 118-132

2016 "An Inescapable Dilemma or A Utopia: Examining Social Relations in Mitchell Rose's Dancefilm 'Globe Trot,'" *Dialogs com a arte: revisit de arte, cultura e educação* 6: 157-169

CONFERENCE

Selected Conference Papers

2019 "Tales of Chinese Dancers from Beijing Dance Academy: Authenticity and Performativity in Wang Mei's Dance Film," Dance Studies Association

2017 "Gazing Chinafrica through the Dance Film 'An African Walk in the Land of China,'" Congress on Research in Dance and Society of Dance History Scholars Joint Annual Meeting

2016 "An Inescapable Dilemma or A Utopia: Examining Social Relations in Mitchell Rose's Dancefilm 'Globe Trot,'" Arts in Society Annual Conference

2013 "The Protesting Arabesque," The Nordic Forum for Dance Research and The Society of Dance History Scholars International Joint Conference in Dance Research

Organized Panel

2020 "Screendance During the Pandemic," Beijing Dance Academy Dance Forum

AWARDS AND HONORS

2020 Best Student Film Award, *Family Portrait* (2019), San Francisco Dance Film Festival

2020 Grand Jury Award, *Family Portrait* (2019), In/Motion International Dance Film Festival, Chicago

2020 Best Editing in Short Documentary, *Inside the Frame* (2019), Silver State Film Festival

2018 Best Student Film Award, *Afar* (2016), MarDelDance Dance on Film Festival

2013 Selma Jeanne Cohen Award for best graduate student paper, Society of Dance History Scholars

FELLOWSHIPS

2018 Edna and Yu-shan Han Award, The School of Arts and Architecture, UCLA
2018 The Duthie-Secchia Fellowship for Doctoral Research on Contemporary China, Center for Chinese Studies, UCLA
2017 Carl Patrick Memorial Scholarship, UCLA
2016,17 Sandra Kaufman Memorial Scholarship, UCLA
2015-18 The Moss Scholarship, School of Arts and Architecture, UCLA
2015-17 Graduate Dean's Scholar Award, School of Arts and Architecture, UCLA
2012-14 The Iowa Arts Fellowship, The University of Iowa

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Undergraduate Courses Taught, UCLA

2016-2020 Video Tools and Techniques (taught the course for six quarters)

Undergraduate Courses Taught, University of Iowa

2013/Fall Chinese Dance

Undergraduate Courses Assisted, UCLA

2021/Winter Dance for Camera (Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance)
2020/Fall Social Emotional Learning through the Arts in the Pandemic (Visual and Performing Arts Education Program)
2020/Spring Socially Engaged Pedagogy (Visual and Performing Arts Education Program)
2019/Spring Autism Media Lab (Department of Theater, Film and TV & Disability Studies)
2019/Winter Autism Media Lab (Department of Theater, Film and TV & Disability Studies)
Socially Engaged Pedagogy (Visual and Performing Arts Education Program)
2018/Fall Ten Questions: Interdisciplinary Conversations (School of Arts and Architecture)
2018/Spring Introduction to Community Engagement through the Arts (Visual and Performing Arts Education Program)
2018/Winter Looking for the Unseen (School of Arts and Architecture)
2017/Fall Documentary Cinematography (Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance)
2017/Spring Introduction to Community Engagement through the Arts (Visual and Performing Arts Education Program)
2017/Winter Dance for Camera (Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance)
2016/Fall Representations: Theory and Practice (Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance)

SELECTED DANCE FILMS

2020 *Inservient* (9min), cinematographer, editor, in collaboration with choreographer Cheng-Chieh Yu
2019 *Family Portrait* (11min), director, choreographer, editor, dancer
2019 *Devin's Mom's Morning Ritual* (8min), director, cinematographer, editor, in collaborator with choreographer Daeun Jung
2018 *First Dance* (1min), directed, cinematographer and editor
2016 *Solar Duplex* (11min), co-director, cinematographer, editor, in collaboration with choreographer Victoria Marks

Preface
Turning on the Camera

I first learned about screendance when I was pursuing my MFA in Dance Performance at the University of Iowa in 2013. This creative practice opens up a new way of making dance in which intentionally framed bodies and micro-movements make up the raw materials for a choreographic assembly. In this process of re-envisioning dance performance for the screen medium, the original dancing body is re-corporealized; the movement sequence is re-organized; and the law of gravity, as well as the linearity of the temporal and spatial logics, are subject to deconstruction. Fascinated by these new possibilities of putting dance on screen to envision choreography, I carried a small digital camera with me and started filming dance, later editing the fragmented movements into sequences that could not be replicated in live performance.

My obsession with this new artistic expression resulted in a few amateur experimentations that launched my journey of investigating dance films through creative practice. In 2015, I attended my first dance film festival, Dance Camera West in Los Angeles, a festival that is highly regarded in the growing field of screendance. In 2016, I attended 40 North Dance Film Festival in San Diego where my new work at the time, *Afar,* was screened. What stood out to me was that, while a handful of international dance films were presented in the program, the vast majority of these works came from Europe and North America. While the narrative of these festivals intends to convey an international group of practitioners, programming often skews towards a Euro-American—predominantly white—practice.[1] But is

[1] It is important to acknowledge that in that last five years, a number of dance film festivals have intentionally worked to diversify their programming, including more works that represent women, disabled bodies, bodies of people of colors, dance forms that are not postmodern dance. They also begin to highlight more works by international artists that have traditionally been underrepresented in screendance. Thus, the landscape of screendance today appears quite different from what I first observed in 2015 and 2016.

that really the case? Born and raised in China, I wondered why there were no dance films created by Chinese artists. I asked myself, "Do choreographers make dance films in China?"

This now seemingly naïve question led me through five years of research both on screendance as an art practice and as a scholarly field of critical inquiry. The screendance scene in China that I have explored turns out to be an array of dynamically shifting, real-time happenings. When I began to research dance film productions in China and Hong Kong in 2016, I found very limited information. Aside from a handful of one-off events in mainland China over the past decade, Jumping Frames International Dance Video Festival in Hong Kong was the only festival that had consistently provided critical platforms for this art practice. In 2016, I was informed by Raymond Wong, the curator at Jumping Frames, that a film of mine included in the festival program was selected for presentation at the hallway of the National Center for the Performing Arts (国家大剧院) in Beijing through the festival's partnership with the Center. This event made me realize that dance film had perhaps already grown into a recognizable art practice in mainland China in spite of limited information on the Internet at the time. I also wondered if dance film was understood differently in the Chinese context given the format of the gallery-style exhibition that resembles contemporary art exhibition, including video art, instead of a cinema exhibition in a movie theater setting. To discover how artists and scholars in China perceive and create dance film, I embarked on fieldwork in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

As I continued my research, I soon realized that I had initially internalized a narrow understanding of dance film that equated it to short dance films promoted by Euro-American screendance festivals, which are predominantly rooted in postmodern dance and avant-garde cinema. I also noticed that such assumptions were shared by many artists and scholars in China who reiterated the narratives that the phenomenon of dance film first originated in "the West," by

which they specifically meant North America and Europe. Thus, they considered that dance film was only just starting to develop in mainland China. However, by broadening the scope of my research to seek other modes of dance film practices that are similarly unconventional and experimental, I found that a vast field of works opened up. This dissertation project has been shaped by an investigative process of speaking with practitioners, curators and scholars in China who experiment with putting dance on screen. It is also greatly informed by my own artistic practice in dance filmmaking and my participation in the global network of screendance festivals on an annual basis. Through this research, I hope to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on screendance as well as situate dance film practices in China both within the context of China's postsocialist transformation and within the dynamic processes of transnational cultural flow.

Introduction
Setting Up the Site for Dance

In 2016, prominent Chinese contemporary dance choreographer and educator Wang Mei (王玫) debuted her very first dance film after a well-celebrated nearly 40-year career at the Beijing Dance Academy. Co-directed by Wang and dance filmmaker Li Qing (李青),[2] this film, titled *The Dance within the Film, the People within the Dance* (影像中的舞, 舞中的人 2016), exposes the shared and distinctive aspirations and struggles of five contemporary Chinese dancers of four different generations at the Beijing Dance Academy: Wang Mei, Zeng Huanxing 曾焕兴, Liu Mengchen 刘梦宸, Song Xinxin 宋欣欣, and Li Mengyu 李梦雨. The main body of the film includes five independent parts, each focusing on the personal stories of each artist. Intercutting talking-head interviews and choreographed dance that present the performers' individual experiences in relation to their pursuit of dance constitutes the overarching representational strategy employed in the film.

In the scene that centers the filmmaker herself, Wang Mei gazes straight into the camera as if carrying an intimate conversation with a close friend. Wang frowns her forehead as she laments the uncontrollable process of aging. Then we see her sitting on the floor underneath a wood dance barre, alone in an empty classroom. Slowly swiping her right leg to the right, which is followed by her left leg, she sits straight on the floor and draws out a pattern that resembles a shifting arm of a clock with her legs. This scene is captured in wide shots to emphasize the sense of loneliness and emptiness. Towards the end of the scene, Wang lays on the ground as the

[2] Li Qing, a graduate from the Beijing Dance Academy, currently teaches in the New Media Program at Beijing Dance Academy. Li has made a number of experimental dance films and has screened her works in dance film festivals outside China.

camera spins above her, creating the illusion that she is turning in circles. This shot transforms her body into a clock that marches towards the future. The carefully designed cinematography emphasizes fragmented choreography focusing on different parts of Wang's body, such as her fingertips and feet, while other parts of her body remain still. These shots vividly represent her deep anxiety towards the experience of aging that may soon take her away from the beloved stage and dance studio that have long defined her life. In our interview, Wang shared with me that she wants to make more dance films in the future.[3] She believes that the film medium could sustain her dance career even if she is no longer able to perform dance with the same intensity as before. Putting dance on screen could also help her expand movement vocabulary and open up new possibilities for choreography. To Wang, dance film provides a range of new possibilities that concert dance could not offer. Her words echo with many other Chinese choreographers who also recently started to experiment with putting dance on screen.

Besides Wang's story of her struggle against the undeniable process of aging, the other four dancers present other issues they faced at the moment of creating this film. These personal contemplations, both narrated in words and embodied through dance, address a range of topics, including (1) institutional hierarchy that pressures Zeng to obtain a more senior job title; (2) competition amongst peers that makes Liu feel regretful of her career choices; (3) whether studying abroad may result in a failure of fulfilling the social expectation for women to get married by age 30 and have children by age 35 in Song's case; and (4) post-graduate career choice of going back to Xinjiang in order to survive the current commercialized dance field that

[3] Wang Mei, interview with the author, August 24, 2018. In our interview, Wang stated the following: "Why do I want to make more dance film? Because I am getting older and I no longer have the same stamina to dance. When you film dance, you can film it part by part, right? I think I have no choice but to take on this path. Then the question is how should I dance? I cannot just dance however I want. I will only do it when the presentation of dance can be both unique and embody my current state of life" (trans. author).

no longer guarantees financial security in Li's case. By situating these individual reflections in relation to social expectations in the twenty-first century Chinese society today, Wang's film points to an overarching theme that this dissertation explores: how does dance film intersect with individual lived experiences in the context of postsocialist China?

This dissertation project investigates the aesthetics and cultural-political implications of new experiments in screendance carried out by four different generations of dance artists in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the early 1990s. I adopt this periodization because it was in the last decade of the twentieth century when single-screen dance films that explore the creative interaction between dance and media technology first emerged.[4] These experimental works, instead of reproducing live dance performances through recording devices, treat dance on screen as an independent art form with its distinct logic. I use the word *experimental* to emphasize the intentional process of experimenting with new ways of integrating dance and media technologies that depart from conventional approaches of documenting and presenting dance on screen. I do not consider *experimental* as necessarily oppositional to mainstream cultures or dominant ideologies. Under this conception, it is possible to broaden the understanding of experimental art to include those that align with ideologies of the state, thus validating artistic experimentations within state institutions. This rapidly developing and ever diversifying field of kinesthetic and cinematic practices is often referred to in Chinese as *wudao yingxiang* (舞蹈影像 dance-moving image). Circulating at local or international dance film festivals and exhibitions, in museums and gallery settings, on television, on the Internet, and through social media platforms, these experimental dance-moving image productions take part in

[4] It is important to note that some dance films are created using multiple screens. In this dissertation project, I limit the scope to examining works that are projected on a single screen.

the expanding global screendance scene and contribute to shaping imaginaries of Chinese identities and lived experiences in and beyond postsocialist China.

Through ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, choreographic analysis, and film analysis, my project seeks to answer the following questions: How do experimental dance films created by Chinese choreographers or filmmakers in the recent three decades respond to and construct particular understandings of China's rapid social, economic, and political transformation? Does the history of dance on screen in China differ from that of its Western counterparts and illuminate alternative genealogies that inform its practice? What kind of curatorial and educational practices have taken place to promote screendance? How do Chinese screendance artists position themselves and their works in the global dance film scene?

Exploring a variety of different approaches to dance filmmaking, this dissertation presents three key arguments. First, *wudao yingxiang* in China is not a monolithic art genre nor should it be seen as merely a Western import. Rather, different modes of dance-moving image practice emerged out of interconnected yet distinct artistic genealogies and respond to different sets of social historical conditions in China. Second, I reveal how the growing dance film practices are not isolated from the global screendance scene but take part in transnational cultural flow. In this exchange, dance filmmakers negotiate with the productive tension between establishing culturally distinct expressions of screendance and adopting Euro-American aesthetics in particular. Third, my project, while presenting both works created by male and female choreographers, highlights the significant contribution of female artists in shaping the field of screendance in the PRC. Unlike the Chinese film industry that has been traditionally and still dominated by male figures, my study reveals that female dance filmmakers play a significant

role in constructing the imaginaries of Chinese cultures and memories through screen choreography.

Screendance as An Analytical Lens

This section discusses the nomenclature surrounding dance on screen practices. I present both general and specific terms that have been used to refer to these practices in both English and Chinese languages. Acknowledging the terms that currently exist in the discourse helps make visible the deliberate efforts and the complex interlingual negotiation that went into legitimizing this growing field of artistic practices.

The English term *screendance* has been used as a loosely defined term that denotes a field of interdisciplinary art practices that explore the interplay of dance and screen technologies. Douglas Rosenberg and Claudia Kappenberg (2010) first used the term in the inaugural volume of the *International Journal of Screendance Studies* to denote the migration of dance from physical sites to screen manifested in multifarious forms. In his book *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*, Rosenberg (2012) further clarifies his choice of *screendance* for its privileging of the site of transmission and consumption, the screen, as where the dance takes place. In a broad sense, Rosenberg argues that *screendance* can be used as an umbrella term that encompasses any and all kinds of dance-media relationships as long as the screen is the medium through which dance is presented. In a narrow sense, however, he theorizes screendance as situated opposite to the documentation of dance, differing from a mechanical or digital reproduction of a live dance performance. In other words, screendance connotes an independent art form, not subservient to an original version and not at risk of losing its "aura."[5] Since the

[5] Walter Benjamin introduces the concept of "aura" in his seminal article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to refer to the artwork's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at

early 2010s, the term *screendance* has been widely used to mark a continuously expanding field of creative practices and scholarly inquiry. Other terms—such as *dance film*, *cine-dance*, *video dance*, *dance video*, *dance for camera*—co-exist, each articulating a specific understanding of the dance-media relationship. For example, the term *dance for camera* emphasizes the role of the camera in the creative collaboration. On one hand, it highlights that the camera is a co-performer with the dancer, and on the other hand, it indicates that the dancers do not perform for a live audience but in front of the camera. *Video dance* and *dance video* both specify the hybridity of this artistic expression but put different emphasis on whether the art form is a form of dance or a form of video.

In mainland China, *screendance* is best translated as *wudao yingxiang* (舞蹈影像 dance-moving image), though many other Chinese terms have also been used previously and currently as various translations to different English-language terms.[6] The combination of "dance" (wudao 舞蹈) and "moving image" (yingxiang 影像) began circulating amongst dance practitioners around the late 1990s and early 2000s. The term first appeared as a scholarly designation in Si

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the place where it happens to be" (1935, 36). Benjamin argues that through the process of reproduction, the aura of the art depreciates, and the authority of the object is "jeopardized" (37). Benjamin's argument applies to reproduction of an artwork based on its original form. When screendance takes on the form an independent art, not subservient to an original version, the idea of the diminished aura no longer holds.

[6] These terms include *dianshi wudao* (电视舞蹈 dance television), *luxiang wudao* (录像舞蹈 video dance), and *wudao duanshipin* (舞短视频 dance shorts). *Dianshi wudao* emerged in the 1990s during a time when dance was still mostly disseminated through television. It was used as a translation for the English term video dance because when video dance was introduced to China by international visiting artists, it was the dance for camera series created for BBC. Thus, video dance was also associated with the space of television. *Luxiang wudao* was another term used to translate video dance into Chinese. Here, the word *luxiang* (video) emphasizes that the medium of the production involves the digital video camera. *Wudao duanshipin* is a rather new term responding to short dance films that are disseminated through the Internet. These works tend to be short and manifest in both very casual styles of home videos and more rigorous experimentation of artistic productions.

Hongliang's 2001 article "The Moving Image of Dance, the Dance of Moving Image" (舞蹈的影像·影像的舞蹈) published in *Dance* magazine, one of the most important journals on dance in the PRC. In this article, Si considers the integration of dance and moving image "a necessary outcome of the era of visual cultures" (2001, 35, trans. author). He uses *wudao yingxiang* to refer to both video projections taking place during a dance performance and stand-alone dance videos, which are two very different kinds of productions. In subsequent years, *wudao yingxiang* has been consistently used in inconsistent ways, at times as a translation for the English term "video dance" (Yuan 2019), at times being used to refer to all kinds of dance on screen productions (Wu 2015; Liu 2020), and at times denoting the interaction of moving image and dance in live performances. In other words, like screendance, *wudao yingxiang* is used simultaneously to denote different permutations of dance onscreen practices in a broad sense as well as newly emerged forms of dance-media experimentation. Dance scholar Liu Chun (2018) addresses the unstable understanding of this term:

> *Wudao yingxiang* [is] previously understood as a recording of dance but currently understood as an interdisciplinary art. In a narrow sense, the term refers to a new art form, yet broadly, it denotes different kinds of shifting relationships between dance and media. (trans. author)

The porosity and quickly changing understanding of *wudao yingxiang* demonstrates the unstable and dynamic discourse of dance on screen in the PRC. The neologism also confirms an unprecedented interest in the cross-disciplinary artistic experimentation that integrates dance and screen technologies.

In this dissertation, I adopt a broad definition for both *screendance* and *wudao yingxiang*. I decided to privilege the English term *screendance* in order to recognize and situate *wudao*

yingxiang within the dynamic global field of practices and scholarship.[7] I also treat screendance as an analytical lens for exploring (1) how the screen offers a medium-specific site for exploring and articulating choreographic ideas; and (2) how the integration of dance and moving image can give rise to new artistic expressions.

The growing body of screendance literature in the past two decades and beyond offers important theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks to understand various screendance practices. For instance, Sherril Dodds' (2001) *Dance on Screen*, the first book-length project to theorize a range of dance practices on screen, conceptualizes "video dance" through notions of "hybridity" and "fluidity." She theorizes the technologically mediated dancing body as a "fluid body" that transcends the materiality of the live body with new spatial and temporal logics. In her book *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, Erin Brannigan (2011) argues that "dancefilm" produces distinct cine-choreographic practices in which a film performance is shaped by choreographic strategies. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli (2018), adopts a cultural studies' lens to investigate representation and embodiment of race, gender, sexuality, and class in screendance works that intersect with popular culture. Moreover, numerous articles published in the *International Journal of Screendance Studies* as well as the *Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* address

[7] Though I use screendance more frequently in my writing, I do recognize that *wudao yingxiang* alludes to some context-specific histories and meanings that screendance does not. First, *wudao yingxiang* communicates a parallel relationship between dance and moving image and emphasizes its nature of hybridity. The term screendance, however, privileges dance over screen as if the screen acts as the container for dance. Second, *wudao yingxiang* does not indicate the medium of production, whether it is analogue film or digital video. The term implies a fluidity in wudao yingxiang's ability to cross disciplinary boundaries. Third, the term *yingxiang* (moving image) recalls early forms of screen performance that constitutes Chinese visual history, such as shadowplay (*yingxi* 影戏), a moving-image practice between 1897 and 1910s that predates the formalization of Chinese cinema. It also echoes the word "ying" (影 shadow) in "dianying" (电影 film) while maintaining a much more flexible notion of moving-image, whereas "dianying" is loaded with specific connotations with regard to its forms.

a wide range of topics related to screendance and intentionally resist defining the field with rigid boundaries. My project builds upon these existing theoretical understandings by exploring different ways contemporary Chinese dance artists have inscribed ephemeral dance performances on screen to engage with China's socio-economic and cultural transformation since the 1990s.

In each chapter, I adopt more specific terms than *screendance* to emphasize a particular mode of dance-moving image practice, which I consider as subcategories of screendance. Each mode is articulated through works by one or two representative Chinese artists who have played a significant role in the development of these approaches to dance filmmaking but who are also little or insufficiently discussed in both English-language and Chinese-language scholarship. These artists include television director and producer Bai Zhiqun (白志群), pioneering video dance artist and scholar Liu Chun (刘春), China's first independent choreographer Wen Hui (文慧), as well as a new generation of post-80s choreographers Ergao (二高) and Tang Chenglong (汤成龙). In Chapter One, I use the term "dance television" (DTV) to acknowledge the space of the television where experiments of filming and editing dance took place in the 1990s and 2000s. In Chapter Two, I classify Wen Hui's works as "experimental dance documentary" to emphasize both its experimental nature and its genealogy in documentary filmmaking. In Chapter Three, I use the term "experimental dance short" to situate Tang Chenglong's and Ergao's works within the international screen festival circuit that celebrates and disseminates short-form experimental dance films. I also refer to all of these dance onscreen works as dance films to legitimate and emphasize their contribution to film practices which are mostly neglected in Film Studies.

Alternative Genealogies: Early Chinese Screendance Practices

Putting dance on screen can be traced to the beginning of cinema, which then diverged into disparate forms of cinematic practices in different social and cultural contexts. Because of the dominance of Euro-American centric literature on screendance, most scholarly writings have situated screendance in the genealogy of Western dance and film history. Consequently, they feature predominantly works by European and American artists. These genealogical interpretations construct a historiographic account of screendance that includes the documentation of dance in the early era of cinema,[8] the silent film era until the late 1920s when movement was prioritized on screen,[9] and the golden age of Hollywood film musicals from the 1930s to the mid-1950s.[10] It also includes avant-garde cinema that incorporated dance,[11] American modern and postmodern choreographers' experimentation with dance film that embraced the aesthetics of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s, and BBC's dance on camera

[8] Early filmmakers immediately began to treat dancers as moving subjects in their films as they recognize a synergy between dance and film which are both movement-based. For example, in 1894, Thomas A. Edison filmed Ruth St. Denis performing a skirt dance outdoors. The first motion pictures introduced to the US audience also featured dancers. George Méliès often used dancers in his films, such as *The Magic Lantern* (1903) and his many other "fantasy films." Dance was considered "particularly compatible with the filmic form" because of its shared sensibility to movement and rhythm (Dodds 2001, 4).

[9] The silent era of film placed an emphasis on featuring dance on screen since movement, rather than dialogue, was the principal language for constructing a narrative. Many actors during this time came from a dance background.

[10] During this period, choreographers and dancers such as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Eleanor Powell, Agnes de Mille and Gene Kelly foregrounded dance and music as the principal components of the film while treating narratives as secondary (Genné 2018).

[11] For instance, in the 1940s, Russian-born American filmmaker Maya Deren's avant-garde films such as *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) constructed dancing bodies that defy the linear logic of time and space, marking another historical moment for the development of screendance. In this work, dancer Talley Beatty continues his movement while the locations where he dances change, from a forest to a living room, and then to a courtyard. Film critic Robert Haller calls it "an especially appropriate, and suggestive, model for filmdance" (1983, 19).

series and *Tights Camera Action!* on Britain's Channel 4 in the 1990s. These dance films on television produced a number of well-crafted experiments rooted in postmodern dance traditions through choreographer-director collaboration. The canonization of Western dance films in the Anglophone scholarly field of Screendance Studies has resulted in a rather narrow screendance history that takes little consideration of its development outside Europe and North America.[12]

This project complicates the dominant narrative of screendance in English-language literature by delineating different historical processes taking place in mainland China. I refer to the dance films that I examine in this project as "new" experiments because dance on screen is not a recent phenomenon but had a rather long history of productions that exhibit different approaches. Here I would like to bring attention to a few screendance practices distinctive to the Chinese context prior to the postsocialist era. These earlier works not only contribute to the shaping of collective cultural imagination of dance-media relationships in contemporary China but also point to alternative genealogies of screendance.

The intertwining relationship between dance and film in China can be traced to the beginning of Chinese cinema. For instance, *Dingjun Mountain* (Dingjun shan 定军山 1905, directed by Ren Qingtai 任庆泰), often touted as the first Chinese film, includes scenes of choreographed Beijing opera performance. In the early twentieth century, Chinese traditional song and dance theaters in a myriad of genres, known as *xiqu* (戏曲, often translated in English as "Chinese opera") were highly popular.[13] To tailor to the Chinese audiences at the time, early

[12] Only a small number of articles explore screendance works in alternative contexts. See, for instance, Liu 2014, Fowler 2014, and Chakravorty 2016.

[13] In the introductory chapter of her book *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization,* Daphne Lei (2011) problematizes the translation of Chinese traditional theater into "opera" as overgeneralizing, exoticizing, and alienating.

Chinese cinema gravitated towards presenting operatic performance on screen, which forged a distinct cinema genre often referred to as the opera film (Teo 2013). Stephen Teo regards the opera film as "the most distinctive of all Chinese genres" and "a quintessential embodiment of a cultural-nationalist form of Chinese cinema" (12). As both a theatrical genre that involves choreography as well as a musical genre, the adaptation process from stage to film means that both performance genres had to also fit within the logic of the cinema. Teo further points out that this translation process presented many challenges in reconciling with the aesthetic contradictions between these two media, or between "xieyi – impressionism as a property of the stage" and "xieshi – realism as a property of the cinema" (Han Shangyi 1956, as cited in Teo 2013). This dilemma is similarly felt in the creative process of adapting stage dance performance to dance on film.

Bedsides these opera films, dance scenes were also included in some Chinese feature-length films of the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, narrative film *New Women* (*Xin nüxing* 新女性 1935) presents scenes of social dance and a dance performance as part of the narrative plot that highlights the international dance scene in Shanghai at the time. Hong Kong feature film *Portrait of Four Beauties* (*Si mei tu* 四美图 1948) incorporates a ballet scene performed by dancer and actress Hu Rongrong. Another 1948 documentary film *Song of Tengri Tagh* (*Tianshan zhi ge* 天山之歌) presents numerous dance scenes performed by the Xinjiang Youth Ensemble during its Shanghai tour of 1947-48, including influential Xinjiang dancer Qemberxanim's signature piece, "Plate Dance" (Panzi wu) (Wilcox 2018). These early Chinese films demonstrate the intertwined relationship between dance and cinema that extends beyond the history of the PRC.

In the early decades of the PRC, state-owned film studios such as Beijing Film Studio, August First Film Studio, Shanghai Tianma Film Studios and Central News Documentary Studio collaborated with various dance troupes to archive choreographies of various genres and disseminate these dances to Chinese audiences in the format of film. For instance, song and dance films such as *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* (Bai feng chao yang 百凤朝阳) produced in 1959*, Colored Butterflies Fluttering About* (Caidie fenfei 彩蝶纷飞) created in 1963, and large-scale song and dance epic *The East Is Red* (*Dongfang Hong* 东方红) in 1965 recorded a number of stage productions of different styles of Chinese dance. In addition, a series of full-length national dance dramas were also adapted into feature-length colored films through collaboration with Chinese film studios, for instance, *Magic Lotus Lantern* (Baoliandeng 宝莲灯 1959), *Five Red Clouds* (Wuduo hongyun 五朵红云 1960), and *Dagger Society* (Xiaodao hui 小刀会 1961).[14] While *Magic Lotus Lantern* recounts the story of love and faith between the immortal and human enacted through Chinese classical dance, the other two productions depict narratives of anti-imperialist, anti-feudalist, and anti-capitalist communist revolution. Examining the dance choreographies and performances in these films in extensive detail, Emily Wilcox (2018) articulates how these Chinese dance performances embody socialist revolutionary cultures and reflect Maoist dance experimentation and innovation.

The most widely disseminated and internationally known screendance in socialist China is unquestionably the revolutionary ballet adapted to film and created between 1966 and 1976 during the Cultural Revolution, a state-led radical social experiment that led to many disastrous

[14] *Five Red Cloud* was performed by the Guangzhou Military Soldier Song and Dance Ensemble *Dagger Society* was performed by the Shanghai Experimental Opera Theater (Shanghai shiyan gejuyuan).

economic, social and cultural consequences.[15] During this time, Mao's wife Jiang Qing took charge of China's arts and cultural production and demanded a revolutionary turn towards creating a new form of distinctly Chinese and socialist dance dramas. Jiang's direction resulted in the production of four revolutionary ballet opera films, *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun* 红色娘子军 1971), *The White-Haired Girl* (*Baimao nü* 白毛女 1972), *Ode to Yimeng* (*Yimeng Song* 沂蒙颂 1975) and *Children of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan ernü* 草原儿女 1975). The first two were part of the eight original "model performances" (*yangbanxi* 样板戏).[16] These filmed revolutionary ballet productions functioned as the principle medium for disseminating and standardizing a socialist revolutionary mass culture in the country (Clark 2008).[17] Chinese Studies scholar Paul Clark (2008) has provided detailed analysis on the trials and errors the production team underwent in order to innovate a specific approach to filming the revolutionary ballet that is neither a recording of a live performance nor a conventional Chinese opera film (to satisfy Jiang Qing's request). His analysis points to the complex process of adapting these two model ballets from the stage version to film, suggesting that, while

[15] Because of its wide circulation, Chinese revolutionary ballet is often misconceived as the primary form of Chinese dance that embodies the revolutionary culture in the socialist era. Wilcox's book *Revolutionary Bodies* (2018) specifically challenges this misconception by delineating a comprehensive and expansive history of Chinese concert dance and argues that Chinese dance, rather than ballet, is considered the national dance that embodies Maoist socialist culture in the early decades of the PRC.

[16] These other six "model performances" include five modernized Peking opera, namely *The Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji* 红灯记), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu Weihushan* 智取威虎山)*, Raid on the White-Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi Baihutuan* 奇袭白虎团)*, On the Docks* (*haigang* 海港), and *Shajiabang* (*Shajia Village* 沙家浜) and one symphony also titled *Shajiabang*.

[17] Exploring the filmed version of revolutionary ballet opera, Rosemary Roberts (2010) examines the construction of gender in *Red Detachment of Women* by analyzing both the movement and the camera. These texts, dispersed in volumes that focus on the revolutionary history of socialist China, contribute to our understanding of the history of screendance. This chapter further points out how these early productions provided sources of inspiration for future screendance experimentation.

screendance productions during the Cultural Revolution appear singular and uniform, they are nevertheless products of experimentation and innovation.

The rich archive of Chinese films that feature dance points to the deeply entangled relationship between dance, theatrical performance, and cinema in the history of Chinese cultural production. Unlike more recent experimental dance films that treat screendance as an independent art form not directly reproducible as a stage performance, these earlier works prioritize the faithful adaptation of an original stage production to film medium. Though these early films may or may not directly impact how contemporary Chinese screendance artists approach their works, they nevertheless occupy an important space in the collective cultural psyche of Chinese people because of their historical significance and wide circulation. Some artists, such as Bai Zhiqun and Wen Hui, also personally performed in revolutionary ballet or other dance productions during the Mao era. They grew up watching filmed ballet opera and other dance films. These earlier works paved the way for later incarnations of dance onscreen productions in direct or indirect ways.

In this project, I trace a genealogy of dance and film works that have shaped these artists' practices. I discuss how new experiments in screendance demonstrate departure as well as inheritance from earlier dance onscreen practices. Besides these earlier productions, I also discuss the impact of some more recent practices, particularly music videos that were first imported into China from Taiwan in the 1980s, as well as Chinese independent documentary practices.

Technology-enabled Screen Culture

Screendance required access to film, video, and screen technologies, from both the aspect of its production and consumption. The early screendance productions that I discussed in the previous section were only made possible because of China's access to film technologies such as projectors, cameras, and prints, which were reserved only for professionals at the time. The diversifying field of screendance practices in the last three decades is facilitated by the availability of a wide range of technological devices to the wider public. On one hand, the prevalence of new media technologies provides new possibilities for artistic innovation. One the other hand, the availability of different forms of screen technologies also impacts how people experience dance.

In spite of the astonishing speed of technological development since China's economic reform that began toward the end of 1970s, access to technologies for dance film experimentation did not become a reality until much later. In the early to mid 1990s, it was still rare for non-professionals outside the mostly state-owned television and film industries to get hold of filming and editing devices. For instance, Lu Xinyu (2010) points out the overlooked interconnection between state-owned television system and independent documentary productions, in which early independent filmmakers borrowed equipment from state television stations in order to create their own films.[18]

Yet, since the 2000s, the portable camera, video recorder, and computer have gradually become a critical part of everyday reality. Access to filming technologies made it possible for

[18] Besides the access to resources, Lu Xinyu (2010) also points out that in the early 1990s, independent documentary makers were usually also employees at state-owned television station. While creating documentaries for their work, they also took every possible opportunities to create their own documentaries outside the state system. Their collective works fueled the development of the New Documentary Movement.

choreographers to experiment with video making. More choreographers began to film their own dance choreographies rather than relying on filmmakers to make decisions such as the framing of the dancer, the movement of the camera and the site where dance takes place. The easy accessibility to filming and post production equipment has diversified modes of dance film production in terms of labor. Sometimes a choreographer is involved in the entire production process, from choreographing the dance, performing in the film, to filming and to editing. Sometimes, a choreographer collaborates with a filmmaker but still plays an important role in determining how the choreography is represented on screen. At other times, a choreographer self-directs the film while collaborating with a cinematographer and an editor in the production and post-production process. The works I will discuss in this project cover all these three modes of production. Besides the ones I address here, other processes of collaboration also exist.

The availability of different kinds of filming devices also means that while the barriers of entry to filming dance have become lower than ever, hierarchies in production values also become more visible. Having the financial resources to access higher-end equipment represents a position of privilege. However, it does not determine how meaningful a work is. The dance films that I will discuss in this project are created through a range of different technological devices, from professional television production standard equipment, to the consumer-grade flip camera, to high resolution cameras and drones. Through a close reading of their works, I reveal how the specific choices of the medium of production could be seen as an aesthetic and political statement.

Besides the direct impact on screendance from production-related technologies, the growing visibility of this field of practices in mainland China was also facilitated by new ways of transmitting and consuming dance in the public domain. Television became a common

household item in the early to mid 1980s in the PRC, which meant that audiences for Chinese television began to increase to significant size. The rising demand for television programs then incentivized more technological innovation and more diversified programming within television production. In twenty-first-century China, ever-popular iPads, computers, and smartphones—along with the emerging internet technologies—have gradually replaced television screens as the main interfaces of media consumption. This shift is accompanied by the growing prevalence of online media platforms such as WeChat,[19] TikTok,[20] Weibo,[21] and video streaming sites such as bilibili, Youku, and iQiyi. These media platforms have popularized individualized forms of content distribution, prompting many professional and amateur choreographers and dancers to post dance videos of various kinds on the internet to gain visibility and recognition, or simply to share their works. The content is then consumed through personal portable electronic devices, further facilitating an individualized mode of media consumption. Film scholar Paola Voci refers to this phenomenon of distributing and consuming videos through these smaller-size portable screens as "smaller-screen realities" (2012, 1–22). She argues that these smaller screens are transforming visual cultures in China by encouraging a wide range of new media genres that are interested in self-expression but not necessarily political dissent. As new media technologies have become an integral part of everyday life, boundaries between high-brow art and low-brow

[19] For instance, WeChat, first launched in 2001 by Tencent, has acquired over 1 billion monthly users in the world since 2018. It is also the dominating social media platform in the PRC. As a powerful "everything app," WeChat intersects with all aspects of life, from paying bills to shopping for clothes, to purchasing a movie tickets, to order take-out meals, etc.

[20] Social media platforms make screendance more visible to the general public. For example, to promote screendance, professor Zhang Zhaoxia collaborated with social media company TikTok to organize dance video competition. Social media platforms became a productive medium to raise public awareness on experimental dance films. Dance-related videos ranks top three on TikTok (Zhang, interview with the author, August 24, 2018).

[21] Weibo is a Chinese microblogging site first launched in 2009.

art are increasingly blurred. In relation to dance films, the new screen culture normalizes the consumption of short dance videos via various online media platforms, whether it is just a casual recording of dancing at home or a rigorously-conceived dance film.

Even as the internet now serves as a primary site for the self-distribution of digital media, other exhibition platforms continue to be privileged spaces of exhibition. Screendance fluidly traverses different exhibition channels, from television to cinema to galleries. This boundary-crossing nature of the new dance-moving image culture also means that the creators of *wudao yingxiang* are not limited to choreographers and filmmakers per se. Although in this study, I focus primarily on practitioners who also self-identify as dancers and choreographers, I recognize that visual artists and performance artists also actively partake in the shaping of this practice. For instance, Chinese contemporary artist Cao Fei has consistently created videos that include dance. Cao's videos are predominantly screened through the format of gallery installations, but they also appear at screendance festivals. If earlier screendance productions are situated within the history of film or seen simply as documentation of dance, new experiments in screendance are not tied to one particular media technology, one mode of production, one system of aesthetic codes, or one exhibition platform.

Postsocialist Modernity

This dissertation explores the interplay of screendance and the discourse of postsocialist Chinese modernity. On one hand, I consider that the postsocialist condition gave rise to new aesthetic practices in screendance through the production of new cultural logics. On the other hand, mediated dance onscreen, manifested in a variety of forms, also sheds light on various aspects of postsocialist cultures and experiences. I use *postsocialism* as both a periodizing term

and an analytic framework to denote the specific socio-political and cultural conditions experienced in the PRC during an era to which the last three decades (from the early 1990s to the end of 2010s) belong. The postsocialist era marks a radical departure from the communist revolutionary culture shaped by ideologies of Marxism, Maoism, and socialism (Lu 2001; McGrath 2008; Zhang 2008). However, the prefix *post-* does not mean that socialism has become something of the past. Rather, it implies that residual effects of socialism continue to impact postsocialist political, social, and cultural life. Thus, the notion of postsocialism is productive for thinking about the unprecedented and ongoing transformation in all industries and aspects of life taking place in the PRC as well as the remnants of socialism in its shaping of social memories and cultural psyches that continue to impact arts and cultural productions.

The postsocialist era is often considered as beginning at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Yet, this process of moving away from Maoist socialism had already begun a decade earlier. In December 1978, two years after the end of the decade-long Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee Meeting marked a historical moment that pointed a nation desiring to recover from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution towards a new modernization process. In this meeting, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) put forward the policy of Reform and Opening Up (gaige kaifang 改革开放) that signaled a drastic turn away from the Maoist past and towards an embrace of global market economy that is capitalist in nature. In the subsequent decade, with the establishment of special economic zones and the kickstart of the urbanization process, amongst many national, regional and local policies, China experienced the fastest GDP growth in its history and in the world, with an average of

over a 10% annual rate until 2005. Meanwhile, it had also legitimized economic "unevenness" as a defining feature of China's postsocialist modernity (Gong 2011).[22]

The 1980s—referred to as the New Era by Xudong Zhang (1997)—resembles what some call as a period of New Enlightenment in the cultural sphere. Accompanying the unprecedented economic growth, this decade witnessed the second artistic renaissance in China during the twentieth century, the first one taking place in the 1910s. With China's reopening to the Western capitalist world, "Western" philosophy,[23] literature, theoretical discourse, and art, including modern dance, were re-introduced to China and embraced by Chinese intellectuals and artistic communities.[24] It is important to note that cultural exchanges had always taken place during the Mao era, but the direction of transnational cultural flow and exchange shifted towards the capitalist West after the reform began. The inflow of new ideas and ways of thinking led to intense cultural debates on the future developmental paths the nation should undertake with the goal of constructing a new modern Chinese culture. The advent of global modern and postmodern cultural-aesthetic trends, specifically one centered on the capitalist West, led to the budding of a range of art movements taking place in the field of cinema, literature and art that

[22] Chinese scholar Haomin Gong (2011) emphasizes that unevenness should be considered not an adjective but a defining characteristic of postsocialist China as unevenness is not simply a practice of economic development but it has shaped all aspect of Chinese life. He states that unevenness became "a structural factor of society" in postsocialist China (19).

[23] While the binary concept of the East and the West no longer holds, I use the word "Western" (西方) to reiterate the term that Chinese artists and scholars continue to use to highlight the foreign import of ideas, goods, cultures, arts, and the like, particularly from Europe and the US. It may also include countries in the Anglosphere like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

[24] In her dissertation, Fangfei Miao (2019) specifically zooms in onto this period when modern dance was re-introduced to China through artistic exchange between dance teachers and dancers in the US and those in China.

continued to develop in the decade that followed.[25] Meanwhile, many chaotic, contradictory visions also provoked anxiety towards China's future. The growing division in the Party's leadership and unrealized call for democracy and freedom resulted in the student-led protests in 1989 and the Tian'anmen Square Incident on June 4. Deng's reform and opening-up policy was also temporarily halted in the aftermath of the event.

Three years later, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992 marked the beginning of a new stage of an even more aggressive economic reform in the PRC compared to the previous decades. This trip reaffirmed the Party's commitment to economic liberalization by pursuing a radical market reform and welcoming foreign investments. Market privatization, accompanied by some relaxation of state control, quickly spread across all industries, from agriculture to manufacturing and to the arts. In this process, the dance field also had to transition from state-funded institutions to partake in the profit-seeking cultural industry.[26] The rising institutional autonomy and the intensification of competition created incentives and a conducive environment for innovation. China's subsequent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 further signaled the country's formal integration into the capitalist global economy, accelerating its modernization process and ushering in a plethora of global cultures. In this process, the PRC

[25] This new aesthetic trend contrasts with prior aesthetic trends during the Mao era. Examining Chinese socialist literature in the 1940s and 1950s, Nicolai Volland (2020) uses the term "socialist cosmopolitanism" to argue Chinese literature during the Mao era takes part in the transnational socialist culture and world literature. Similarly, writing about Chinese dance in the period from 1949 to 1965, Emily Wilcox (2018) refers to the global modern aesthetic in Chinese dance at the time as an embodiment of the aesthetic of "Third Worldism." Both scholars emphasize that socialist Chinese arts and cultural productions are not simply localized and isolated but actively partake in and contribute to global modern aesthetic trends. This socialist and postcolonial-centered modern aesthetic was replaced by a US-centered one after the 1970s.

[26] In Chapter One, I provide a detailed discussion on how this transitional period gave rise to a new way of presenting dance on television through China's Central Television (CCTV).

legitimizes the internal contradiction of socialist politics combined with a capitalist economic system.

The seemingly stable political environment and economic growth since the beginning of the Reform Era is accompanied with a series of paradoxes. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to play a central role in political and ideological control. Under this distinct cultural condition, many cultural workers participate in the so-called "main melody" productions that characterize a large number of arts and cultural productions in China, which continue to embody the socialist spirit, reinforce state ideologies, and affirm nationalist sentiment.[27] Meanwhile, individual artistic expressions are also encouraged, which spurred a range of new aesthetic practices, including new ways of envisioning dance on screen. These two aspects are not necessarily contradictory. In Chapter One, I provide a detailed account of how new experiments in screendance actually first took place in China's central television, a space highly regulated and controlled by the state, with the creative contribution of television director and producer Bai Zhiqun who used to be a professional dancer.

In addition, in terms of people's everyday life, while the country as a whole became much richer, income disparity also grew. Notwithstanding the fact that the nation that takes pride in its long history, the palimpsest-like erasure and reconstruction of social space particularly in urban cities makes many people oblivious to their recent and distant past. The increasingly commercialized society driven by materialism has become invigorating to some people and

[27] In Xiaomei Chen's book *Staging Chinese Revolution*, Chen points out "main-melody" plays were "promoted by the central government to advocate the 'main theme of our time" (2017, 21). They are often created to "urge the audience to preserve socialist spirit and carry out the unfinished revolutionary tasks left behind by former leaders" (20). The definition of main melody also changes over time under different leadership. For example, while Jiang Zemin recognizes the role of arts and cultural production in the construction of culture, the current leader Xi Jinping highlights main-melody production's efficacy in spreading "positive energy [正能量]" (21).

disorienting to others. The uneven economic development and distribution of resources across regions and between urban and rural areas led to large-scale migration of labor, leaving behind children and the older. These contradictions are intimately felt and experienced in everyday life and shape Chinese people's mentality. Jason McGrath presents the cultural realm under the postsocialist condition as "fraught with experiences of fragmentation and anxiety in addition to the awakening of new desires and identities" (2008, 2). Similarly, Lisa Rofel (2007) argues that the shifts in China's public culture under neoliberalism led to the production of new subjectivities, or what she calls "desiring subjects" who project new kinds of longings, aspirations, and needs. From a different lens, anthropologist Yunxiang Yan frames this cultural shift on a personal level as "the rise of the individual," manifested through increased "emphasis on individual rights, and freedom in life aspiration, and greater exercise of individual choice in social practices, and the disembedment of individuals from previously encompassing social categories, such as the family, kinship and community" (2010, 15). According to Yan, these changing social relations then contribute to the process of an "individualizing" Chinese society.

Extending these existing studies, I consider that experiences of postsocialist modernity as marked by processes of individual negotiation with these layers of social and cultural disjuncture and contradiction. Whether using themselves or others as subjects of the film, many choreographers treat dance film as a site to address their personal feelings of dislocation, anxiety, alienation, disorientation, hope and desire on a corporeal level. The dance films that I discuss in this project present various aspects of this negotiation. They allow us to reflect upon a series of questions: what are the roles of Chinese cultures and traditions in a globalized China? Is Chinese dance conducive for screendance experimentation? Can our bodies archive and enact social memories on screen? What does home mean in a material-driven society that is constantly in

flux? Performing in digital space, urban sites, rural and remote areas, these mediated dancing bodies representing various ages, ethnicities, and different dance forms blur boundaries between the rural and urban, traditional and modern, local and transnational. The various topics addressed through these screendance productions also confirm that postsocialist China is not a monolithic reality but a constantly transforming process.

Transnational Exchanges

This project reveals that transnational exchanges of dance and media productions have been central to the permutation of screendance experimentation in China. Transnational exchanges had always taken place between China and other parts of the world but at various scales and influenced by specific politics at different points in history.[28] The launch of China's reform policy and its formal integration into the global economy marked by its accession to the WTO in 2001 further escalated the pace and intensity of artistic exchanges. To understand the "new global cultural economy," Arjun Appadurai (1996) theorizes five dimensions of global cultural flow, including ethnoscapes (the landscape of person moving to different places: tourists, guest workers, refugees, etc.), mediascapes (production and dissemination of electronic media: newspaper, television, film, music, etc.), financescapes (the flow of global capital), ideoscapes

[28] Recent scholarship on Chinese dance and cinema further proves that many exchanges took place during the socialist era in dance and cinema technologies. For instance, Emily Wilcox's book *Revolutionary Bodies* (2018) challenges the American assumption of the PRC during the Mao era as culturally isolated by presenting the numerous international performances of Chinese dance artists in countries beyond those considered as part of the socialist camp. Film scholar Tina Mai Chen (2009) explores the Sino-Soviet film exchanges in the 1950s and 1960s. She articulates the cultural political implications of the sharing of technology and film between the Soviet Union and China at the time. I consider that these international dialogues participated in the shaping of various forms of dance on screen productions, for example, the filmed version of Chinese ballet opera that integrates western ballet, Chinese classical dance, Chinese theater, and imported technologies of cinema.

(e.g. ideologies of the state, counter-ideologies of movements, worldview) and technoscapes (technologies that move across various boundaries). He stresses that these categories of -scapes interlace with each other and are fundamentally disjunctive, unpredictable and unorderly. As a result of these various dimensions of flow, Appadurai points to the homogenizing and particularizing cultural trends that negotiate sameness and difference. Though Appadurai is often critiqued for not attending to materiality in his theorization, I found this framework of -scapes useful in teasing out and identifying different layers of global cultural flow both in quantity and quality with regard to screendance. The transnational movement of people, media and technologies have impacted how dance films are perceived, produced and disseminated in mainland China.

My project shows that transnational exchanges in experimental dance film, though not one-directional, were not always even. When experimental dance films first appeared on Chinese television, these works targeted primarily domestic audiences and did not circulate globally. Yet, as early as the mid-1990s, Chinese dance artists in higher education dance institutions such as Beijing Dance Academy were already exposed to BBC's dance for camera series created in the early 1990s and other well-recognized experimental dance films through guest lecturers in dance and media from Europe, the US and Canada (Liu 2005). These artists not only brought to China film works but also technologies. For example, in the 2000s, Lisa Nagle and John Crawford, professors of media technology from the Department of Dance at University of California, Irvine, were frequently invited to conduct workshops on dance and media technology at Beijing Dance Academy where they also introduced to the academy an interactive software, called "Isadora," which is often used in live dance performance (Zhang 2012). Some Chinese artists in the interdisciplinary field of dance and media—including Li Qing, the co-director of the film I

mentioned at the opening of the chapter—also studied under these professors at UC Irvine as visiting scholars. Outside the higher education setting, at Beijing Caochangdi Workstation (an art space co-founded by independent choreographer and filmmaker Wen Hui along with her then partner Wu Wenguang), Wen and Wu organized annual "Crossing" Festivals between early 2000s to 2009. During the festival, a series of experimental dance films were brought to China by Cinédans-Dance on Screen Festival in the Netherlands.[29] Wu and Wen also brought these works to Kunming as well as Shanghai through their festivals. Therefore, though highly sporadic and dispersed, Euro-American experimental dance films had their footprints across many cities in China rather than only taking place in China's cultural and political center, Beijing, in the 2000s.

The attitude of openness to the global dance film scene and "Western" technologies in dance media production does not mean that Chinese dance filmmakers passively adopted "imported" aesthetics and trends. While works that blindly imitate Western dance films surely exist, the dance artists that I discuss in this project all actively sought out aesthetic approaches that are rooted in Chinese cultures and lived experiences. Exploring a wide range of practices of time-based art produced by performance artists in Beijing since the beginning of the postsocialist era, Meiling Cheng (2013) considers the emergence of performance art as a phenomenon of glocalization (making a global art form local) and sinicization (making it Chinese). This notion of sinicization productively calls attention to how Chinese cultures and identities are marked in these works in this process of negotiation with global cultures. Taking into consideration the process of sinicization, I explore how these artists negotiate with the tension between learning

[29] The brochures of the "Crossing" Festival reveals that the festival also hosted a two-day-long workshops on screendance led by artists from the Netherlands.

from Euro-American aesthetics and innovating context-specific choreographic and representational practices.

Though this study does not directly examine dance films created by Hong Kong artists, I acknowledge the significant role Jumping Frames International Dance Video Festival in Hong Kong has played in influencing the screendance scene in mainland China. Jumping Frames was established in 2004 as a part of the City Contemporary Dance Company in Hong Kong. As the first dance film festival in Asia, Jumping Frames soon grew into a globally recognized festival that dialogues with other global festivals on an annual basis. As a hub for transnational exchanges in screendance, Jumping Frames offers a space for showcasing dance films created by mainland Chinese artists to the global screendance audiences through the festival itself as well as its network with other festivals. It also serves as an important link where international dance films can be brought to mainland China through the festival's partnership with various performing arts centers or higher education institutions.[30] Ergao's film *This Is A Chicken Coop* that I will analyze in Chapter Three is a production commissioned by Jumping Frames. In that chapter, I will also discuss in more detail the politics of curation of international dance film festivals, including the position of Jumping Frames.

In recent years, an increasing number of dance films created by mainland Chinese artists have circulated in global film festivals and other art spaces. Some works even received prestigious awards. Examining the curation and programing of dance film festivals, Douglas Rosenberg (2012) contends that these international festivals, through their curation and

[30] For instance, in March 2009, Jumping Frames brought a series of dance film to exhibit at UCCA in 798 Art District in Beijing. The event titled "Jumping Frames Beijing" opened with a feature-length dance documentary, *Coffee with Pina* (Israel), followed by the screening of a number of films by international and Hong Kong artists (Liu 2009).

programming, contribute to shaping new aesthetic trends in the field. Thus, the rising visibility of Chinese dance films also means that works by Chinese artists are increasingly contributing to the diversifying field of screendance productions on a global level. These works, joining the rise of screendance experiments in other countries and regions in Asia, Africa and Latin America, contribute to shifting cultural hierarchies in the global screendance scene.

Methodology

As an interdisciplinary project, my dissertation lends itself to mixed methodologies, including choreographic analysis, film analysis, ethnography, and archival research. Choreographic and film analysis of dance films serves as the primary method of this study, as I treat dance films as both a representational visual media and an art form rooted in embodied practices. I also perform ethnography and archival research to help contextualize the dance films that I examine.

An Integrated Approach to Film Analysis and Choreographic Analysis

In this study, I foreground the construction of the body to examine how various aspects of Chinese culture and experiences are represented and embodied on screen. This approach is indebted to a rich body of literature across various fields, particularly in Dance Studies, that validates and centers embodied knowledge as well as regards the body as a critical site of knowledge production, power, and agency. For example, Susan Foster's notion of "corporeality" perceives the bodily reality "not as natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience" (1995, x). This conception of the body not only recognizes that the dancing body is culturally constructed but also conceives it as a productive site to shed light

on the culture. Adopting a similar understanding of the body, Fran Martin and Ari Larrisa Henrich's anthology *Embodied Modernity: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures* (2006) approaches the shifting representations of bodies as an alternative lens from text-based sources to examine Chinese modernities as well as the notion of "Chineseness." In the anthology *Corporeal Politics*, Emily Wilcox and Katherine Mezur propose the methodology of "corporeal politics" to foreground the dancing body as the central locus for "artistic expression and the production of meaning" (2020, 12) in the study of Asian dance and the cultures the dance embodies. Thus, to conduct close reading of the corporeal performances in this project, I employ choreographic analysis, body-centered methodologies central to critical dance studies.

My analysis of the corporeal is further complicated by the filmic intervention in the construction of the dancing body that is specific to dance film as a hybrid art form. Existing screendance literature (Dodds 2001; Brannigan 2011; Rosenberg 2012) has theorized the intersubjective relationships between the camera and the performer. Many studies also consider editing as a process of re-corporealization. These frameworks for understanding the ontology of screendance suggest that when reading dance films, choreographic analysis cannot be performed without taking into account the cinematic mediation of the body.

Accordingly, I propose an interactive and relational approach to reading screendance that emphasizes the co-constituting effects of both choreographic and filmic elements. First, I do not treat dance choreography and the performing body as stand-alone objects of analysis. Instead, I underscore how the cinematic apparatus (such as the use of the camera, lighting, editing and the mise-en-scène) mediates the choreography.[31] In other words, the way the dance is filmed impacts

[31] While the camera can be approached as a dancing body, its movement is either specifically choreographed in advance in relation to the dancer(s) or improvised spontaneously. Priscilla Guy (2016) argues that editing is the only choreographic process in screendance. She considers the movement generated for the purpose of shooting is not choreography but merely raw materials that serve the final

its meaning. Second, I treat various filmic elements from a choreographic lens. For example, I conceive editing as an important choreographic process in dance filmmaking that constructs specific meaning through the deliberate ordering of shots. I also consider the camera as a co-performer in the profilmic space, taking part in the dance. Taking into consideration the co-constitutive effects of choreographic and filmic devices, I reveal how the mediated dancing body on screen present different possibilities than live dance performances in articulating cultural nationalism, enacting social memories, and negotiating categories of gender, ethnicity, and human/animal relationships.

Ethnography

Dance scholars have long embraced ethnography as a critical research methodology for studying dance (Novak 1990; Savigliano 1995). For instance, recognizing the dancing body as not naturally given but culturally constructed, Cynthia Novak (1990) conjures an ethnographic history of contact improvisation in the US based on a series of interviews with practitioners and audiences as well as her personal experience participating in the contact improvisation scene. She considers the lives and perspectives of the dancers as well as responses of viewers essential for understanding the interplay between the emergence of a new dance practice and the larger social political context. My project requires a similar approach to investigate the phenomenon of screendance through personally participating in workshops and festivals, conducting oral history interviews with choreographers and filmmakers, as well as carrying out in-depth qualitative

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choreography. The editing of dance film selects, modifies, and re-sequences the movement of bodies on screen. Through filming, the live bodily performance is transformed into data that can be reorganized. Through editing, "[t]he raw data of the dancing body is stitched together, … resulting in an *impossible* body" (Rosenberg 2012, 9). Therefore, editing re-corporealizes the dancing body, creating screen choreography that only exists in the filmic space.

interviews with scholars, festival curators and advocates. My interviews with screendance practitioners sought to understand what led them to create dance film, how they conceive dance film as an art practice, what inspired their creative ideas and artistic approaches, and what they are interested in addressing through their works. In the next three chapters, rather than only critically analyzing a selected number of dance films from my own perspective, I highlight the voices of these artists to deliver a nuanced understanding of their works and foreground how their personal encounters impacted their artistic approaches.

In addition, my own artistic practice in dance filmmaking and consistent participation in screendance festivals over the past five years have critically informed my theoretical understanding of dance film. My identity as an artist and scholar born and raised in China and currently living in the US also provided me a unique angle to examine Chinese cultural productions during my lifetime from both the position of insider and outsider. In this process, I negotiate contrasting aesthetic values that are defined by a Euro-American centric lens and from a Chinese perspective, neither of which is singular.

As part of my fieldwork, I attended various screendance exhibitions including the 2018 Jumping Frames International Video Dance Festival in Hong Kong, several gallery/museum exhibitions of dance films in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, as well as rehearsals and dance workshops by a few dance filmmakers whose works I will examine in the next three chapters. In addition, considering the development of dance film as embedded within the larger contemporary dance scene in China, I also attended a number of contemporary dance performances to understand how screendance is positioned within China's cultural production. Though not the main subject of this research, these contemporary dance concerts of various

scales (from large-scale national dance dramas to small-scale modern dance concerts) reveal the shifting values associated with different forms of contemporary dance, including screendance.

Archival Research

Searching for collections of specific artists' works, I conducted archival research at the Ming Contemporary Art Museum (明当代美术馆) in Shanghai which houses digital copies of dance theater productions and films by contemporary Chinese choreographer and theater artists, including Wen Hui (文慧) and Er Gao (二高). Through this archive, I was able to access their dance productions beyond the dance films that I analyze in this dissertation. Their live dance productions, though not the subject of this research, allow me to better situate their films within their larger body of works and shed light on their overarching artistic philosophies. In addition, I also visited an exhibition, titled "Dance as Existence," at the Inside-Out Art Museum (中间美术馆) in Beijing. The exhibition displayed selected works by Wen from 1994 to 2018 as well as press reviews, photographs of Wen's production, and choreographic sketches by Wen. This rich collection of visual materials beyond the dance film itself constitutes what literary scholar Gerard Genette (1997) refers to as "paratexts." The term denotes all kinds of film-related information that could impact the reception of a film. For example, festival programs reveal official languages used to describe dance film and the motivations behind dance film advocacy; press reviews present the way dance film is perceived by various establishments in the contemporary Chinese cultural scene. In my research, I pay special attention to these paratexts as they provide important contextual information to help me situate these dance films within the specific social and political moments in which they were created. In addition, I was also able to gain access to the personal archives of some artists who generously shared with me documents of

their pre-production planning for their films, brochures of dance festivals or screenings their films took part in, as well as and their films. These public and private materials helped me piece together a multifaceted picture of the new screendance scene in the PRC.

Based on the "archive" of over 200 experimental dance films that I constructed through my fieldwork, I discerned different approaches to dance filmmaking and selected the most representative works of specific modes of practices for close analysis. I chose to focus on these experimental works as they help articulate a wide range of creative possibilities that screen technologies offer for dance making. They also demonstrate visible shifts from earlier screendance productions created during the socialist era. I conceive my process of selecting case studies as an act of curation with specific logic of inclusion and exclusion. I take into consideration the geographic locations where the screendance artists are based as well as their relationships to state institutions, thereby painting a "multicentric" picture of the *wudao yingxiang* scene in China that does not privilege the cultural capital Beijing and state-sponsored productions as the only center.[32] While Bai Zhiqun and Liu Chun work in Beijing and within state-institutions, Wen Hui is an independent artist who works primarily in Beijing but also in Kunming. Ergao is an independent artist based in Guangzhou, and Tang Chenglong works at a state-owned dance troupe in Wuxi but self-produces his dance films. Putting these works in conversation with each other reveals that individual artists' lived experiences play a more significant role impacting how they envision dance on screen than the binary concept of making art *within* or *outside* the state system.

[32] Meiling Cheng first proposed the notion of "multicentricity" in her book *In Other Los Angeleses* (2002) to describe "the centrifugal urban geography" of Los Angeles and the performance artworks created in LA. Cheng later applies the same framework of multicentricity to study time-based performance arts in Beijing to "[acknowledge] the coexistence of multiple—multiscaled—centres as a palpable phenomenon of our cosmic, terrestrial, social and individual existence" (2013, xxii).

Chapter Summaries

This study sheds light on the unique role of dance-moving image in engaging with and intervening in China's social cultural transitions through both filmic representation and corporeal embodiment. This project does not attempt to create a canon of Chinese dance films. Nor does it reflect an exhaustive list of dance media experiments that have taken place in mainland China since the early 1990s. Rather, I focus on dance-moving image productions that embody a diverse range of artistic imagination or conceptual innovation. These works contribute to the production of an array of complex visual and kinesthetic experiences that are reflective of postsocialist conditions.

Chapter One, "Navigating State Ideologies through Aesthetic Experimentations," explores experimentations of dance videos taking place at China Central Television (CCTV) in the 1990s and 2000s. I highlight the significant contribution by CCTV director Bai Zhiqun (b. 1948) in the promotion of a new genre of dance on television works often referred to as DTV (dance television 舞蹈电视). Situating Bai's works within the history of television, I argue that Bai's DTV works pioneered an unprecedented vision of putting dance on screen in the PRC that exceeds a mere documentation of dance. I examine how Bai's works, while drawing from a range of transnational influences, also inherit the legacy of the socialist aesthetic ideals of making dance relevant to the masses while reinforcing state ideologies. Besides focusing on Bai's influence, I discuss a competing vision of video dance that emerged around the same time promoted by another pioneer dance film artist and scholar, Liu Chun (born in 1976), who is heavily influenced by Euro-American dance for camera works. I contend that the co-existence of their disparate understandings of DTV marks different yet overlapping origin points for experimental video dance in China within state-affiliated institutions.

Chapter Two, "A Corporeal Invitation to Remembering," centers independent modern dance choreographer and filmmaker Wen Hui (born in 1960) to explore a distinct mode of dance-moving image making that blends documentary elements with dance performance. In this chapter, I situate the emergence of experimental dance documentary in the context of China's New Documentary Movement that first began in the late 1980s and 1990s. I also examine Wen's transnational dance experience that gave rise to her approach to screendance that prioritizes the experiences and movement of the everyday. Using Wen's film *Dance with Third Grandmother* (2015) as a case study, I examine how this work projects a feminist perspective to reflect upon Chinese socialist history through an embodied approach. Evoking individual memories of China's socialist past through corporeal enactment, Wen regards the body as a vehicle for accessing memories and carrying out intergenerational dialogues. Situating this dance film in Wen's previous choreographies and film works, this chapter highlights how the innovative visual and kinesthetic languages developed through *Dance with Third Grandmother* can be seen as a pivotal point in Wen's career that seeks a departure from her then partner Wu Wenguang's documentaries. I suggest that Wen's dance film is a manifestation of her newly recognized feminist identity that has long shaped her choreographies and dance theater works.

After examining some pioneering and well-established screendance artists of older generations in the first two chapters, Chapter Three, "Searching for Home in the 'Periphery,'" turns towards two dance filmmakers born in the 1980s. In comparison, the post-80s urban choreographers grew up in a radically different China, where change has been the only constant since their birth at the early stage of China's economic reform. I examine, through the lens of nostalgia, two globally well-circulated dance films by two emerging choreographers that engage with distinct local aesthetics. These works are Ergao's *This Is A Chicken Coop* (2016) and Tang

Chenglong's *Gatha* (2018). I argue that it is precisely the desire of searching for an idea of "home," whether it is manifested as a lost past or a spiritual home, that led these two choreographers to engage with local and/or ethnic visualities and cultural elements in their films. This chapter also moves from examining the production aspect of dance film to its global circulation as dance films by Chinese artists have become increasingly visible in the global dance film scene since the mid-2010s. I explore how the reception of these films fits into different narratives about China that these festivals project. In turn, I suggest that the positive global reception of these works also contribute to a new direction of screendance development in mainland China that taps into local and regional Chinese cultures as sources of innovation and cultural reflection.

In the Epilogue, I engage in an open-ended discussion that projects the future of screendance in China, particularly as the dance field responds to the COVID-19 global pandemic. I use two recent experimental dance films directed by Xu Rui (许锐) and choreographed by Wang Yabin (王亚彬) and Liu Yan (刘岩) respectively, to illustrate how experimental dance films created during the pandemic function to enact patriotic and humanistic narratives to construct senses of hope during the time of despair. I also discuss Chen Yujie's work *The Sun Also Rises* (2020), created through "crowd-sourcing" short video clips of individual performers "dancing" in private and public space, to explore new possibilities of remote dance film creation enabled by technologies. I then address how the pandemic brought new changes to the value of dance-moving image, shifting its position from an art form defined by experimentation to a necessary site for dance creation and circulation.

Chapter One
Navigating State Ideologies through Aesthetic Experimentations: Video Dance on Television at the Turn of the Millennium

In 1993, a television art film (电视艺术片) featuring Chinese dancer and choreographer Liu Min, titled *Dream – Collection of Works by Choreographer Liu Min* (梦—舞蹈家刘敏艺术撷英 27 min), was broadcast on CCTV (channel 3), China's only national television network. This work, directed and produced by Bai Zhiqun (白志群), a female television director at CCTV at the time, constituted a daring experimentation. In this work, Bai juxtaposes site-specific performances of Liu running in the forest, lying down on cracked earth, and ruminating in front of the ocean, with her contemporary dance performances of six different choreographies on stage. Departing from the typical television programming convention for dance performance, which would have presented Liu's choreography in its entirety, this television art film instead presented fragmented sequences on screen, highlighting specific actions achieved by her skillful body, such as leaping in the air and performing splits while being lifted. The video also showcases the capacity of television editing that makes it possible to cut across a range of different geographical locations. *Dream* was lauded as "the PRC's first television art film on dance" in China's oldest and most authoritative national dance publication *Dance* (舞蹈) ("Bai Zhiqun dianshi wudao zuopinji wenshi" 2010, 70). This production inaugurates a new direction of presenting dance on television that exceeds a mere documentation of a stage performance.

Seven years later, Bai formally introduced a new genre of dance and television production called "Dance Television" (舞蹈电视), abbreviated as DTV, via the first "CCTV

Television Dance Competition" in 2000.[33] DTV, in a narrow sense, refers specifically to short dance videos created for and broadcast on Chinese television that explore the creative interaction between the camera, dance, and editing.[34] Prior to the emergence of DTV, dance on television largely comprised recordings of stage performances, whether they were pre-recorded or broadcast live. These dance performances, shot in a television studio or on a concert stage, were often filmed from multiple angles and with a moving camera to provide different perspectives to view the dance. They were edited together to showcase both the overall scale and details of the dance. Similarly, in the PRC's rich screendance history, a number of socialist dance performances of diverse styles and themes have also been preserved on film (Wilcox 2018). These dance films produced by state-owned film studios explored how dance choreography could be put on screen in an artful way by establishing the camera position and motion in direct relation to the dance and determining how to assemble different shots to construct a coherent choreography. Yet in spite of their deliberate engagement with filmic apparatuses, they belong to a conventional approach of filming dance which reproduces or translates the stage version on

[33] In Chinese literature exploring dance works on television, *television dance* (电视舞蹈) and *dance television* (舞蹈电视) were used as interchangeable terms to refer to dance on television productions in general. These works include televised live performances, pre-recorded and edited stage performances, and pre-conceived video dance that aims to explore the creative interaction between the medium of television and dance. Some scholars attempt to distinguish television dance from dance television, arguing that one refers to recorded stage performances while the other refers to more experimental works. Yet, such writings often contradict one another and do not point to a consensus (see Hu & Sui 2016; Tang 2006; Xu 2012; Zeng 2014). This inconsistent usage of terms reflects early efforts to understand a new art form that had not yet been rigorously defined.

[34] When broadly used, the term also encompasses adaptation of stage performances taking place in a television studio with intentionally designed camera angles and editing style in order to provide a more accessible viewing experience. In this chapter, I use the term DTV in its narrow sense to emphasize experimentations on screen that integrate the logic of the television medium and dance instead of prioritizing solely the logic of the dance choreography. I conceive DTV as a form of video dance production specifically for television. Thus, I also use *video dance* as an interchangeable term in this chapter.

screen. In some cases, such as filmed versions of revolutionary ballet, these adaptations were specifically intended to standardize the dance production by creating an official version that could be used to measure against other versions of live performances (Clark 2008).[35] In contrast, the DTV works that I discuss in this chapter depart from official television dance conventions and constitute a new form of screendance that explores the synergy of a hybrid video-dance art. These works often break away from the limitations of stage and television studio space by situating dance in alternative spaces such as in nature, everyday living spaces, or virtual environments. They also embrace the fragmentation of movement and do not necessarily adhere to the linear progression of a dance. They construct what dance scholar Erin Brannigan calls "a cine-choreographic model of the dancing body liberated from theatrical concepts of liveness" (2011, 9).

Despite DTV's fractional output and short-lived presence on television, its very existence brings to the surface two paradoxes that deserve close examination. First, these pioneering experimentations of dance on television planted seeds for the emergence of the new cultural phenomenon of video dance production, or what has been referred to as experimental dance film in the last decade. This now rather marginalized art form in China found its precedents in the space of mainstream media. Second, these works on television make visible the dialectical space of Chinese national television, complicating its popular conception as a site for propaganda rather than aesthetic experimentation. The appearance of these works on Chinese television raise

[35] In his book *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, Paul Clark (2008) details the arduous process behind the production of filmed model operas. In the process of adapting the stage version to the screen, the filmmakers went through much trial and error to arrive at a version that both reflects the original dance but also takes advantage of the specificity of the film medium to construct specific characters through framing and camera angles. Such careful design of the interaction of filmic apparatus and dance is also visible in many other dance films during the Mao era.

three key questions that I am investigating in this chapter: What conditions gave rise to these dance-video experimentations on television? How do these works reconcile the tension between innovation and ideology, both being audience-oriented imperatives of television space? How do these early video dance productions situate historically within China's screendance productions and in relation to the rising video dance scene concentrated in Europe and North America at the time?

Existing English language scholarship on Chinese television has richly explored the shifts in television industry during the era of economic reform (Bai 2014; Cai 2017; Gorfinkel 2018; Keane 2015; Schneider 2012; Zhu 2008; Zhu and Berry 2009). Yet such literature puts an emphasis on television serial dramas, news programs, documentaries, and music entertainment programs but rarely discusses dance programs on television. Nevertheless, these writings provide critical contextual information that will help situate the emergence of DTV in the overall trend of innovation and experimentation on television in terms of formats and content at the time. Although a limited amount of Chinese-language literature in media studies explores arts and cultural programs on television, DTV is often overlooked, perhaps because of its sporadic broadcast schedule.[36] A number of journal articles that specifically focus on dance on television in China point to the aesthetic innovation and cultural significance of a few DTV productions, but they often isolate these works from the larger history of dance on screen in China.

This chapter provides a different framing of these DTV productions. Instead of limiting DTV to the realm of dance on television, I situate DTV in the genealogy of screendance in China

[36] Interestingly, even on CCTV's own website, for unknown reasons, there was no information on the first CCTV Television Dance Competition. Records on its second term also do not mention the category of DTV works, implying either a neglection of DTV or an intentional forgetting of these works, deeming it as insignificant.

and conceive it as the beginning of video dance or experimental dance film productions. In this chapter, I piece together fragmented information on DTV through existing dance and television literature and from personal interviews with key promoters and artists of video dance at the time—Bai Zhiqun, Liu Chun (刘春), and their students. This information paints a picture of the context of DTV's emergence, thereby facilitating a critical analysis of specific works by Bai and Liu. Understanding these early video dance experimentations then paves the way for later chapters that investigate more recent screendance works created in the 2010s.

This chapter first follows the career of CCTV television director and producer Bai Zhiqun, who was instrumental in pioneering and advocating for this mode of video dance production. I focus on two of Bai's most representative works: *Fan Dance Water Ink Painting* (also known as *Fan as a Brush*, *Shanwudanqing* 扇舞丹青, 2001) and *Diaries of Youth* (*Qingchunriji* 青春日记, 2009).[37] Both videos embody her ongoing aesthetic investigation of how to integrate dance into specific sites outside a television studio. While *Fan Dance* employs three-dimensional animation technology to create a virtual space for dance to take place, *Diaries of Youth* situates dance on a college campus to depict Chinese youth's schooling experiences. Weaving together personal interviews, Bai's own writing on her exploration of dance on television, and textual analysis, I explore both aesthetic innovations in Bai's works as well as how these works are framed under China's cultural policy at the time.

While this chapter centers on Bai's works that were specifically produced for television, I also discuss examples of video dance by another pioneering artist and scholar, Liu Chun, to

[37] At the time of this writing, *Shanwudanqing* can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJ4MOVmh0bI. *Qingchunriji* is not available on the Internet. Both DTV works are published by CCTV in a DVD collection of Bai Zhiqun's dance on television works titled *Bai Zhiqun Dance Television Collection* (2009).

complicate further the notion of DTV. Liu's *Life* (*Shengming* 生命, 1999) and *Umbrella* (*San* 伞, 2002)—award-winning DTV works that were broadcast at the first and second CCTV Television Dance Competitions, respectively—exhibit avant-garde aesthetics that do not appear to align intentionally with the state ideologies that Bai's works project. I discuss how the consideration of these works as DTVs within Bai's show actually contradicts Bai's own definition of DTV. Finally, I provide a nuanced examination of video dance productions on Chinese mainstream television by taking into account these disparate understandings of DTV.

Overall, this chapter advances our understanding of video dance in China with two main arguments. First, I contend that Bai's DTV works, drawing from a range of different transnational influences and inheriting the legacy of the socialist aesthetic ideal of making dance relevant to lives of the masses, reinforce state ideologies at the time and contribute to the Chinese nation-building project. Second, I contend that another mode of DTV production, as represented by Liu Chun's works, closely associates itself with Euro-American video dance and contrasts the aesthetic values embodied in Bai's works. Their co-existence, on one hand, marks different yet overlapping origin points for video dance in China within state-affiliated institutions. On the other hand, it also shows that from the early stage of development, video dance in China has been caught in a dialogical relationship between developing an aesthetic that is relevant and specific to the Chinese cultural context and imitating western aesthetics.

Context of Emergence: Historicizing Dance on Television

This section weaves Bai's biographical account and artistic interests with a historical narrative of the emergence of video-dance experimentation on CCTV. I illustrate how various forces, such as technological advancement, reform in the television industry, transnational

influences, and a relatively open environment for innovation and experimentation, contributed to the emergence of DTV. Historicizing dance on television in China reveals how the beginning of video dance production was born out of the backdrop of a rapid and radical socio-economic transition and ideological shifts from Maoist socialism to a socialist theory of market economy in the 1980s and 1990s.

Although dance has always been a part of television programs, television did not become the primary site for cultural production in the PRC until the 1980s.[38] By the end of the 1970s, only a small portion of the population had access to television. Most people watched TV in public settings, such as in communal locations or homes of neighbors who were early adopters of TV (Lull and Sun 1988). The television programs during this period were limited, including news bulletins, dramas, and cultural programs (Hu and Zhou 2008). Stage dance performances and opera dramas, as well as dance film productions created by state-owned film studios, including revolutionary operas, also circulated through television (Hu and Zhou 2008; Keane 2015; Zhu 2008). However, in spite of the availability of dance programing on television, most people experienced screendance through movie-going.

The economic reform launched in 1978 led to significant shifts in the television industry over the next two decades. These changes include a gradual decentralization of television

[38] In January 1958, China successfully assembled its very first television set (Liu 2018). This technological breakthrough paved the way for the beginning of television production in China and the subsequent establishment of the first television station, Beijing TV, launched on May 1st of the same year (Zhu 2008). The first two decades of Chinese television coincided with a series of important historical developments in China's history: the Great Leap Forward Movement (1958–1962), the Sino-Soviet Spilt (1956–1966), and the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). All of these events had detrimental effects on the PRC's economic and technological development, stunting the growth of the television industry (Keane 2015; Lull and Sun 1988; Zhu 2008).

stations,[39] significant rise of private domestic and international investment in television production, expansion of audience coverage, dramatic increase in production and consumption of television sets, and diversification and internationalization of television programs (Zhu 2008). In the 1980s, television was touted as one of the four symbols of modern urban family lives, along with a sound recorder (录音机), a washing machine, and a refrigerator (Huang 2018). By 1985, it was estimated that 95 percent of all urban families owned at least one television (Keane 2015). In other words, a generation was now growing up with television sets in their homes. The sharp rise in the size of the television audience led to an increased demand for new television programs. Yet, the broadcast of dance on television remained monotonic and scattered in different programs that featured various forms of arts and cultural productions, such as national and regional festival galas, including the live broadcasting of annual spring festival gala launched in 1983 (Zhang & Gong 2019).[40] The dominant mode of dance on television continued to be recordings of stage performances, in which dance was incorporated in a supporting role to accompany singers on screen (Li 2009).

[39] The decentralization of Chinese television was led by the State Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (SMRFT), now called the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). The ministry supervises state-owned television and radio enterprises as well as censors contents of television, film, and radio production. In 1983, the Ministry initiated a four-tier policy, which encouraged government divisions at the national, provincial, municipal, and county level to each establish their own television stations (Zhu 2008, 10). This policy granted regional, provincial, and local stations considerate autonomy to develop their own productions without direct influence from authorities in Beijing. It also led to an overflow of television stations in China. Some studies revealed that in mid-1990s, the number of TV stations in China reached the number of over 3,000 (Keane 2015). This wild number was later consolidated to the approximately 300 (Keane 2015).

[40] According to a quantitative survey on urban television viewers conducted by television scholars Lull and Sun, television programs at the time fell into four categories, in the order of the program's overall popularity: (1) various forms of drama (drama series, Chinese opera, foreign drama, movies, war dramas, foreign movies, historical drama); (2) sports (sports and Kung-fu); (3) informational programs (news, educational, travel, documentaries, language, political); and (4) light entertainment (variety, children/cartoon, animal shows, crosstalk, game shows, music shows, comedy) (1988, 222).

Bai began her career at CCTV precisely during this opportune moment in the history of Chinese television where the industry was imbued with creative potential, but the presence of dance was still marginal. Born in 1948 in Shanghai, Bai started learning dance at Shanghai Children's Palace (少年宫) at nine and then received professional dance training at the People's Liberation Army Academy of Art (中国人民解放军艺术学院) from the age of twelve. Upon graduation in 1965, she was assigned to work at the All-Army Song and Dance Troupe (总政歌舞团), also known as General Political Department Song and Dance Ensemble, where she danced and then choreographed until after the Cultural Revolution. After a successful collaboration with some television directors for a special topic dance program while still working at the dance troupe, Bai was re-allocated to work at CCTV in 1983 (Zhao 2002). As the only newcomer with a background in dance at the time, Bai was asked to work primarily on producing arts and cultural programs at CCTV (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018). Reflecting upon her early years working at the television station, Bai states,

> At the time, besides accomplishing assigned big tasks, directors were encouraged to be creative and to come up with their own ideas to create new programs. If the leadership approved the proposal, then the directors could go ahead to test their ideas. It was unlike nowadays when television programs are very strict with their formats and content. They now require annual planning (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, trans. author, June 19, 2018).

As demonstrated by Bai's words above, the lack of institutional knowledge and technical conventions in the television industry in the 1980s and early 1990s provided an ideal setting with some freedom for her to carry out a range of aesthetic experimentations.

Bai's interest in exploring new ways of presenting dance on television was built upon works by an older generation of television directors, including Deng Zaijun (邓在军), Huang Yihe (黄一鹤), Li Xiaolan (李晓岚), and Qi Qingyun (齐清云) (Zhao 2002). Some of them had

already started to explore the possibility of taking dance outside a studio setting (Bai 2012). Yet, according to Bai, these experiments had not been very successful. Arbitrarily situating a dance originally choreographed for the stage in an alternative environment often created a sense of dissonance (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018). In an article written by Bai reflecting upon her own creative practice, Bai (2012) uses a group dance *Harvest Song* (丰收歌) as an example to illustrate the potential risk of displacement when filming dance in everyday environments.[41] *Harvest Song* is a stage choreography originally derived and abstracted from peasants' laboring movements of harvesting. Bai contends that directly placing a stylized dance back into a field of crops where the actual referenced physical labor takes place would appear too arbitrary and incongruous to the environment. Though Bai does not specify exactly what made the dance unfitting to its original context, she suggests the importance of devising site-specific choreographies. To move forward with such experimentation, Bai raises a few key questions that have guided her career in directing and producing dance on television: How could she incorporate dance in everyday settings to emphasize the connection between dance and everyday life?[42] How could she integrate the specificity of television language and dance language to cultivate a new art form (Bai 2012, 23)?

Around the mid-1980s, a selection of television programs from outside mainland China were imported into the PRC, including Music Television (MTV 音乐电视) programs from Taiwan (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018). In the US context, MTV is often

[41] This dance was featured in the sixth CCTV Television Dance Competition in 2011 and won an award.

[42] In Bai's own words, she asks, "How to achieve a *dance-ification* (舞蹈化) of everyday movement and a *life-ification* (生活化) of dance movement?" (Bai 2012, 23). Exploring the relationship between dance and life appeared to the key inquiry that inspired her artistic innovation.

associated with the American cable channel that was launched in 1981 through ViacomCBS. The channel airs music videos to promote popular singers and songs. In the Chinese context, MTV is more associated with the specific television genre rather than the television station that broadcasts the videos. In other words, MTV is often used as an equivalent term to music video. Some of these productions feature dance, either performed by the singers themselves while singing, or by professional dancers to accompany the songs. The filming of these fragmented dance performances were often not confined to the studio setting. MTV's use of montage editing and insertion of dance in everyday life, according to Bai, provided inspiration on how to liberate dance from the concert stage (Bai 2012). In 1987, collaborating with Taiwanese popular singer Zhao Xiaojun, Bai spearheaded the production of MTVs in mainland China and directed *Tide—Songs from Taiwan* (*Chao – laizi Taiwan de ge* 潮—来自台湾的歌), a collection of music videos featuring songs by Taiwanese popular singers. Soon after, Bai independently produced a series of award-winning music videos such as *When I Grow Up, I Will Become You* (*Zhangdahou wo jiu chengle ni* 长大后我就成了你) and *Warm Home* (*Wennuan de jia* 温暖的家).[43] While working on these music videos, Bai, along with her long-time collaborator Yao Yao (姚尧), experimented with incorporating dance into these videos. For instance, in *When I Grow Up, I Will Become You*, the MTV depicts short dance scenes that narrate a story of a child growing up and becoming a professional dancer and a teacher. The video consistently uses dissolve as a transition between close-ups of a female singer singing and other shots that frame a dancer sitting on a chair in stillness, the dancer leaping in the air, and a classroom scene (see

[43] A streaming version of Bai's *When I Grow Up, I Will Become You* is available via 腾讯视频 (Tencent) at https://v.qq.com/x/page/r01855h9qez.html. Several of Bai's works have received the Gold Award at the CCTV Music Television Competition (Zhao 2012).

Figures 1 and 2). MTV works like this piece, not interested in presenting an intact dance choreography, normalize fragmentation and compartmentalization of movement. In other words, music videos actually provided an important aesthetic foundation for experimental dance films.

Figure 1. Video still from *When I Grow Up, I Will Become You* (director: Bai Zhiqun). Source: https://v.qq.com/x/page/r01855h9qez.html.

Figure 2. Video still from *When I Grow Up, I Will Become You* (director: Bai Zhiqun). Source: https://v.qq.com/x/page/r01855h9qez.html.

Besides the influence from Taiwanese MTVs, Bai also drew inspiration from early Hollywood film-musicals and socialist Chinese dance films to explore strategies to integrate

dance in everyday life scenarios. For instance, Bai considers Fred Astaire's film musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) a successful case study. Choreographer-director Astaire spearheaded the convention of transitioning from walking into dancing to create a bridge between the rhythmic movement of everyday life and choreographed dance (Genné 2018). This method allows for a gradual and seamless transition from an everyday scenario into theatrical dance. Drawing from examples of song and dance dramas during the socialist era, Bai found that another way to make the presence of dancing coherent in everyday life depends on the specific subjects constructed on screen. Bai (2012) suggests that the reason why dancing does not appear out of place in films like *Five Gold Flower* (*Wuduojinhua* 五朵金花 1959), *Sister Liu* (*Liu Sanjie* 刘三姐 1960), and *Anaerhan* (Anna'erhan 安娜尔罕 1962) is that these films feature ethnic minorities whose lives are perceived as already integrated with dancing and singing. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine critically the construction of ethnic minorities in these early socialist films, I would like to point out here that these films provided one possible solution for Bai's inquiry: to construct subjects who specifically play dancers. The premise is that if the characters portrayed in the video are already dancers, then a dance scene would not appear too out of place. This logic also applies to popular Hollywood dance films introduced to China in the late 1980s, such as the American film *Breakin'* (1984), the protagonists of which are hip-hop dancers. At the time, film and music videos that featured hip-hop dance—often imported to China through pirated VHS tapes—sparked young people's interests in this new movement genre (Wilcox, forthcoming; Clark 2012). Its growing popularity then led to the production of hip-hop dance film *Rock Youth* (*Yaogun qingnian* 摇滚青年 1988), directed by Chinese fifth generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang. In these narrative dance films that feature dancers as protagonists, dance scenes often serve to advance the narrative plot, construct certain mood, and heighten emotional

impacts.[44] In turn, the desire to incorporate dance in film also facilitate the creation of protagonists who are dancers. Bai adopted this approach in several of her DTV works including *Diaries of Youth* which feature college students in a dance program.

These new ideas of conceptualizing dance on television drawing from various domestic and transnational influences culminated in the production of *Dream – Collection of Works by Choreographer Liu Min* (27 min) broadcast on CCTV in 1993, a work that I briefly described in the introduction. The production of this work took some convincing. After some initial debates and hesitation from Bai's leadership concerning whether the audience would accept such a pioneering concept, Bai eventually received approval to create a collage of choreographer Liu Min's dances by focusing on Liu as a dance artist instead of her choreography (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018). Although the aesthetic value of *Dream* has been widely acknowledged in dance and television scholarship within China and within the television industry (e.g. Gao and Chen 2010; Gao and Wang 2002; Zhao 2002), this mode of presenting dance on screen remained marginal at the time. Broadcasting of stage performance continued to be embedded in other comprehensive arts and cultural programs such as "Spinning Stage" ("Xuanzhuan wutian" 旋转舞台 started in 1985) and "Chinese Literature and Art" ("Zhongguo wenyi" 中国文艺, started in 1996), which also showcased other art forms including but not limited to instrumental music, songs, and Chinese opera.

[44] For instance, Feng Xiaogang's *Youth* (*Fanghua* 芳华 2017) tells the story of young dancers in a military art troupe; another recent Chinese narrative dance film *You Beautify My Life* (*Ni meili le wode rensheng* 你美丽了我的人生 2018) features protagonists who are professional dancers in Xinjiang Province; narrative film *Blue Sky Bone* (*Lanse gutou* 蓝色骨头 2013) features a dance scene in the shower performed by Tao Ye, in which Tao played the role of a dancer in a military art troupe.

The mid-1990s witnessed radical transformations in the television industry. The new political and ideological atmosphere under Deng Xiaoping's leadership encouraged a relaxation of state media control, intensifying the processes of commercialization, internationalization and privatization of the television industry that had already started in the 1980s. Heightened competition between television programs and TV stations created increased incentives for experimentation and innovation, leading to the launch of new television programs (Hong, Lü, and Zou 2009). Beginning in the mid-1990s, CCTV adopted a new management system that granted more decision-making power to television producers in order to promote a diversification of television programs. Under this new system, television producers, rather than party-appointed supervisors, were given the power to design programs, decide on their content, control the finances, and oversee the production (Hong, Lü, and Zou 2009). Along with a range of different forces mentioned above, this transformation in organizational management further shaped the condition for the emergence of new dance programs at both the national and provincial levels.

In the late 1990s, Bai Zhiqun proposed to launch a television show that exclusively presented dance. This proposal led to the production of the first dance-only television show "Dance World" (wudaoshijie 舞蹈世界) in 1999, directed and produced by Bai through CCTV-3.[45] Its inception marked a historical milestone in the development of dance on television in mainland China (Li 2009; Xu 2017). A year later, Bai launched the "CCTV Television Dance Competition," a bi-annual competition, through "Dance World." As mentioned earlier in the

[45] In 1999, CCTV-Channel 3 officially became the designated Arts and Culture Channel and was then renamed as Comprehensive Arts Channel in 2000. CCTV-3 specializes in comprehensive art- and literary-related programs including but not limited to dance, music, Chinese opera, talks shows, and literature (Zhu 2012).

introduction, the inaugural year of the "CCTV Television Dance Competition" formally introduced DTV as a distinct art form from televised live performances by assigning it an independent category in the competition. The term DTV, borrowed from "MTV," makes explicit its influence from imported Taiwanese MTV and points to its genealogy that is specific to the Chinese context. The competition was composed entirely of short video dance around five minutes in length. This limitation on the length of the works reflects the desire of making dance accessible and digestible for the television audience whose viewing habits had been impacted by the readily available remote control and a shortened attention span (Li 2009). The competition also encouraged provincial and local television stations to participate in the production of DTV and submit their works to the competition (Li 2009). It remains unclear how the dissemination of DTV production impacted these television stations or how many works were submitted. In its second year, the competition included both video dance and televised live dance performances in a variety of genres, including Chinese folk and ethnic dance, Chinese classical dance, contemporary dance (which is associated with military dance in the context of China),[46] modern dance, ballet, and ballroom dance.[47] However, after the first two years of the competition, the DTV category was completely eliminated from the program.[48]

[46] The notion of contemporary dance in China differs from that in the US. In her book on Chinese contemporary dance, Chinese dance scholar Mu Yu (2009) presents that the notion of contemporary dance and modern dance in mainland China differs from that in a Western context. She clarifies that contemporary dance in China refers to dances that embraces socialist realism and is often associated with military dance (245).

[47] Interestingly, CCTV's own online historical record about "CCTV Television Dance Competition" only started in its second year and only included information on live performances.

[48] After 2002, the competition only presented televised stage performances, which included more genres of dance and created a category for non-professionally trained dancers.

In our interview, Bai alluded to the high costs and low audience ratings as main reasons behind the removal of the DTV category in the competition, which is reiterated by Bai in other sources (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018; Bai and Liu 2014). According to Bai, "Dance World," was one of very few programs on CCTV that were funded exclusively by the television station itself rather than operating independently from their own profits or corporate sponsorship (Zhao 2002). The limitation in funding had always been a challenge since the conception and production of DTV works was much more costly than other forms of dance television productions (Zhao 2002). According to Bai (2014), creating a DTV work usually takes a team of people and at least six months of work. Moreover, since the mid-1980s, audience ratings have played an increasingly important role to help determine the continuation or termination of a television program. Audiences appeared less receptive to DTV than conventional forms of dance broadcasting. Nevertheless, what Bai perhaps considered a "failure" due to the short-lived and sporadic appearance of DTVs was indeed a critical moment in China's dance and moving image history, marking the beginning of video dance productions in China. These works embody efforts for aesthetic investigation under the shifts and demand of the changing landscape of China's media industry at the turn of the 21st Century.

Aesthetic Investigations on Television within the Frame of China's Cultural Policy

Besides Bai's own artistic interests and the shifting television industry that provided the conditions for the emergence of DTV, how did the cultural policy for the media industry influence these aesthetic experimentations? The possibilities and limits of experimentation within the Chinese television industry have been shaped by three co-existing goals of Chinese television since the mid-1980s: (1) to foster national culture and ideologies by representing

official discourse, (2) to maximize profits by broadcasting commercially viable shows, and (3) to cater to public interests (Zhu 2012). Thus, television producers have to reconcile the tension between these responsibilities when designing and creating their programs. Specifically, as a cultural worker at CCTV, Bai Zhiqun grappled simultaneously with questions of how to create dance on television that adhered to the official platform of representing national culture to the mass audience in a consumable way, while also cultivating space for innovation and experimentation. The two aspects are not necessarily contradictory. The specificity of the mainstream television platform under China's political context deems that these short dance videos are inherently different from their Euro-American counterparts presented on television that preceded DTV.

The project of cultural nationalism became revived during the reform era after 1978 when the Communist Party sought new paths for constructing a unified national identity. This demand for building a national culture was heightened after the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989 that threatened the political stability of the nation. Investigating theories of nationalism pertinent to the Chinese national context, Yingjie Guo (2004) builds upon Benedict Anderson's articulation that the nation can only be theorized "by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural system that preceded it" (1991, 12). Guo illustrates the prominent role cultural nationalism plays in China's contest for building a modern nation post-1989. He articulates that while cultural nationalism in China manifests in various forms guided by different visions for China,[49] the common goals of cultural nationalists lie in rediscovering

[49] Specifically, Guo identifies four types of cultural nationalists that emerged after 1989—namely, nationalist historians, Confucians, opponents of language reform and cultural linguists, and postcolonialists. For instance, Confucianists seek to reactivate Confucius values and make them relevant to the current social and political order. Drawing inspiration from postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, Chinese postcolonialists critique Eurocentric modernity and emphasizing the need to discover a "Chinese Self" that defies a colonized

cultural authenticity and evoking national spirit. Art, including dance, is constructed as an important site where national cultures and identities are embodied, represented, and articulated.

Consistent with this notion of cultural nationalism, at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002, Jiang Zemin, the then Chairman of the PRC, addressed the following to cultural workers:

> Literary and art workers should go deep among the masses and into the thick of life so as to contribute to the people more works worthy of the times. The press, publishing, radio, film and television must give correct guidance to the public, and Internet web sites should serve as important fronts for spreading advanced culture. Basing ourselves on the practice of reform, opening up and modernization and keeping abreast of the latest developments in world culture, we must carry forward the fine tradition of our national culture, draw on the strong points of other nations and make innovations in content and form so as to enhance the attraction and appeal of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2002).

Jiang's words are in fact consistent with the languages used during the socialist era on the role of arts and cultural production with an added emphasis on new technology (e.g. the Internet) and adapting to the context of "reform and opening up." Consistent with Maoist vision, this speech indicates that the Chinese nation-state conceives of cultural construction of the Chinese nation through its art and cultural productions as a critical component of the nation-building process. The Chinese path to modernization taps into traditional Chinese cultures to help disseminate socialist values. These guidelines highly impacted the cultural industry under Jiang's leadership and were directly applied to any dance programs broadcast on Chinese television. Dance on television, thus, does not just disseminate dance as an aesthetic form but is also tasked to choreograph a national imagination. Innovation in content and form is encouraged as long as it

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identity given China's semi-colonial history. Each group has its own understanding of Chineseness and paths for modernization, but their positions are not mutually exclusive and their boundaries can be fluid.

contributes to the "socialist culture with Chinese characteristics." This vision is consistent with the entire socialist period.

Meanwhile, with the deepening of economic reforms, the commercialization of the television industry led to an increased reliance on audience ratings for profit making and gradually shifted its role from primarily serving as a mouthpiece of the government to emphasizing "public relation" and "popular consent" (Zhu 2012, 14).[50] This notion of mobilizing art and culture to serve and influence the masses reflects the lasting impact of Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" delivered during the communist revolution in 1942. In this talk, Mao, while highlighting the role of arts and literature in taking part in revolutionary missions, also put as the top priority the necessity of understanding the mass audiences of workers, peasants, soldiers, and cadres. In postsocialist China, the arts and cultural programs on television no longer foreground class consciousness and revolutionary needs as they did during the Mao era. However, these productions continue to carry on the responsibility of meeting "the spiritual and cultural needs of ordinary people" (Ministry of Radio, Film and Television 2000).

Media theorist Florian Schneider (2012) argues that state control is only one of many factors that shape the programs and content of Chinese television. He suggests that television producers' self-censoring according to their own ideological orientations also plays an important role in influencing the content and programming of Chinese television. Schneider considers this form of censorship a result of "soft" control, in which legislation and guidelines are intentionally

[50] Specific guidance for the media industry is given from the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT). For instance, in a meeting held by MRFT in 2000, the Ministry stresses that the media industry must "meet the spiritual and cultural needs of ordinary people," and enhance "socialist material and spiritual civilization'" (as cited in Zhu 2012, 26).

left vague to inspire self-censorship. In the case of Bai's experiments on television, while it is unclear whether Bai intentionally self-censored her production, I argue that Bai's thematic choices and formal strategies, such as situating dance in alternative spaces, particularly in everyday settings, are driven by the Maoist aesthetic ideal of making dance relevant to the masses. Bai's dance experience, spanning from the late 1950s to after the Cultural Revolution, was highly influential on her television career in terms of shaping her artistic sensibility. In an interview with Zhao Shuang (2002), Bai characterized her experience conducting regular fieldwork in rural areas and military bases as the most valuable part of her dance career at All-Army Song and Dance Troupe. This kind of fieldwork is a generative and productive practice that provides insights for dancers on the lives of peasants, workers, and soldiers, which then inform their performances and inspire new dance choreography (Wilcox 2012a). Bai's dance experience led her to believe in the importance of situating art and cultural productions "deep into the lives" (深入生活) of the masses, in order to make them "relevant to the audience" (Zhao 2002, 12). I suggest that the same belief that informed the creation of socialist dance actually became a driving force for Bai's exploration of video dance. Bai sees dance on television as a productive vehicle to make dance relatable to experiences of the masses because of its technical capacity of directly situating dance in specific sites familiar to the audience. Thus, Bai's ideology is consistent with the official guidance for media production. While Bai, as a television producer, was given more discretionary power in determining television programs and content in the mid-1990s, her perception of DTV as an art form that could potentially make dance more accessible and relatable to the masses framed her aesthetic experimentation. These ideals and rubrics that she imposed onto her creative process were not necessarily confining but were generative under a relatively open environment in the television industry at the time.

Bai considers that it is precisely these specific conditions of China's television production—namely, a platform that serves, educates, informs and entertains the masses under the guidance of official discourse—that render DTV an aesthetic investigation from within China rather than as a foreign import. Bai is highly aware of video dance produced by various television stations in Europe and the US and has seen many of those works.[51] Though it is consistently acknowledged within screendance scholarship in China that video dance first appeared in Euro-American countries,[52] Bai considers DTV a unique product of the Chinese television history, a perspective that I also share. Comparing DTV broadcast on CCTV to video dance in general, Bai states,

> The term 'dance television,' on one hand, denotes exploration on how televisual and dance languages can emerge. On the other hand, it means that the production has to disseminate through television. It differs from DV dance, which can be avant-garde and can be individualistic. Therefore, television dance automatically carries the responsibilities of the viewing public (trans., Bai and Liu 2014).

I believe what Bai calls "DV dance" refers to video dance that presents postmodern dance aesthetics. In Bai's opinion, these works often prioritize the director's or the choreographer's vision instead of privileging the general public's taste. In my interview with Bai, she further clarifies that it would be irresponsible to present a work without considering its potential audience reception. While acknowledging aesthetic values in some video dance works that

[51] According to Bai (2002), she spent many days watching video dance for television from Euro-American countries at New York Public Library during her research trip to learn more about dance on television. In my interview with Bai, Bai also revealed that she was in touch with BBC's television producer for its dance program and was familiar with the works he produced.

[52] Dance scholar Sherril Dodds defines video dance as a genre of screendance that is "either originally conceived, or radically conceived, for the television screen" (2001, 69). These works first appeared in the UK and the US in the 1950s and became prevalent in mid-1980s and the 1990s in Europe, Canada and the US when television stations started to commission works by modern dance choreographers and pair them with a television director to produce video dance. Besides broadcast on television, these works also circulate in screendance festivals (Dodds 2001).

feature modern dance, Bai critiques its content for evoking negative feelings. Bai states, "Television programs target the masses. They need to promote positive spirits. We cannot over-stress negative feelings in order to obtain higher TV ratings" (trans., Bai and Liu 2014). Though it is unclear how these specific video dance works to which Bai refers promote negative content, Bai's statement further elucidates her belief that aesthetic innovation needs to be in service of promoting uplifting content for the audience. Consistent with Bai's approach, Chinese dance scholar Ou Jianping (2008) provides the following guideline for the production of dance television,

> Dance television is a new dance form filmed and edited for the purpose of mass dissemination through television… It needs to cater to the public's taste. It should fit within the framework of appropriate and acceptable social behaviors in mainstream society. It should also follow political party's guidelines. While pursuing aesthetic innovation and originality, it consciously or unconsciously represents the authoritative voice of a particular social group and political party, its ideologies and aesthetic ideals (trans.).

While Ou does not specifically refer to DTV but to dance on television in general, the specific guidelines also apply to DTV. His writing explicitly points out that the context of production sets very specific rubrics for dance works on television. These video dance experimentations programmed specifically for public dissemination equally assume the function of reinforcing hegemonic cultural values and ideologies. In what follows, I will use two of Bai's DTV works, *Fan Dance Water Ink Painting* and *Diaries of Youth,* as case studies to illustrate Bai's aesthetic innovations, as well as elaborate how her video dance on Chinese television participates in the nation-building project at the turn of the century in China.

Fan Dance Water Ink Painting—Choreographing Cultural Nationalism

Fan Dance Water Ink Painting (*Shanwudanqing* 扇舞丹青 2001), also known as *Fan as a Brush*, is a DTV production adapted from a well-known Chinese classical dance piece for the stage. The dance was performed by Wang Yabin (王亚彬), one of the most prominent dancers in China today, and choreographed by Tong Ruirui (佟睿睿). Both of them graduated from the Beijing Dance Academy. The 2001 version of *Fan Dance* was the third time Bai directed the filming of this dance. The first two filmed versions were both faithful documentations of the piece performed on a concert stage (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018). The conceptual idea behind the creation of this work emerged out of a request from the technical unit of the CCTV, hoping to showcase newly invented technologies for television through video dance (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018). At the time, according to Bai, a lot of advanced televisual technologies had been developed for television productions. Yet few opportunities were available to showcase these technological achievements. Thus, this DTV adaptation of *Fan Dance* embodies a desire for integrating newly developed digital technologies with dance productions to demonstrate to the mass audience that televisual space in China operates as a productive site where modernization takes place. Dance critics who wrote about *Fan Dance* univocally celebrate this work, both its stage versions and the DTV version for its embodiment of the "essence" of Chinese traditional culture (Lü 2013; Meng 2002; Zhang 2007). Dance scholar Jiang Dong (2020), in his essay "The Dilemma of Chinese Classical Dance: Traditional or Contemporary," considers this dance an example of a particularly contemporary expression of Chinese classical dance aesthetics, which appears to resolve the contradiction between the notion tradition and contemporary in relation to Chinese classical dance. My

analysis focuses on how the video dance version further produces a modernized visualization of these traditional aesthetic values.

Situating this work in the history of dance on screen within China, *Fan Dance* marks one of the earliest video dance experimentations that specifically explores how a coherent dance work can flow across multiple shifting sites on screen. In *Fan Dance*, the dancer Wang Yabin traverses a series of three-dimensional virtual environments of Chinese ink wash paintings that are simultaneously activated by the movement of her body, or the dancing fan in her hand (see Figures 3). The video presents primarily wide shots that showcase Wang's full body in motion with occasional inserts of medium and close-up shots of her upper body. The inclusion of several extreme close-ups of her flipping fan works to provide transitional moments, allowing for a cut to a different environment. As Wang continues to perform her dance, the animated Chinese ink wash painting shifts the space and time where she is situated, from mountains to a bamboo forest, from a pool of lotus flowers to a garden of chrysanthemums, from morning to dawn, and from summer to fall. In this work, the 3-D animation technology allows the dance to be

Figure 3. Video still from *Fan Dance Water Ink Painting* (director: Bai Zhiqun).

deposited on a pre-constructed virtual landscape at ease. The use of smooth camera movement and editing technique ensure uninterrupted movement from one scene to the other, creating a sense of continuous flow.

The dancing body's effortless temporal and spatial mobility is achieved through a productive dialogue between the creative incorporation of technology and an adaptation of the original choreography. Compared to the stage version, the most visible changes to the choreography take place in the last two minutes of the dance, whereas the first part of the dance appears nearly identical to the original version. In the latter part of the piece, instead of momentarily performing sustained movement in place at a much slower tempo, Wang continues to perform rapid turns either standing up or lying on the floor while turning, tossing, folding, unfolding, twisting, circling, and tilting her fan above her head or around her torso.[53] She travels across the virtual site, from right to left, exiting the camera frame and then re-entering from the opposite side. In the original choreography, however, due to the boundary of the stage, Wang's traveling across the floor would alternate in directions rather than being unidirectional. This continuous motion of exiting and re-entering the frame in the video dance version facilitates the transition from one scenery to the next as if the dancer magically arrives at a new space after exiting the previous one, thus creating the illusion of the animated landscape as an endless space. This perpetual unfolding of the landscape creates an experience of viewing a scroll of Chinese water ink painting for the audience.

Discussing digitally constructed virtual sites for Euro-American screendance works, Harmony Bench (2008a) proposes the notion of "no-place" to denote an "absence of spatial and

[53] These specific qualities of movement to manipulate a fan (e.g. turn 转、toss 甩、unfold 开、fold 合、twist 拧、circle 圆、tilt 曲) are markers of Chinese classical dance techniques.

political markers and relations" conveyed through these digital sites (37). These interchangeable spaces, abstracted or specifically sited, do not establish a definable relationship with the dancing body. They act as replaceable backdrops, allowing dancing bodies to freely wander through and across these spaces. Bench argues that the construction of this type of fluid site is associated with "a seemingly neutral space of global flow" (45), which echoes the colonialist expansionist project. This sense of flow is also characteristic of modernity at large. In the context of mainland China, one of the phenomena associated with the process of modernization lies in significantly increased spatial mobility of people at greater speed. In this way, by highlighting the dancer's illusory freedom of mobility, the video re-invents Chinese classical dance on television by projecting a sense of modernity.

Bai's *Fan Dance* is also fundamentally different from Bench's case studies of Euro-American screendance works. This difference lies in the relationship between the dancer and the virtual environment, whether the dancing body appears detached from the space or actively participates in the construction of the space. Bench (2008b) points out the incongruity between the dance and the shifting environments where the choreography is situated as a result of the separate processes of filming and then recomposing the dance onto other types of digital spaces. This production process dooms the dancer to only "hover indeterminately above unidentifiable geographies, repelled by their continuously changing backgrounds" (193). In Bench's case studies, the screendance works do not intentionally seek out a coherent relationship between the dance and the site where dance takes place. The dance appears indifferent to space.

In *Fan Dance*, however, the dancer's body is not a disengaged object being deposited onto different backgrounds. Rather, Wang is an active agent commanding and directing the change of the environment with different techniques of manipulating her fan. During the

production process of this work, Wang's body was composited into the virtual landscape of the water ink painting real-time during filming rather than through the post-production process. She was directed spatially in terms of how far and towards which direction she should travel, where her gaze should land, which angle her body should turn towards, and how high she should raise her arms or legs. These specific directions facilitate the seamless integration of her body into the environments that were invisible to her (Bai Zhiqun, interview with the author, June 19, 2018).

These differences exhibited in the relationship between the dancer and the site in Bench's case studies and *Fan Dance* are motivated by contrasting philosophies. While the former examples display a western expansionist view that erases national boundaries, the close attention to the interactive and co-constituting relationship between the dancer and the site for dance in *Fan Dance* highlights the Confucian and Daoist philosophy that stresses "social harmony" and "harmony with nature" (Li 2014, 157).[54] This human-nature relationship became the most visible in the last scene when Wang dances in the snow amongst a wood of plum trees. Traveling through space from one tree to another, Wang waves her fans with her arms drawing big circles. The silk fan, painting an invisible path like a magic wand, gives life to a full tree of red plum flowers. The classical musical composition *High Mountain Flowing Water* (*Gaoshanliushui* 高山流水) performed on guqin, a seven-string ancient instrument belonging to the zither family, perfectly coordinates with the dancing. Each accented pluck of the strings matches the raise of a leg, a leap, or a turn of the fan, as if the dancer is simultaneously playing music while painting. The video dance achieves not just the harmony between the dancer and the animated landscapes,

[54] Li argues that the notion of harmony (*he* 和) is central to Confucius philosophy. Harmony takes place at various levels, amongst individuals, between man and nature, and on a societal level. Li illustrates the teaching of Xunzi, an influential Confucian philosopher in the third century in China, that a "flourishing world" results from the joining together of "social harmony and harmony with nature" (2014, 157).

but also across three forms of Chinese classical art. As a hybrid art, the video dance renders audible and visible the trace of dance movement, translating a kinesthetic experience into an audio and visual one that coherently evokes and perpetuates recognizable symbols of Chinese national culture, which is also associated with an elite culture.[55]

Under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, the overarching national discourse with regard to the role of arts and cultures is precisely the development of culture. In Jiang's words, "the essential tasks for China's modernization are to work hard to establish an advanced culture, to make this culture more attractive and inspiring to people everywhere, and to quickly become a developed country by expanding its advanced productive force" (China Daily 2001). The televisual re-imagination of *Fan Dance* resonates with the ideological guidelines suggested by Jiang. *Fan Dance* transforms the body of a traditional character, as signified by her costume of a white silk robe and pants of the Tang or Song dynasty, into a turn of the twenty-first century, modern Chinese body imbued with technology-facilitated mobility. Many Chinese critics theorize *Fan Dance* as representing a neutrality that blends together qualities of masculinity (刚) and femininity (柔) (Ye 2010; Sun, Zhu and Xiong 2012; Zhang 2015). The choreography appears more kinesthetically dynamic in relation to other female Chinese classical dance solos popular around the same time.[56] The technology-enabled mobility further masculinizes the female dancer by making her movement appear even more expansive. This visual and kinesthetic

[55] In her article "Han-Tang *Zhongguo Gudianwu* and the Problem of Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Dance: Sixty Years of Controversy," Emily Wilcox historicizes the construction *Zhongguo gudianwu* (or Chinese classical dance) and nuances the ongoing debates on the notion of cultural distinctiveness with regard to this dance form. She points out that *Zhongguo gudianwu* was created to emphasize "a unified, elite image of Chinese culture" whereas Chinese folk and ethnic dance are often associated with "regional diversity and populism" (2012b, 215).

[56] In the construction of masculinity and femininity in Chinese classical danc, dynamic mobility across space is often associated more with masculinity.

sense of flow facilitates the construction of a national subject who takes up space, overcomes boundaries, and creates or activates digital and auditory environment through her bodily painting. Such corporeal construction on-screen enacts a technology-equipped new kinesthetic nationalism that is simultaneously representative of Chinese national culture and generative in effecting changes to the space where the body travels.[57] *Fan Dance*, thus, actively partakes in the nation building project by disseminating a modernized visualization of classical Chinese art forms that are often promoted by the state as markers of Chinese national culture. By choosing to adapt a Chinese classical piece into a DTV work rather than a work of Chinese folk and ethnic dance or modern dance, Bai implies a hierarchical perception within Chinese dance that still persists within Chinese dance academies today. Packaging together symbolic signs that imply shared cultural roots, *Fan Dance* also takes part in state-sponsored cultural productions that promote a purified vision of Chinese art absent from foreign influences and a unified vision of Chineseness.

Diaries of Youth **– Constructing Model Images of Youths**

While *Fan Dance* contributes to the construction of a nationalist cultural imagination by evoking legible signifiers of Chineseness, *Diaries of Youth* (2009), a 36-minute video, does so by portraying ideal corporeal images of twenty-first century Chinese youths. Divided into six

[57] In her manuscript *Revolutionary Bodies* (2018), Wilcox proposes the term "kinesthetic nationalism" to denote one of the three defining features or what she calls "commitments" of Chinese dance (6). "Kinesthetic nationalism" refers to the aesthetic form that defines a dance as Chinese dance. In her own words, "According to kinesthetic nationalism, what makes Chinese dance 'Chinese' is that its movement forms – its movement vocabularies, techniques and rhythms, for example – are developed through ongoing research and adaptation of performance practices of Chinese cultural commitments, broadly defined" (6).

chapters,[58] the work presents various aspects of campus life experienced by college students at the Shandong Art Institute: going through military training in the beginning of the college journey, eating in the dining hall, taking classes, playing sports during recess, studying in the library, developing romantic friendships, and saying goodbye to each other upon graduation. This work is directed by Bai Zhiqun and choreographed by fourteen different artists, with two or three of them responsible for each chapter. Amongst all of Bai's DTV works, *Diaries of Youth* is one of a few works that are completely shot on location where the social life depicted takes place. To delineate students' experiences in four years of college, Bai condenses all of these activities into one day, from waking up in the morning to a scene that depicts their graduation at night. This DTV production was broadcast in the "Dance World" program on CCTV-3 on December 5, 2009. Created towards the end of Bai's career, *Diaries of Youth* is an originally conceived DTV work that stands out as what Bai herself believes "the boldest experimentation" with dance on television that culminates her life-long research on connecting dance with life (Bai 2012).

In *Diaries of Youth*, both choreographic and cinematic devices are employed to highlight a range of different bodily qualities: disciplined, obedient, efficient, collective, hopeful, sentimental and energetic. The video starts with young men and women waking up from their bunk beds. A series of rapid rhythmic cuts between shots from various angles highlight their specific actions: yawning, putting on shoes and pants, brushing teeth, washing their faces, rushing downstairs (see Figure 4). The upbeat music creates the pulses for the cut and raises the tension of the scene. As the drum beats gradually accelerate, the wide shot of students running

[58] The six chapter titles are "Military Training – The Persevering Youth," "Classes – The Bittersweet Youth," "Recess – The Flight of Youth," "Self-guided Study – Reading Youth," "Purity – The Beautiful Youth," and "Departure – Long Live Youth."

downstairs cuts to a close-up shot of someone dressed in a military uniform blowing a whistle. Then we see over one hundred male students running to line up in rows on a playground, turning their heads at an exaggerated speed to the left and to the right. In this short scene, the rapid cuts between shots that focus on choreographed everyday gestures heighten the sense of urgency. This urgency does not lead to chaos; rather, it reinforces orderliness.

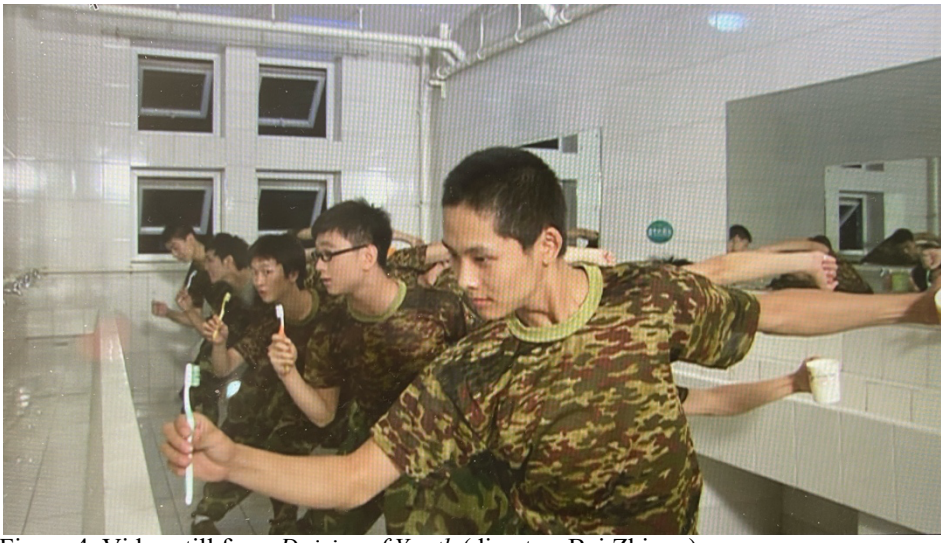

Figure 4. Video still from *Dairies of Youth* (director: Bai Zhiqun).

The classroom scene displays the same sense of order. In this scene, as one student runs into the classroom, placing her index finger in front of her lips and uttering a long and soft sound "shhh…," a room of over eighty students dressed in white T-shirts and blue jeans rush to their seats anticipating their teacher's arrival. This film cuts immediately to a close up of feet in black high-heels, making highly rhythmic sound from a brisk walk towards a door. Without having to show the full shot of the teacher, the rhythm of her shoes, resembling the drumming in the opening scene, conveys her position of authority. What follows is a rhythmic series of cuts, presenting variations of simple everyday gestures that are performed either in unison, or row by row in sequence: standing up, nodding their heads to greet the teacher, sitting down, crossing their arms and opening them up, typing on computer keyboards, raising their hands, shifting their

bodies to the left, to the right, and to the front, making a big circle with the entire body from sitting to standing to sitting again, and performing variations of the above-mentioned movement by speeding up the movement (see Figure 5). Choreographically, the stylization and rhythmic variations of gestures specific to a classroom setting reflect Bai's ongoing search for the coherence between the choreography and the site where it takes place. Some gestures appear overtly literal. But considering that Bai aimed to reach a broader audience, many of whom had limited knowledge of dance, this kind of choreography served to make dance legible to a lay audience.

Figure 5. Video still from *Dairies of Youth* (director: Bai Zhiqun).

The recurring movement motif performed in sequence, from one person to the next until the last person in the row completes the movement, which appears in this scene as well as in many other chapters, also underscores the idea that each individual belongs to the collective body of the performers. Although the notion of the individual has been long transformed under the neoliberal market economy,[59] these cinematic and choreographic decisions suggest a

[59] Much literature has explored the shifts of the notion of the individual in postsocialist China. For example, in Yan Yunxiang's sociological study *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (2009), Yan presents a range of case studies that demonstrate the social phenomenon of the rise of individual agency as one of the most profound changes in postsocialist China. The anthology *Chinese Modernity and the*

persistence of the socialist vision of personhood that is in the service of a collective vision. To portray these students as a collective, the camera rarely highlights one person more than the other. Even if a close-up or medium shot occasionally focuses on one young man or woman, the next shot always situates him or her in the ensemble of students. These shots convey a sense of uniformity in these students' experiences. Interestingly, incidences of disunity are also present in almost each chapter to break the monotonic coherence of the scene. For instance, in the military training scene, a male student is running late and rushes to the queue to join the group; in the classroom scene, a student raises his arm and stands up as if he were to answer a question, but then he immediately covers his head in embarrassment and is pushed down into a sitting position by students sitting next to him. In these cases, male students, not female, disrupt the balance and harmony of the space, becoming the unruly ones in the ensemble. However, their out-of-place actions are only short-lived. They are immediately integrated into the ensemble, either by pushing themselves into the row in the military training scene, being pressed down from standing to sitting in the classroom scene, or quickly finding an empty seat to start reading in the library. These little incidents of disorder are depicted as "mistakes" to be suppressed and corrected, so the collective corpus can continue its actions harmoniously. Such portrayal also conveys a standardization of student experiences, which is, according to Andrew Kipnis (2012b), characteristic of the Chinese education system in the postsocialist era as a practice of nation-building through constructing experiences of commonality.

The entire video dance also depicts a model educational experience that focuses holistically on aesthetic, physical, technological, intellectual and global education. The video

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Individual Psyche (Kipnis 2012a) advances Yan's arguments. Through case studies from a wide range of fields such as visual art, dance and education, etc., these articles put forward an argument that the process of individualization is often enslaved within forces of conformity and alienation.

features male and female students performing highly technical acrobatic movements in Chinese dance classes and Chinese opera rehearsals to showcase their skillful athletic bodies. This dance class scene reaches its climax when a group of male dancers perform acrobatic jumps and flips in the air, one following another. The editing creates a visual spectacle presenting a series of aerial choreography only achievable on video by making the cut to the next shot before the student lands on the ground. A figure drawing class featuring students carefully observing and sketching a marble sculpture of a man showcases their exposure to western visual art. To portray students' desire for knowledge, the choreography repeats the movement motif of female dancers extending their arms outward to raise a book in front of their face. They gaze at their books with a tender smile before putting them close to their hearts as if they are the most precious objects to them. In recess, students actively participate in sports activities, from basketball to soccer to cheerleading, that culminate in a short choreography on the playground that blends hip-hop dance and basketball playing. The specific choreography in this scene highlights youth culture in China at the time, influenced by transnational hip-hop culture. Throughout the video, these students, fully attentive in classes, skillful in technique classes, curious in the library, and enthusiastic and energetic in sports activities, perform the most desirable kinesthetic responses to each of the scenarios.

The representation of youth in this video dance is consistent with and reproduces the official discourse on the type of images youth television programs should promote. In his speech at a celebration for the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China in 2001, the then chairman Jiang Zemin stated the following, "The fundamental task of developing a socialist culture is to turn people from generation to generation into citizens with lofty ideals, moral integrity, better education and a good sense of discipline" (International Business

Publications 2015, 78). This talk, along with others encompassing similar ideology, led to direct impact on television programs. For example, the CCTV launched a "six hundred strategy," which involved CCTV commissioning a total of 600 programs for young viewers that projected these values and ideals (Keane 2015, 42). Following Jiang, Hu Jintao proposed the notion of "harmonious society" during the 2005 National People's Congress as a response to the severe social inequality and environmental deterioration resulting from China's rapid economic development in the previous two decades. The media industry quickly responded by embedding messages embodying what the building of a harmonious society calls for, including "the development of a society with democracy, rule of law, fairness and justice, integrity and fraternity, vitality, stability and order, and harmony between man and nature" within television programs (Gorfinkel 2017, 39). *Diaries of Youth* precisely constructs images of youths based on these officially prescribed qualities of model citizens to reinforce the dominant ideologies at the time. The young college students are portrayed as obedient, disciplined, educated, studious, healthy, energetic, pure-hearted, joyful, and with immense potential. They are constructed to embody the hope and the spirit of the Chinese nation.

While deploying drastically different cinematic and choreographic devices, both *Fan Dance* and *Diaries of Youth* are experimental in their aesthetic approaches, departing from predominant dance on television productions that present stage dance performances. The dynamic camera movement, constantly changing angles and perspectives, rhythmic cutting to music, manipulation of time and space, and seamless transitions from one scene to another culminate in a visual feast that absorbs the audience into an imaginary space animated by the dancer in the former case, and a vibrant college life in the latter case. Exploring how dance and the television medium can creatively integrate, Bai (2012) stresses the importance of taking into

consideration the specific cultural function of television. According to Bai, DTV is not simply an experimentation on the "dance-video" relationship but a form of cultural production that conveys the responsibilities of instilling positive national values and spirit to the masses. The aesthetic explorations in these works envision a new model of presenting dance works in service of national ideologies. The way dance and moving image intersects in these two works constructs corporeal images that align with the official discourse of the modern Chinese nation at the turn of the century. While these screendance productions challenge and disrupt established aesthetic and conceptual structures of presenting dance on television, they also simultaneously provide a new site where nationalist hegemony can be exercised.

Contested Notions of DTV

While Bai's DTV works present an alignment of aesthetic innovation with the nation-building project, contested notions of DTV co-existed. In Bai's show "Dance World," a handful of more experimental video dance works that feature postmodern dance aesthetics and individual expressions were also celebrated. Based on existing literature (Li 2012; Liu 2019; Meng 2009) as well as information I gathered from my interviews with screendance scholars and artists in China, I identified Liu Chun as one of very few early practitioners of video dance who started experimenting with this art form in the late 1990s outside the television industry. Liu later became one of the most influential screendance scholars and advocates for *wudao yingxiang* in the PRC, writing several books on screendance and organizing a number of exhibitions, festivals, and workshops to promote this art practice. Two of Liu's video dance works were broadcast in the CCTV Television Dance Competition in its initial two years when the DTV category was still part of the program. These two DTV works, *Life* (*Shengming* 生命 1999) and *Umbrella* (*San*

伞 2002), received Gold and Silver Awards in 2000 and 2002, respectively. The acknowledgement of these two videos suggests that works that did not necessarily share the same mission of highlighting national culture or emphasizing positive national spirit were also given space to be broadcast on CCTV for a brief moment. The presence of these videos on CCTV does not contradict my argument that DTV experimentations *within* the television industry strive towards a coherence between aesthetic innovation and the political correctness of the content. Rather, Liu's works further complicate the emergence of video dance in China as not only emerging from within CCTV but also outside of it.

Liu graduated from Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) in 1996, majoring in dance history, before pursuing a Master's degree in dance at the Chinese National Academy of Arts. During his studies at the BDA, Liu was first exposed to video dance when the BBC director Bob Lockyer was invited to campus to present some of the channel's video dance productions (Liu Chun, interview with the author, June 18, 2018). Upon completing his Master's degree in 1999, Liu, along with his colleague Xiao Xiangrong (肖向荣), went on to found Kongkong Dance Studio (Kongkong wushi 空空舞室), an independent studio dedicated to the experimentation of video dance. At Kongkong, Liu and Xiao created a series of works including *Life, Umbrella, Turn Coin Turn* (*Yingbi zai zhuan* 硬币在转 1999), and *Warm and Dark* (*Wenluan heiye* 温暖黑夜 2000). These works all include both English and Chinese titles and credits, which imply that Liu may have had the intention to circulate these videos internationally to dialogue with the Euro-American video dance scene. While *Life* and *Umbrella* were broadcast on CCTV, some of his other works participated in international dance film festivals in Hong Kong and Sweden, further suggesting that Liu's dance videos were not created for television alone. Both Bai and Liu respond to their personal encounters and artistic interests in different ways. Unlike Bai who

created DTV specifically for the television platform and targeted the Chinese mass audience, Liu's experimentation reflects his desire to engage with the specific notion of video dance informed by imported Western works which adopts postmodern aesthetics.

The distinction between Bai and Liu's works reflects the differences in their contexts of production, and is further heightened by their disparate understandings of DTV. When asked about his perception of dance television, Liu responds,

> What I understand as DTV (电视舞蹈艺术片) is the same as dance for camera, a type of *wudao yingxiang* (dance-moving image 舞蹈影像). It is original. And it is a visual exploration that merges the cinematic language and movement language. The work is created out of dialogues and conflicts. It does not solve problems. It can only raise questions (Bai and Liu 2014, trans. author).

Liu's answer indicates that he is preoccupied with the artistic value of DTV which celebrates an open-ended process of artistic inquiry. He also hints at the experimental nature of DTV when he equates it with "dance for camera," a video dance practice that first emerged in the Euro-American context and prioritizes the co-performance between the dance and the camera. These works trace their genealogy from avant-garde cinema, and modern and postmodern dance traditions. Unlike Bai who conceives that DTV emerged from within China and is specific to its cultural and political context, Liu openly equates DTV to Euro-American video dance.

A closer look at Liu's award-winning videos further illustrates Liu's understanding of DTV and sheds light on how his approach differs from Bai's in navigating and exploring the video-dance relation. For instance, *Umbrella*, a six-minute DTV work directed by Liu and choreographed by Wu Zhenyan (吴珍艳), features female dancer Wu performing with a red umbrella in an urban setting. The video disrupts the desire for a cohesive narrative structure by cutting between fragmented dance phrases taking place in an empty apartment located on a top floor of a tall building, through a gap between two red walls, on a wall in the form of shadows,

outdoor on the street, and in a hallway. The female performer dances out an intimate relationship with the red umbrella as if the umbrella symbolizes her unspoken desire. Towards the end of the work, accompanied by the sound of thunderstorm, the umbrella's handle breaks in half, laying alone in the empty room. The video takes place at multiple sites without explicitly pointing to the connections between them. In the very last scene, we see an intact red umbrella flying upward from the street level towards the apartment, implying the beginning of a new cycle. *Umbrella* employs postmodern dance to express various emotional states of the female dancer without rendering legible a singular reading. Rather, the work presents a series of jigsaw puzzles that demand the audience to piece them together in order to access meaning. This approach echoes Liu's conception of DTV as an art form that raises questions through juxtaposing visual materials that appear conflicting or incongruous rather than delivering a coherent and close-ended narrative. This particular understanding of video dance is consistent with the normative expectation of postmodern dance and dance for camera works that emerged in the Euro-American context, just as how Bai's DTV works present consistency with expectations and guidelines of the CCTV.

Besides exploring spatial possibilities, Liu also experiments with a range of possible variations of temporal experiences made possible by the televisual medium. Compared to Bai's works, Liu's videos appear much more playful and experimental with the construction of temporality. The manipulated time and reality draws attention to the specificity of the video medium itself rather than making the technological aspect invisible. In *Umbrella*, Liu frequently speeds up, slows down, or reverses movements in postproduction in order to subvert the linear progression of time. Such an approach makes visible the video medium and creates

technologically mediated bodies that defy gravity as well as alter the original rhythm and speed of the choreography.

Similarly, in *Life*, co-directed by Liu Chun, Teng Hu, and Xiao Xiangrong, the video intercuts scenes taking place in a dance studio, a dressing room, and on stage, featuring the 1996 graduating class of the choreography major at Beijing Dance Academy. These scenes are layered with different colors—white, yellow, and original color shaded by stage lighting—to give a sense of different times in these students' college lives. The video contrasts rapid cuts of energetic dancing with shots of dancers posing in stillness. Besides manipulating time through speeding up and slowing down takes, the video also employs freeze frames to temporarily suspend the motion of the dancers as if evoking the idea of photographic stills. Such a strategy increases the elasticity of time within the video. Other characteristics in *Life* that are not seen in Bai's works include the consistent use of handheld cameras and the close proximity of the camera to the dancers. This is made possible by the different technology utilized in the production. While Bai used professional television cameras, Liu's works used a digital video camera that was relatively small in size (Liu 2011). The mobility and intimacy made possible through this camera creates a new visual perspective as if the audience is viewing the dance by being positioned amidst the dancers, rather than simply watching them from a distance.

While Bai embraces Chinese classical dance form in her aesthetic experimentation with the intention to exhibit national culture, Liu considers modern and postmodern dance to be more conducive to video dance in comparison to Chinese classical dance or folk dance. According to Liu, modern and postmodern dance can better represent contemporary life and express individual emotions, whereas Chinese classical dance and folk dance are too codified to be deconstructed on screen (Liu Chun, interview with the author, June 18, 2018). Another reason for a lack of

engagement with Chinese dance forms, alluded by Liu, was simply that early practitioners like Liu were first inspired by Euro-American video dance that features mostly contemporary dance. In their process of imitating these works and trying to develop their own methods, they tend to gravitate towards modern and postmodern dance. Speaking from his own experience, Liu mentioned that many of his students considered putting Chinese dance forms on screen to be "tu" (土 native), which is associated with the idea of being old-fashioned and outdated. They felt that contemporary dance better embodied their modern urban lives, with Chinese folk and classical dance appearing disconnected from Chinese life now (Liu Chun, interview with the author, June 18, 2018). This association of aesthetics of Chinese dance with the idea of "tu," or outdated, and of western modern dance with "yang" (洋 foreign), or fashionable, presents a binary opposition between the Chinese and the Western as Chinese people encounter Western cultures.[60] Thus, the choice of dance form is a complicated one imbricated with dance artists' experiences of modernity and their perception of the modern and postmodern dance in relation to the "West" at the time. Through her ethnographic research on Chinese dancers, Emily Wilcox (2017) has revealed a common narrative—particularly pervasive amongst Chinese practitioners of modern and contemporary dance—that represents the "Chinese" style as restrictive to personal artistic discovery. Critiquing this narrative, Wilcox (2017, 2018) demonstrates through her research that, far from restricting it, Chinese classical and folk dance also serve as sites for personal artistic discovery. In recent years, some new dance film works coming out of China have started to re-embrace Chinese folk and classical dance, considering it a source of aesthetic innovation instead

[60] Such conception does not just manifest in dance but is rather prevalent in modern PRC thought. For example, in her book *Red Revolution, Green Revolution*, historian Sigrid Schmalzer (2016) theorized how this binary in modern PRC thought played out in establishing ideals of agricultural science.

of limitation. In Chapter Three, I will discuss how these newer works bring to light screendance artists' shifting relationship to China's traditions and the West.

Moreover, in comparison with Bai's works, Liu's DTV productions were created under different material conditions. For instance, *Umbrella* was an independent production with a very limited budget made possible through the help of a group of Liu's close friends (Bai and Liu 2014). Most of them came from a dance background, and some had experience in video making. Reflecting upon this experience, Liu states, "The fact that a DTV work like this was broadcast on CCTV and was acknowledged was an immense encouragement for us creators. *Umbrella* represents my earliest exploration on how to merge television and dance" (Bai and Liu 2014, trans. author). As an independent production, *Umbrella* shows no interest in engaging with national cultures or addressing a broad audience but embodies these early video dance practitioners' intellectual curiosity in how to film and edit dance to make it a distinct new art form, irreproducible on stage. Portraying only one protagonist and filming on the street or inside an apartment also partly reflect the lack of funding, a reality of independent video dance production that often makes it necessary to utilize freely accessible locations as sites of performance and to limit the number of performers in order to reduce costs.

Liu's DTV works embody drastically different aesthetic approaches and ideological underpinnings in comparison to Bai's works, which were specifically produced by and for CCTV. The fact that Liu's works—which so prominently display aberrant, unconventional characteristics—won awards at the CCTV Television Dance Competition points to an unusual openness for aesthetic innovation at the time. This openness embraced a different definition of DTV that equated it to experimental video dance. Such a definition prioritizes aesthetic experimentation over audience reception, which sharply contrasts with Bai's understanding of

DTV as an art form that balances the needs of the mass audience, the embodiment of national cultures, and aesthetic exploration on the integration of television and dance. To Bai, DTV is an innovative art form only within the framework of Chinese television, an opinion not necessarily shared by Liu.

Liu's works produced outside the influence of the television industry presented the possibility of a different path for video dance in China. As DTV gradually faded out from mainstream television, paling in light in relation to dance shows with more popular appeal,[61] video dance found an alternative space in higher education dance institutions. In 2002, Beijing Dance Academy launched the first undergraduate program focusing on video dance productions in the country, directed by Wan Su. The major was called Television Dance (电视舞蹈). Liu Chun was one of the instructors at the program in its early years, during which he designed his own course on how to create video dance based on his own creative experiences. In the early 2010s, the major was renamed to New Media Dance (新媒体舞蹈) to address new changes in dance and moving image production, and to encompass ever diversifying practices.[62] In 2005,

[61] For instance, some of these programs include: *Let's Shake It!* (舞林大会) (2006), *So You Think You Can Dance* (舞林争霸) (2013), and *Shake it up!* (新舞林大会) (2018) by Shanghai Oriental Satellite Television; *Strictly Come Dancing* (舞动奇迹) (2007), *Amazing Dance* (奇舞飞扬) (2013) and by Hunan Satellite Television; *Voice China – Dance* (舞动好声音) (2012) by Zhejiang Satellite Television. Many of these shows rode on the wave of internationalization of Chinese television programs by directly importing television shows from successful reality TV shows abroad, such as *So You Think You Can Dance* in the United States and *Strictly Come Dancing* in the UK. Besides the emergence of these new programs that featured dance, traditional formats that showcased various forms of dance performances on television continued. Co-existing and competing with these more mainstream and popular programs on dance, DTV did not gain momentum on television but quickly disappeared within a decade.

[62] One of the more quickly embraced practices related to screendance has been the incorporation of screendance within concert dance. This field appeared to have developed significantly faster than dance film because of the large demand for modernizing concert dance by integrating various kinds of stage technologies. Choreographers have started to explore the relationship between the digital dancing body on screen and the performers on stage.

Bai Zhiqun also started to mentor graduate students in the major of television dance at Chinese National Academy of the Arts, during which she guided students to take part in the production of a variety of dance programs on CCTV, including the CCTV Television Dance Competition, which by that time no longer included a DTV category.[63] Through their teaching, Bai and Liu also institutionalized their diametrically opposed perspectives of DTV.

Conclusion

Contrary to the current status of video dance as a marginal art form that circulates mainly within dance, film, and experimental art communities through exhibitions and festivals, I argue that to a large extent, video dance in China emerged as a product of mainstream television that was created for the consumption of the masses. The beginning of video dance in China follows a different trajectory than its development in the Euro-American context. Instead of initially appearing in marginal art spaces (such as art galleries and independent film festivals), before entering into mainstream media, this new genre of presenting dance on screen first appeared on China's national television. In spite of its fractional outputs and sporadic appearances in the span of fewer than twenty years on television since the early 1990s, DTV marks a critical moment in screendance history in mainland China. Specifically, DTV works challenged aesthetic conventions and unsettled established boundaries of filming and editing dance by exploring how television and dance could result in a hybrid new art form. Acknowledging this moment in screendance history destabilizes the dominant narrative about video dance within China today

[63] In an interview, Bai's former graduate student Meng Meng revealed that Meng participated in the productions of several CCTV Television Dance Competitions, but by then, these competitions only featured live dance performances. Meng also participated in the production of *Diaries of Youth*, which was filmed at Shandong Art Institute, where Meng started teaching after finishing her graduate studies under Bai (Meng Meng, interview with the author, January 15, 2020).

that conceives of video dance as only a Euro-American import or a subfield within modern and postmodern dance.

Tracing the context of emergence for DTV, I argue that advancement of televisual technology, commercialization of the television industry, and the attitude of openness to experimentation in the environment of television production in the late 1980s and 1990s, collectively provided the conditions for innovation to take place. China Central Television (CCTV) director and producer Bai Zhiqun emerged as one of the most influential advocates for new forms of expression on screen at the time. I demonstrate that Bai's DTV experiments were built upon a diverse range of domestic and transnational influences, drawing from techniques employed in socialist song and dance dramas, Taiwanese MTVs, and Hollywood dance musicals. Working from within mainstream television, Bai conceives DTV simultaneously as a site for aesthetic experimentation where uplifting and politically correct content could be embodied through dance and disseminated to a television audience. Through a close reading of *Fan Dance* and *Diaries of Youth*, I maintain that Bai's works provide salient examples of how DTV could become a productive site that choreographs cultural and kinesthetic nationalism, contributing to China's nation building project. While adhering to authoritative discourse directed by the state cultural policy at the time, the television industry provided ample space for innovative artistic expression to emerge.

Nevertheless, I point out that Bai's video dance experimentations represent only one understanding of DTV, coming from a perspective of a television producer who worked within the Chinese television industry. CCTV Television Dance Competition also embraced divergent aesthetics that indicate contrasting understandings of DTV. Unlike Bai's works, which aim to achieve a balance between aesthetic experimentation and ideological representation, Liu Chun

and his collaborators' award-winning *Life* and *Umbrella* exemplify DTVs that prioritize experimentation over ideological concerns promoted by the Chinese state at the time. Though only briefly appearing on television, Bai and Liu's video dance experimentations demonstrate Chinese television's openness to aesthetic experimentation and divergent on-screen visual and kinetic expressions at the time. On one hand, Bai created new aesthetic practices to reimagine a dancer's relationship to space (e.g., *Fan Dance).* On the other hand, Liu embraced existing postmodern dance for camera practices originated in the Euro-American context while searching for aesthetic expressions that are relatable to Chinese dancers' lived experiences at the time. Putting Bai and Liu's works in dialogue with each other complicates the narrative of the emergence of video dance in mainland China by pointing to two overlapping origins.

While both Bai and Liu consider video dance reflective of the Chinese dance field in the so-called "modern era" with its engagement with modern televisual technology, they hold diametrically opposed views towards DTV. While Bai strived to invent a new artistic medium that could fit within the mainstream television context, Liu's experimentation drew on the desire to introduce and adapt Western video dance works to convey Chinese experiences through modern and postmodern dance.

The tension between Liu and Bai's understandings of DTV sheds light on how their disparate narratives of screendance history are constructed by the larger historical narratives representative of their generations. Born in 1948 and educated with the People's Liberation Army's art system, Bai's relationship to art and cultural production was highly shaped by the socialist ideal of using art to serve the Chinese public. She herself has internalized these party-state prescribed aesthetic ideals through her dance career. This understanding of the function of art persisted in her during her career at CCTV despite China's social transition into

neoliberalism. Bai considers herself as a cultural worker who is responsible for making dance appealing to a broad audience. I argue that her interest in video dance experimentation is precisely driven by a belief in the creative potential of video dance to make dance more relatable to Chinese audience.

Liu, on the other hand, belongs to the cohort of post-70s Chinese artists, whose lives were heavily shaped by increasing social stability and cultural openness to foreign influences in postsocialist era. Examining post-70s artists in China, sociologist Ling-Yun Tang contends that these post-70s artists exhibit "a distinct cultural response to the broader relationship between transnational capitalism and artistic modernity" (2017, 21). Disinterested in engaging overtly with national politics,[64] they project a strong desire to embody individual emotional and psychological experiences under the rapid urban transformation through their art works (Tang 2017). Although Tang's study focuses on post-70s visual artists, her argument remains relevant to the field of dance and appears even more appropriate when applied to works by the new generation of budding choreographers born in the 1980s, whose works I will examine in Chapter Three. In Liu's view, through rendering on screen one's personal physical and psychological experiences in China, the video dance work would automatically embody Chineseness without having to deliberately evoke legible signs of Chineseness.

I contend that in spite of their differences, Bai and Liu's disparate approaches to DTV do not eclipse each other but find their own space for development, the former on national television until the late 2000s and the other in university settings and film festivals since the early 2000s. Both of their understandings of DTVs have lasting impact on the trajectory of screendance in

[64] Yet it is important to note here that, on one hand, seemingly apolitical works may be imbued with politics in a much more hidden way, and on the other hand, they could also reinforce the dominant values by precisely not exhibiting clearly discernable politics.

mainland China and are still relevant today. For instance, some advocates of *wudaoyingxiang* continue to emphasize the need of creating works that are uniquely Chinese and that embody China's rich cultures and traditions, whereas others are not much concerned about its cultural relevancy, advocating that video dance created in China would ideally mark a distinct Chinese cultural identity. The next few chapters will focus on recent dance film works that exist outside mainstream art and cultural production to shed light on the shifts and inheritance from this seeding period of video dance.

Chapter Two
A Corporeal Invitation to Remembering: Wen Hui and *Dance with Third Grandmother*

Sitting side by side on two small stools, in the courtyard of a rural Chinese village, a middle-aged woman and an elderly woman hold hands, their arms suspended mid-air. The elderly woman, dressed in a purple jacket and matching beanie, leans to her side until her torso becomes almost horizontal to the ground. The younger woman senses her tug through their linked hands. She slowly leans forward, drawing an arc with her upper body. Silently, without speech or eye contact, the women share moments of corporeal intimacy. The dancers described in this scene are Wen Hui (文慧), one of the pioneers in Chinese modern dance who established the first independent dance company in China, and her "third grandmother," Su Meiling (苏美玲). Recurring bodily dialogues between Wen and Su are the main visual components that make up Wen's film *Dance with Third Grandmother* (*He sannainai tiaowu* 和三奶奶跳舞 2015, 15min).[65] A documentary that privileges corporeal performance, *Dance with Third Grandmother* fluidly traverses prestigious international and domestic art spaces, fitting into various categories of moving image genre, such as dance film, documentary, and video art.[66] Its hybrid nature makes the film a salient example to investigate the interplay of dance performance and documentary.

[65] The full version of the film can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-vNVngkDbM&list=PLUwiaKwAIzseUlvBKDCwmupS_gXqv3bKb.

[66] The film was screened at the 56th Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition in May 2015. In 2017, the film was included as one of two works from mainland China in a dance and moving image exhibition titled "On Site Impromptus: Dance and Moving Images in Daily Space" at Ming Contemporary Art Musuem in Shanghai (Ming Contemporary Art Museum 2017). It was also included in the second annual Creative China Festival under the theme "China Now, New Era" in New York organized by Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation and Creative China Center (Creative China Festival 2018).

This chapter investigates how choreographic and filmic strategies in *Dance with Third Grandmother* facilitate the process of preserving and representing personal and social memories. Created in association with the Folk Memory Project, *Dance with Third Grandmother* documents Wen's personal encounter with Su Meiling, an over 80-year-old woman who Wen discovered to be her great aunt when she went back to her father's hometown in Yunnan to trace her family's history. The Folk Memory Project, co-conceived by Wen Hui and documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang (吴文光),[67] is a large-scale multidisciplinary art project that integrates documentary filmmaking, oral history interviews, and performance. The project originally aimed to retrieve peasant survivors' memories of the disastrous famine in the end of the 1950s and the 1960s in China, a history that is still silenced by official narratives of the Chinese state (Zhuang 2014). Later, the project expanded its scope to encompass other periods of the PRC's early history, such as the Land Reform, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution.[68] Launched in 2009, the project urged artists to return to their families' villages to collect a wide range of oral accounts of personal experiences and memories of those times (Zhuang 2014). By creating a repository of oral accounts of these peasants' lived experiences during the Mao era, this project is a response to the dearth of records of certain facets of Chinese history.[69] *Dance*

[67] In much documentary literature, it is often written that the Folk Memory Project has been led solely by Wu Wenguang. My fieldwork and interviews with Wen Hui reveal that the project was co-conceived by Wu and Wen. A few scholars also iterate this finding (see, for example, Pernin 2014).

[68] Up until 2018, the project had assembled 216 participants, comprised of Caochangdi (草场地) Workstation residents, peasant documentary filmmakers, and students from art schools who were enrolled in the Caochangdi documentary workshops (Wu 2019). Up until 2019, more than 1,480 oral history interviews have been conducted in 22 provinces and 323 villages, covering topics ranging from the Great Leap Forward, the Land Reform, and the Cultural Revolution, and other historical periods since the establishment of the PRC. This effort has resulted in the making of 56 films by 23 filmmakers (Wu 2019).

[69] Writing about oral histories, Valerie Raleigh Yow (2005) considers that oral history, as a qualitative method, sheds light on how a person's life has been shaped by the history in which he or she lives. It also provides an opportunity to hear the voice of the non-elite and gain information outside official narratives

with Third Grandmother is Wen's second film after a feature-length documentary of the same subject, *Listening to Third Grandma's Stories* (Ting sannainai jiang guoqu de gushi 听三奶奶讲过去的故事,2011, 75min), created through the Folk Memory Project.

This chapter examines the formal and aesthetic experimentation of dance filmmaking in *Dance with Third Grandmother*, which treats observational footage of everyday movement and improvised corporeal interaction as raw movement materials for choreographic assembly. As discussed in the introductory chapter, screendance, to borrow from Douglas Rosenberg's definition, is "an intentionally broad term" (2012, 3) that encompasses any and all kinds of practices of putting dance on screen. As an independent documentary that features movement of both trained and non-trained dancers, Wen's film falls within the rubric of screendance, or its nowadays almost interchangeable term, dance film. Numerous screendance scholars (e.g., Dodds 2001; Brannigan 2011; Rosenberg 2012) point out that dance film's ontology of hybridity encourages cross-pollination from different artistic media. In this chapter, I investigate *Dance with Third Grandmother* as a case-in-point for the drive toward experimentation in integrating dancemaking and independent documentary. Tracing its artistic genealogy, I explore how this film is highly informed by the intellectual positions embraced by various independent artists and how these approaches to dance and filmmaking produces an alternative mode of historiography.

I highlight how Wen's methodological approach responds to multiple transnational and domestic influences, whereas her thematic exploration is grounded in experiences of everyday life, particularly that of Chinese women. In making this film, Wen Hui continued her

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and public records. Similarly, Chinese theater scholar Zhuang Jiayun (2014) points out that oral history in mainland China is often regarded as a counter memory force that contests the hegemonic interpretation of history. By creating a repository of oral accounts of these peasants' lived experiences during Mao's era, this project directly responds to the lack of unofficial record of Chinese communist history.

investigation of the relationship between body and memory, a central query that runs through the majority of her dance career. Wen conceives the body as a living archive that stores and activates memories and lived experiences. This notion, while congruous with much western dance and performance studies literature, emerged from Wen's own artistic practice but is inseparable from her own upbringing during socialist China and her later exposure to Euro-American modern dance in the 1980s and 1990s. I provide a biographic account of Wen Hui's life with a specific focus on the experiences that shaped her choreography. By doing so, I highlight transnational cultural exchanges and transmissions that gave rise to Wen's artistic philosophy rather than considering Wen's art practice as "purely" native, or in other words, uniquely Chinese.

As an independent experimental documentary, *Dance with Third Grandmother* takes part in the "New Documentary Movement" in China, which emerged in the end of 1980s and took off in the 1990s. This movement in independent documentary rejects the pedagogical approach of documentary making that dominated in China from 1949 to the end of the Cultural Revolution (Lu 2010). This older practice adopted by state-owned television and film production institutions was mostly studio based, with preplanned shot lists and reliance on pre-existing archival footage (Robinson 2013). The new approaches marked a turn in documentary practice that is exemplified in the following shifts: from studio to street, from analogue filmmaking to digital filmmaking, from preplanned and highly controlled production environment to spontaneous production on location, from grandiose historical figures and events to subjects in everyday lives, particularly those who are socially marginalized, from the perspective of the government to the perspective of ordinary civilians, and from being state-sponsored to being fully financed and distributed outside the state media system (Robinson 2013). While state-sponsored film productions construct an archive of memories from the perspective of the nation, these independent film

practices offer a folk archive of alternative histories, or in other words, unofficial memory, based on experiences of individuals. Much literature considers films coming out of the Folk Memory Project as active participants in the New Documentary Movement (Berry and Rofel 2010; Pickowicz and Zhang 2017). Many scholars highlight that these works are characterized by an engagement with performance, including dance (Pernin 2019; Reynaud 2015),[70] and can be conceived as a form of embodied filmmaking in which the filmmaker situates his or her own body in the environment and in relation to the subjects of the film (Kissel 2017). The performative and corporeal dimension in these films results in a more active engagement with film subjects, thus contributing to the unlocking of their individual memories (Pernin 2014). Wen's *Dance with Third Grandmother* (2015) both inherits and departs from specific aesthetic and formal strategies in relation to many films in the Folk Memory Project. Made up mostly of performance scenes, this film expands our understanding of the function of dance in documentary filmmaking.

Overall, this chapter argues that *Dance with Third Grandmother* exemplifies a cross-pollination of aesthetic and intellectual approaches in both independent dance theater and independent documentary. Privileging corporeal performance that embodies female experiences, the film gestures towards the very act of remembering as a political action against the repressive erasure of the histories of those who are socio-politically marginalized. By situating this work in the genealogy of independent dance and film histories, this chapter also contributes to a

[70] Judith Pernin (2019, 146) argues that engaging with performance facilitates the process of activating memories and building trust with film subjects when filmmakers participating in the Folk Memory Project went to their hometown to revive memories of the villagers. Bérénice Reynaud (2015) uses Wen Hui's *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories* as an example to illustrate the incorporation of dance performance in the film.

productive dialogue that advances our understanding of the body's potential for enacting, activating, and archiving memories.

Body as A Living Archive: Historicizing Wen's Choreographic Approaches

In 2011, in a mountain-surrounded village called Dabieshan, Wen encountered her great aunt Su Meiling (Wen 2012). Spending over twenty days with Su at her home and listening to Su accounting tragic stories of her past, Wen created her first documentary *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories* (2011, 75 min) (Wen 2012). The film features oral history accounts of Su sharing her personal stories, including her memories of being a child bride and being brought to her in-law's family, giving birth to her son, witnessing her own mother being persecuted during the land reform, discovering her philandering husband's affair, and divorcing her husband once the communist state allowed divorce. The documentary also juxtaposes talking head interviews of Su with corporeal interaction between Su and Wen performing a range of movements or symbolic gestures together—for instance, combing each other's hair, standing in front of the camera with their hair tied together, and cooking and eating together (see Figures 6). Created after Wen's second trip to the village one year later, *Dance with Third Grandmother* appears to be a reversal of her first film in terms of its prioritization of movement versus spoken words. Instead of foregrounding oral history interviews, this film is almost entirely made up of corporeal performance, alternating between static shots of dance improvisation of Wen and Su and shots that detail Su's everyday activities. Throughout the film, only brief conversations between them take place during or immediately after their bodily interaction. Raising the questions of "why forget?" and "why forgotten?" through an intertitle at the beginning of the film, *Dance with*

Third Grandmother presents a continuation in Wen's ongoing exploration of the politics of memory from her last film, but, this time, predominantly through corporeal enactment.

Figure 6. Film still from *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories* (director: Wen Hui). With permission from Wen Hui.

What are the sources for Wen's interest in investigating memories through performance?[71] Born in 1960, Wen Hui belongs to the first group of Chinese modern dance choreographers during Deng's reform era, along with figures like Jin Xing (金星) and Wang Mei (王玫) who are both highly reputed modern dance choreographers in China. She is also a pioneer in cultivating an independent dance scene in the PRC. In 1994, with her then partner and documentarian Wu Wenguang, Wen founded the Living Dance Studio (Shenghuo wudao gongzuoshi 生活舞蹈工作室), the very first independent dance company at the time. At Living

[71] Considering dance film as a site-specific dance in the screen space as proposed by screendance scholar Douglas Rosenberg (2012), I treat Wen's film as a choreographic assembly of movement materials, or in other words, a choreographic archive. Paying attention to the logic of dance making, I discern that Wen employs a similar choreographic strategy to develop movements when filming *Dance with Third Grandmother* in relation to her dance theater works, which I will elaborate in detail below.

Dance Studio, Wen Hui, collaborating with Wu, created a hybrid documentary dance theater informed by their collective expertise. While Wen worked as a choreographer and performer, Wu helped design the concept, participated in the compositional process, created documentary for the performance, and sometimes performed in their works. From *100 Verbs* (*100 ge dongci* 100 个动词 1994), *Report on Giving Birth* (*Shengyu baogao* 生育报告 1999)*, Dance with Migrant Workers* (*He mingong tiaowu* 和民工跳舞 2001)*,* to *Memory I* (*Huiyi I* 回忆 I 2008) and *Memory II* (*Huiyi II* 回忆 II 2010), these works blend together theatrical elements, choreographed sequences, improvisation based on movement of the everyday, and documentary film to explore the interplay of the body, lived experiences, and individual and social memories. According to Wen, these multimedia dance theater productions aim to raise questions on Chinese history and social changes rather than pointing to any definite answers (Vosper 2017). Many of these works also reflect Wen's keen interest in investigating experiences of women and challenging the social position of marginalized populations, such as migrant workers, through performances.

The notion of the body as a living archive has been a central philosophy that guides Wen's creative works. Elaborating upon her own conception of the body, Wen states the following:

> The body is just like an archive, a library, and your personal experiences, your family and the influence of your parents are undoubtedly reflected in your body... our bodies, including all of us, are trained and regulated by the society. This is the politics of the body (Peng and Dan 2016).

Wen's words indicate her understanding of the body as a social body constructed by its specific historical, social and cultural histories. To connect with the body is to tap into the social histories that shaped it. This conceptualization acknowledges that the body is a source of knowledge

production and a site where memories, traditions, beliefs, and everyday practices are inscribed and continue to live. This overarching philosophical understanding of the body manifests in Wen's specific aesthetic preferences, including but not limited to working with non-dancers, drawing movement materials from everyday life, and having the performers enacting their own stories through movement and verbal texts rather than performing others. All of these characteristics of her work are also vividly manifested in *Dance with Third Grandmother,* which depicts Su performing mundane tasks.

On one hand, while embodying a distinct approach in the contemporary dance scene in China, this approach of drawing on vernacular movement and bodily experience of the everyday life actually has a long history in China's dance practice that dates to the early socialist period. Emily Wilcox (2012a) presents how doing fieldwork in early social era as part of dance training is considered essential in improving dancers' performance quality and thus cultivating better dance artists. Over the course of a few days, or several months, dancers would live with local villagers and took part in local activities of labor to "experience life" (*tiyan shenghuo* 体验生活), which Wilcox refers to as a part of the Maoist aesthetic ideology. However, the difference between this approach and Wen's is that while doing fieldwork helps dancers to better understand the subjects they perform, oftentimes the workers, peasants, soldiers, Wen is more interested in having her dancers perform themselves based on their personal everyday experiences, instead of performing others.

On the other hand, Wen's notion of the body as a living archive appears congruous to many western theories that call attention to body's archiving potential (e.g., Taylor 2003; Schneider 2011; Lepecki 2010) as well as to postmodern dance practices that draw from

pedestrian movements.[72] Yet, I argue that Wen's conception of the body both derives from her various historical and transnational encounters through dance and responds to specific postsocialist conditions in the PRC. In the western context, the incorporation of pedestrian movement, expanded notions of a performance site, and integration of non-trained dancers challenge aesthetic conventions as well as reject the implicit hierarchy in modern dance and classical ballet (Banes 1994).[73] Contrarily, what Wen contests is a rather uniform vision and ideological underpinning of the official dance scene in China that she experienced in her dance training and work.[74] Rather than directly imitating these Euro-American choreographers to whom Wen often gives credit, Wen invents a new methodological approach to dance to specifically address, reflect upon and evoke social reality and lived experiences in the PRC. Meanwhile, the convergence of Wen's choreographic approaches with those adopted by some Euro-American choreographers also help make Wen's works more legible to Western audiences than many other Chinese choreographers.

[72] For instance, while making irrelevant the distinction between archive and repertoire as proposed by Diana Taylor (2003), Wen's notion of bodily archive is consistent with Taylor's in that embodied memory conveyed through gestures, the spoken word, and various forms of performances contribute to an alternative form of knowledge to the written archive that is material and resistant to change. Rebecca Schneider (2011) articulates that the archiving potential of the body lies precisely in the very act of performance. While André Lepecki focuses on re-enactment of dance through dancers' bodies, his argument that "the body is archive and archive a body" (2010, 31) aligns with Wen's understanding of the body.

[73] It is also important to note that the early stage of western postmodern dance has also drawn much influence from non-Western forms and movement philosophies, from Tai Chi practice, Kungfu, and Maoist political sects to mythological dramas from India, African dance, and fashions of various countries in Africa. (Bane 1978, xx).

[74] Here, I do not mean to generalize Chinese dance in socialist era as all uniform and rigid. Wen's experience in dance is specific as her training takes place primarily in the later part of the socialist era when dance training had become more standardized and uniform. In comparison, in the early socialist era, Chinese dance was much more experimental. See Chapter 2 of Emily Wilcox's manuscript *Revolutionary Bodies* (2018), "Experiments in Form: Creating Dance in the Early People's Republic."

To arrive at this specific choreographic philosophy and practice, Wen went through three different stages, each pointing to a disparate understanding of the body: from body in service of a collective vision of the state based on her experience growing up in socialist China, to body as a site of liberation after her exposure to Western modern and postmodern dance, and to eventually arriving at the understanding of the body as a living archive during her own experimentations in China after launching her independent dance career. A biographic account of Wen Hui reveals that what appears to be an idiosyncratic choreographic approach in the 1990s China did not suddenly emerge out of Wen's artistic genius alone. It is also not an imitation of western aesthetics at face value. Rather, it embodies a dialogic negotiation between Western and Chinese aesthetics as well as cultural contexts.

I contend that Wen's peculiar historical consciousness is produced by her upbringing during a highly politicized period of Chinese history. In her book *Memory, Subjectivity, and Independent Chinese Cinema*, film scholar Qi Wang (2014) identifies a generation cohort of filmmakers, born within the two decades following the end of the 1950s, whose films reflect an unprecedented historical consciousness. Wang contributes their desire to engage with the past to their important years of upbringing during a highly politicized socialist era that produced new social subjects. She argues that creative works by members of this generation need to be understood "in the context of this peculiarly haunting experience of socialism" (Wang 2014, 12). Wang's explanation productively offers insights into Wen's historical consciousness reflected through her engagement with dancing bodies.

Growing up during the socialist era and then experiencing postsocialist transformation in her adulthood, Wen has experienced first-hand how the body, situated in different time periods in the PRC's history, serves as a site of social and cultural knowledge. Born in 1960 in Kunming,

the capital city of Yunnan Province in Southwest China, Wen belongs to the generation of Chinese people whose family lives and personal histories were heavily entangled with a range of concurrent social and political upheavals carried out by the state (Zhuang 2014). For example, this is the generation who spent their childhood and adolescence in the Cultural Revolution. Since childhood, they were inculcated to embody the Maoist vision of the collective body of Chinese socialism. Wen recalled that her very first memory of dancing was when she performed "The Loyalty Dance," a specific choreography that expresses respect and adoration towards the Communist leader Chairman Mao (Walder 2015).[75] Wen states:

> Back in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a common sight for us kids to express our admiration and appreciation for various political leaders through our bodies; it was even a source of pride. As a kid, I remember, in our yard each morning and evening, young and old alike gathering around a portrait of Chairman Mao to pay our respects. After we gathered in front of that portrait and reflected on all the bad things we had done that day, we would then perform an affectionate song in Mao's honor. And that's how I began dancing, with this "Loyalty Dance." At that time in China, everyone danced more or less the same type of dance; there was no real distinction between the individual sense of body and the collective body... In other words, any sense of an individual body vanished (2013, 134).

Wen's account of her childhood memory indicates that the performances of the loyalty dance equated to an act of worship. By participating in the dance, the performers enacted their submission to the state order and their belonging to a collective vision. In other words, as Chinese scholar Tuo Wang (2014) contends, this participation in the dance interpellated socialist subjects.

[75] "The Loyalty Dance" was practiced in the 1960s and 1970s in the Communist China. It was part of the Mao Cult activities. The dance involved repeated steps drawn from movement vocabularies of China's ethnic minority dances. In its choreography, the arms and the chest often gestured towards the sky to symbolize adoration and admiration for Mao. The dance was accompanied by a song with lyrics that explicitly expressed loyalty to the Chairman. The dance was performed in all kinds of public and private spaces such as train stations, bus tops, meeting halls, plazas, etc. (Walder 2015, 281).

Typically, upon finishing high school, most people in Wen's generation who were city-dwellers were sent down to the countryside to perform physical labor as a form of socialist re-education from peasants, workers, and militaries, following Mao's order of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" program between 1968 and 1978 (Rene 2012).[76] Many never had the opportunity to attend college. Instead of following the life trajectory of most people born around her time, in 1974, at the age of 14, Wen was admitted into the Yunnan Arts Academy to study dance, which exempted her from the sending-down policy (Guo 2016). After graduating from the dance program at the age of 16, Wen immediately joined a local military troop as a professional dancer, where she studied and performed revolutionary ballets, from new works such as *Ode to Yimeng* (*Yimeng song* 沂蒙颂) and *Children of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan ernü* 草原儿女) to older ones such as *Red Detachment of Women* (Guo 2016).[77] Though not representative of Chinese dance during the socialist era as a whole, the revolutionary ballet became the officially sanctioned dance form during the Cultural Revolution when Wen Hui studied it. Wen reflected on her dance experience during this time in one of her interviews, "When performing the model operas, the body is often tight, with muscular tension and tightly held fist. The head and the chest are upheld, and even the eyes are effortfully exerting forces" (Guo 2016). Disciplined through rigorous training of ballet and Chinese dance techniques and

[76] Also known as the rustication program, the sending-down policy is a large-scale socioeconomic intervention carried out under Mao's leadership to build revolutionary consciousness of the new generation of urban youths. The movement led to forced downward mobility of urban youths to the countryside and remote areas to perform physical labor under harsh conditions. Some of them never had the opportunity to return to cities. The sending-downs are now referred to as the "lost generation" as their adolescence and life trajectories were interrupted by this policy (Rene 2012).

[77] Though having studied *The Red Detachment of Women*, Wen never had the chance to perform this piece. But her experience of studying revolutionary ballet during the socialist era provided rich artistic materials for her recent dance theater production *Red* (2016), which presents a re-interpretation of this signature ballet opera (Guo 2016).

movement vocabulary, the dancers' upheld bodies were constructed to project the uplifting spirit, strength, and power of socialist vision.

In the course of economic and political reforms to recover from the severe damages taking place during the decade of the Cultural Revolution, the mid-1980s witnessed the so-called Cultural Fever, a period considered as China's second enlightenment after the May Fourth movement.[78] During this time, western philosophies, arts and cultures flooded into China, confronting traditional values and raising questions on China's new path to modernity, whether it should be founded on the principle of democracy, science, or traditional Chinese cultures (Zhang 1997). In the midst of these fervent cultural debates, Wen attended the very first class of the Department of Choreography at the Beijing Dance Academy in 1985 (Guo 2016). In her four years at the Academy, she took classes in American modern dance when dancers from Trisha Brown Dance Company, Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and Martha Graham Dance Company were invited to teach workshops at the Academy (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 29, 2019). Like many young college students at the time, Wen actively moved away from socialist values to explore these newly emerged ideas from imported literature, philosophy and arts. Wen indicated that it was these vibrant and conflicting ideas and debates that paved the foundation for her independent thinking (Guo 2016; Cai 2017).

[78] Writing about Chinese modernism during the decade following the Cultural Revolution, Chinese literary scholar Xudong Zhang (1997) discusses the 1980s in China as experiencing a fervent sociocultural construction characterized by "diversity, ambiguity, confusion and sometimes utter chaos" (9). According to Zhang, the Cultural Fever, generated from "learning from the West" (38), gave rise to three schools of thoughts that brought out heated debates surrounding the discourses of science and technology, traditional culture and Western theory in relation to the Chinese experience of modernity. In the cultural climate of the decade that resembled the Chinese renaissance, arts and cultures thrived in new-found freedom. They actively participated in the cultural debates of the era.

Upon graduating from the Beijing Dance Academy in 1989, Wen was assigned to work as a choreographer for the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble. Working for a state-owned dance troupe also meant that the choreographer had to adhere to the aesthetic and ideological codes and conventions defined by the state. Wen found it unsatisfying to create dance within a system that promoted a singular vision of what an ideal form of dance choreography should be (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 24, 2018). Performed at various kinds of ceremonies, conferences of state officials, and festival galas, which were performance events that celebrated national holidays, this form of dance production was prescribed to evoke nationalist sentiment and reinforce dominant state ideologies. Working within the state system but not identifying with it, Wen had difficulty finding alternatives that could allow her to break away from the system. This desire for alternatives frames her later artistic experimentation as a direct response to her previous dance trainings and choreographic experiences rooted in a socialist collective vision.

Wen's encounter with Euro-American modern/postmodern dance offered her new ideas for conceiving dance, marking an important turning point in her career. In 1994, Wen visited New York City with her then partner Wu Wenguang for a film project (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 24, 2018). After the film shoot, Wen decided to extend her visa to stay in New York City to observe and absorb as much American modern and postmodern dance as possible. In a few months, Wen studied at various studios and dance institutions such as the Limón Institute, the Erick Hawkins School of Dance, and the Trisha Brown Dance Company in New York City. After dance classes, she would insatiably watch video tapes of contemporary choreographers that she had heard of before at New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. She recalled that Meredith Monk's incorporation of voice on stage and Pina Bausch's dance theatre

dramas were amongst other works that have lasting impact on her creative vision (Wen Hui, interview with the author, June 17, 2018).

Wen's exposure to new ways of thinking about dance is not limited to movement qualities and choreographic styles but also comes from her observation of everyday life in New York. Wen recalled seeing street performers at subway stations and on the street, which allowed her to realize that dance performance does not have to be constrained to a concert stage with proper lighting. Any space could be a stage. She realized that dance making should be no longer restrained from attachment to a particular space (often a formal theatrical space), the availability of stage lighting, and even trained dancers. Any space and any type of body could generate meaningful work (Wen Hui, interview with the author, June 17, 2018).

However, I suspect that Wen's upbringing may have also played a role in Wen's newly found inspiration. In fact, China's early socialist dance and street theater had a convention of performing on the street and non-traditional spaces. Wen's early experience of loyalty dance was also performed outdoors. Thus, the fact that in Wen's personal narrative, it was these Western encounters that propelled her to envision alternative methodological approaches to dance making that departed from the singular notion of what dance was and should do in her dance training is in fact quite ironic but not surprising. In the 1980s, the dance field saw a return to more conservative ideas about the attachment between professional dance and proscenium stage, which may be why the idea of using alternative spaces as stage became unfamiliar to her. In addition, Wen's own ideological shift also took part in a larger historical and cultural process. American modern dance was the official representation of American capitalist culture during the Cold War. When China under Deng's reform policy began to adopt capitalist economic practices and reestablished diplomatic ties with the US, modern dance re-gained prominence in China

precisely because of its ideological affiliation with the notion of individual freedom. Fangfei Miao (2019) discusses the "modern dance fever" during the rebirth of modern dance between 1978 and 1988 in the PRC, detailing the transnational exchanges between American and Chinese artists as well as layers of misunderstandings and miscommunications. Miao also points out American Dance Festival's promotion of modern dance in China was imbued with political interest in promoting American values of individualism and freedom as a means to liberate Chinese people. Thus, it is likely that such historical narrative of the time had influenced Wen's perception of modern and postmodern dance that she encountered in the US. Dance scholar Randy Martin states, "Bodies can be treated like machines, but then, like machines, they must be produced to produce" (1998, 155). First produced through structures that uniformly inculcated socialist values, Wen's initially obedient body was re-produced into a recalcitrant body through her exposure to different dance forms and styles that embodied alternative sets of social and cultural values.

In discussing Wen's encounter in New York City as an important turning point for her work immediately before her establishment of the Living Dance Studio, I do not intend to overemphasize western influences on Wen's work. Rather, I situate Wen's choreography in the larger context of contemporary dance and in the process of transnational flow. Drawing from everyday gestures and engaging with lived experiences, Wen attempts to redefine dance not as a political tool for constructing grand narratives of the Chinese state but a mode of alternative historiography for archiving personal stories of ordinary people. In other words, Wen's choreographic approach is rooted in the specific social and cultural circumstances of China's past and present and can be seen as a form of sinification of modern and postmodern dance.[79]

[79] I use Meiling Cheng's definition of sinification in her book *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-based Art* (2013). She refers to sinification as the process of making something foreign Chinese. It

Thus, employing a similar approach to movement, *Dance with Third Grandmother*, choreographically, is in conversation with the larger context of modern and postmodern dance on an international scale.

Situating Wen's Film in the Genealogy of Documentary Practices

Just as *Dance with Third Grandmother* embodies a continuation of Wen's choreographic strategy that draws influence from various transnational encounters, as a documentary film that features dance, it also carries the legacy of a myriad of documentary practices. *Dance with Third Grandmother* needs to be situated in the long history of documenting dance and movement practices both within and outside China. Since the beginning of film, dance has played a significant role on screen. Early filmmakers were immediately drawn to dancers, treating them as moving subjects in their films, for instance: Annabelle's butterfly dance by William K.L. Dickson and documentation of Ruth St. Denis performing a skirt dance outdoor by Thomas A. Edison, both recorded in 1894. Dance has been considered "particularly compatible with the filmic form" because of its shared sensibility to movement and rhythm (Dodds 2001, 4). Treating film as a tool for preserving history and culture, ethnographic documentaries often focus on embodied practices, including dance, considering the body as a site of knowledge production. This mode of filmmaking can be traced to the 1910s when Edward Curtis filmed winter ceremonial dances of the Kwakiutl, North American Indians who traditionally lived in what is now British Colombia, as part of his film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914). Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), featuring the life of Inuit living in the Arctic Circle, later

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shares similarity with glocalization, which she articulates as a process that modifies something foreign with "local particularities" (307), or in other words, a process of local adaptation, modification, and reinvention of any global trend.

became a salient example of ethnographic documentary that engages with performance for the camera and re-enactment. Such a focus on embodied knowledge consists of a key aspect of performative documentaries as discussed by Bill Nichols (2001). This performative mode of filmmaking highlights subjectivity and embodiment, constituting a distinct mode of representation that propels audiences to engage with the world through an activation of multiple senses (Nichols 2001). Wen's film echoes this performative approach to documentary making by privileging corporeal performance.

Moreover, in the early decades of the PRC, dance productions and film studios frequently joined force, resulting in the creation of a series of films on dance. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, *Dingjun Mountain* (Dingjun shan 定军山 1905), known as the first Chinese film, also included scenes of Chinese opera performance. From *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* (*Bai feng chao yang* 白凤朝阳, 1959), *Magic Lotus Lantern* (*Baoliandeng* 宝莲灯, 1959), *Colored Butterflies Fluttering About* (*Caidie fenfei* 彩蝶纷飞, 1963) to revolutionary ballet operas adapted into films such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun* 红色娘子军, 1971), *White Haired Girl* (*Baimaonü* 白毛女, 1972), and many others, these dance films provide important historical records that shed light on the development of Chinese dance and its intertwining relationships with the nation state and the post-World War II global context.[80] Some of these productions feature most recent innovation in Chinese dance while others are narrative dance dramas projecting aesthetics of socialist realism. Such effort to adapt live performances into films is driven by the desire to preserve Chinese dance, broaden the circulation of dance, and

[80] Here I reference Emily Wilcox's (2019) elaborate study on dance in the first few decades of the PRC during which many of these filmed dances circulated in socialist countries abroad to disseminate socialist revolutionary culture.

promote socialist ideologies or revolutionary values. More recent state-sponsored documentaries on dance—for instance, the 1998 documentary series featuring prominent dance artists Dai Ailian (戴爱莲), Wu Xiaobang (吴晓邦), Kangbaerhan (康巴尔汗) and Jia Zuoguang (贾作光) (Liu 2019)—also adopt pedagogical and didactic approaches. These works celebrate prominent Chinese dance artists or dance forms and disseminate knowledge about Chinese dance as an important part of China's cultural production and national pride. Wen's *Dance with Third Grandmother* responds to these official productions of dance on film by rejecting pre-planned, studio-based, ideology-driven processes. In contrast, Wen embraces a range of aesthetic and filmic approaches in independent documentaries that attempt to provide an alternative mode of historiography that accounts lived experiences of everyday subjects rather than only featuring professional dancers.

Though Wen did not start making films until 2011, she had been engaged with documentary filmmaking through her long-term collaboration with documentarian Wu Wenguang from the beginning of her independent dance career. For instance, Wu created a documentary on Wen's site-specific performance *Dance with Farm Workers* (2001) set at a soon-to-be demolished textile factory (Peng and Dan 2016). The film is more of a performance documentation, providing a record of an evening-length performance featuring thirty migrant workers and ten trained dancers (Yale 2004). In a durational dance theater work *Memory* (2008), Wen projects Wu's documentary *1966, My Red Guard Era* on a large mosquito net to accompany the performance by Wen Hui and Ma Dehua that recounts memories of their youths in the 1960s and 1970s. After this collaboration, both Wen and Wu realized an urgent need of using performance and documentary to engage with social memories that were lost or intentionally forgotten due to the establishment of official narratives of histories that omitted

much trauma and pain. The urgency to preserve a disappearing perspective of the PRC's early history eventually resulted in the inception of the Folk Memory Project two years later in 2010. Moreover, in Wu's documentary film *Treatment* (*Zhiliao* 治疗 2010, 80 min), a work that commemorates Wu's mother, Wen appears as a dancer in the film. Made as part of the Memory Project, Wu intercuts bodily performances by Wen with his talking-head interviews facing the camera. Wen and Wu's ongoing cross-disciplinary collaboration until the early 2010s contributed to the emergence of documentary dance theater as well as the performative turn in Chinese independent documentaries.[81]

Dance with Third Grandmother draws the most immediate influence from the approaches to filmmaking employed in the Folk Memory Project. Taking part in a long-term effort to uncover individual histories of rural populations, films produced through the Folk Memory Project adopt a participatory approach, an aesthetic of "on the spot" realism achieved through the use of synched sound, long takes, and handheld camera, and a focus on subjects in everyday lives, etc. This specific style of realism produces a sense of being here and now, which Chris Berry articulates as a temporality that rejects the teleological progression of history by presenting "no clear connection to past or future" (2009, 114). This ambiguity reflects China's postsocialist condition (Berry 2009). All of these characteristics can be identified in Wen's film and are reflected in her creative process. For instance, to immerse themselves in Su's village life, Wen

[81] Film scholar Lu Xinyu (2010) provides an overview of the New Chinese Documentary movement in her essay "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement: Engaging with the Social." She identifies two distinct phases of the movement. The first phase went from the 1980s to mid-1990s during which Chinese independent documentarians adopted an observational approach, directly reacting to state-sponsored special topic programs that were studio-based. The second phase, roughly from mid-1990s and onward, has been marked by an increasingly visible performative and reflexive approach to documentary. These filmmakers aim to move beyond utilizing the techniques deployed in the first phase of the movement and also to distinguish their works from television programs that started to incorporate techniques of synchronized sound and long takes, characteristic of the first phase of the movement.

and her project partner Xiaoyin (小银) lived with Su in the village for close to two weeks. Rather than having a fixed vision about what the film should look like, Wen re-entered Su's life with complete open-mindedness to what could unfold and took on a participatory approach to involve the film subject as the co-creator of the film. In this creative process, all three women, Su (84 years old), Wen (51 years old) and Xiaoyin (23 years old), crossing three different generations, engaged in both verbal and bodily dialogues to account their disparate lived experiences.[82] Each of them took turn to hold the camera. Although Xiaoyin is not physically present in the film, her participation in the entire creative process ensures that no one is merely an observer.

This participatory approach is facilitated by the adoption of the mini DV camera. Introduced in mainland China in 1997, the affordability and portability of the mini DV camera led to a boost of independent documentary making and particularly low-budget filmmaking (Berry and Rofel 2010). Reflecting upon the technical properties of the DV camera, documentarian Wu Wenguang (2010) suggests that its small size enables him to break down the barriers between him and film subjects. It results in a more communal experience of filmmaking rather than a hierarchical one. In the case of this film, using this cinematic apparatus to witness the corporeal interaction between the three women provides the possibility of intimacy and heightens the immediacy of embodied experience. Because of its accessibility, Su was also able to participate in the filming process by directly operating the camera. The presence of the camera

[82] Su, born in 1928, has always led a rural life and experienced political upheavals, wars and various social revolutions over her 84 years of life; Wen has always lived in urban China, experienced the Cultural Revolution during part of her childhood and teens, went to college for dance, and also studied in the US; Xiaoyin, on the other hand, grew up in a different village in Yunnan Province during the time when China underwent rapid economic reforms. Not able to continue paying tuitions for school, she left home to seek work in urban cities at age twelve, first in Kunming and then in Beijing. Arriving in Beijing, she first worked as a cook at Wen's Living Dance Studio and then started performing with Wen (Guo 2016). These three women not only embody different temporal experiences but also spatial experiences given their disparate lives in rural areas, urban areas, and in-between rural and urban spaces.

contributes to the bonding experience amongst the three women rather than taking on the role of a distant and detached observer intruding upon the intimate space created by them.

In addition, through a spontaneous approach to filmmaking, *Dance with Third Grandmother* produces the aesthetic of "on the spot" realism, or *xianchang* (现场) aesthetic. *Xianchang* is often understood in two ways. First, on the material level, it refers to the location where the documentary is shot, which requires the filmmaker to be present at a specific time. Thus, according to Chinese film scholar Dai Jinhua, *xianchang* inherits "a temporal and spatial dimension that is bound to embodied presence" (1999, 219). Second, xianchang also refers to a specific quality of spontaneity which produces a sense of liveness (Robinson 2013). According to Michael Berry, contrary to the Maoist model of realism that reflects a dialectical Marxist realism in which the world is understood through its underlying class struggle, "on the spot" realism emphasizes a spontaneous observational style in approaching reality that aims to expose systems of oppression (Berry 2013). This quality of spontaneity is supported by realist documentary techniques including, but not limited to, the use of handheld camera, long takes, synch sound, and natural lighting. Embracing the unpredictable, uncontrollable and unstable nature of material reality of being on site, *xianchang* is "open-ended, improvisational and constantly 'in process'" (Robinson 2013, 30).[83]

Wen shows us that even when the camera is mostly placed on the tripod, it is still possible to produce the sense of *xianchang*. Many times, due to the constraints in the condition of production, when Xiaoyin was not on scene, Wen had to leave the camera on the tripod to

[83] Robinson (2013) situates the rise of this specific approach to cinema within the social and cultural context of the postsocialist transition. He considers that *xianchang* is an aesthetic response to the transient, rapidly shifting, and unpredictable social reality in postsocialist China.

document her interaction with Su without being able to give full attention to what the camera was documenting and how the images were framed. This approach allows certain level of unpredictability of what comes into the frame rather than highlighting what the camera intentionally "captures." In one of the scenes when Wen and Su dance on top of a grain pile, we see Wen occasionally gazes into the camera as if she is wondering whether the camera is still filming or whether their bodies are properly framed. These instantaneous moments expose the presence of the camera and the deliberate construction of the scene. In another example, we see a long take presenting Su, sitting at the entrance of her door, dozing off with her face rested on her palms. The camera stays on her face in a long take until she finally opens her eyes wide, startled by the presence of the camera. The genuine facial expression that reveals her surprise produces the sense of liveness.

Xianchang aesthetic conveyed in this film is also produced through the multi-sensorial experience of audio-visual inscription, from the boiling kettle on a stove, the frying wok, the big wooden bucket for washing vegetables, two small wooden stools to sit on, clothes in muted colors of dark red and dark green to the sounds of rooster crowing, birds chirping, and water running. *Dance with Third Grandmother* draws our attention to objects and sounds that paint a distinct picture of village life in Southwest China. All of these details make up a complex sensory and aesthetic environment that constitutes everyday lives of this particular space where the encounter between Wen and Su takes place. Rather than presenting a space empty of social signifiers, Wen Hui evokes what documentary filmmaker David MacDougall (2015) calls the "social aesthetics" of Su's village life.[84]

[84] According to MacDougall (2015), social aesthetics refer to "the distinctive configuration of sensory, social, and material elements" that produce any given experiential environment. These elements include a wide range of culturally patterned sensory experiences, from objects in the environment, its colors, patterns, sounds to embodied actions of people living in it.

Besides inheriting from approaches advocated through the New Documentary Movement within China, Wen is certainly influenced by Euro-American experimental dance films. Many of these works use montage editing as a means to reconstruct dance's relationship to time and space, which is exemplified in the way Wen approaches editing in *Dance with Third Grandmother*. Wen Hui was amongst early advocates for experimental dance film in China. At Caochangdi Workstation, a creative space gifted to both Wen and Wu,[85] Wen collaborated with prestigious international screendance festival, Cinédans Amsterdam, multiple times and presented experimental dance films by artists from the Netherlands and held dance film workshops during the Crossings Contemporary Dance Festivals organized by Wen and Wu between 2005 and 2010.[86] As I have elaborated in an earlier chapter, in the 2000s in China, experimental dance film as an artistic practice was still little known to contemporary dance artists and filmmakers. By then the Beijing Dance Academy had already started to teach courses

[85] Caochangdi Station is an artist workspace and living space collectively founded by Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang. Caochangdi is located at the outskirt of Beijing near the North 5th Ring Road (Zhuang 2014). The first round of the Folk Memory Project took place when Wu and Wen still had Caochangdi Workstation as their work and living space. In 2004, to support Wen and Wu's artmaking, two of Wen and Wu's friends rented out this space in a multi-building complex with multiple studio spaces in Caochangdi and let Wen and Wu use the space free of charge (Wen 2008). The annual rent at the time was approximately $250,000 Chinese Yuan (or $36,000). After having the space of their own, Wen and Wu was able to held various kinds of workshops, symposiums, seminars, and performances, and film screenings including the earliest dance film screenings in collaboration with internationally known dance film festival Cinédans Amsterdam (Wen Hui, interview with the author, June 17, 2018). It became an active space for local and international artistic exchange and for interdisciplinary artistic collaboration. Unfortunately, with the continuous urbanization process in Beijing that incorporated rural space into urban space, the rent of art studios in this area skyrocketed. By 2014, Wen and Wu had already lost their space at Caochangdi (Wen Hui, interview with the author, June 17, 2018).

[86] See Crossing Festival program brochures, 2005-2010. In an introduction to "Crossing: Dance Festival," in the 2006 festival brochure, it writes, "The name of this contemporary dance festival, 'Crossing,' encapsulates the crossing of life and performance, of reality and imagination, of different cultures, of dance, theater, film, technology, and different art mediums, and of course, we hope, the crossing of and interaction with many different audiences." Wen and Wu devoted to fostering interdisciplinary artistic experimentation and exchange through organizing this festival.

on dance and media experimentation but it was not a popular major. Most dance artists focused on creating live dance performance which was considered more prestigious and had more artistic currency. While Wen had not started to create dance film at the time, she participated in promoting this hybrid artistic genre in Beijing, Chongqing, Kunming and Shanghai, where the festival toured.[87] Thus, the emergence of dance documentary like *Dance with Third Grandmother* is not an isolated invention but embodies a cross-fertilization of various artistic practices. I will now turn to the dance film itself to illustrate how Wen's hybrid approach facilitates her investigation of the politics of memory.

An Exploration of Body, Memory, and Archive

My analysis of *Dance with Third Grandmother* centers on exploring the following two questions: How does Wen integrate her choreographic theorization of the body as a living archive in this film? And how does this type of documentary filmmaking contribute to her investigation of the process of remembering and forgetting? Accompanied by the sound of grunting pigs, *Dance with Third Grandmother* opens with a static shot of a courtyard. In front of a cement wall on the left side, eight water-filled buckets, in different sizes and shapes, lie on the floor. Under a window framed with a red wooden panel on the right side are: a metal make-shift stove with a kettle on top, a large metal bucket covered with a piece of pale-colored cloth, a pile of cut wood on top of some more buckets. As the pigs' grunting sound gradually comes to a stop, an elderly woman slowly walks through a narrow alley with her hands gripped together behind her back. We hear Wen's voice coming from behind the camera, asking: "Granny, should we

[87] See Crossing Festival program brochure, 2005-2010.

play above or below?" The elderly woman answers while pointing towards the camera, "Below."[88]

The opening scene vividly situates this film in an ordinary home in a rural village, but what appears out of ordinary is the word choice of "play" (wan, 玩) in Wen's off-screen voice. How would a middle-aged woman and an elderly woman "play" together? As the film unfolds, we realize that what Wen refers to as playing is the movement improvisation between Su and Wen when they sit on two small stools or stand up while connecting their limbs or torsos. Such a duet scene occurs five times throughout the film and lasts between a few seconds to a few minutes in length each time. Using the word "play" is intentional. It considers their moving together not as "dancing" (tiaowu, 跳舞) but as an act of sharing an intimate and playful moment of life.[89] Reframing "dancing" as "playing," Wen turns an unfamiliar idea of contemporary dance into a concept of playing that is familiar to Su. This shift in the notion of dance situates their moving together as a part of all the other activities Su performs each day that are documented on a digital camera, such as cutting vegetables, washing towels, cleaning a wok, caressing a hen, or dozing off while sitting. By doing so, Wen blurs the boundary between performance and everyday life, in which dance and life become symbiotic and indistinguishable.

Yet, *Dance with Third Grandmother* is much more than a documentation of Wen's brief encounter with Su. Its seemingly apolitical dance of everyday life is imbued with politics. The

[88] These are the original English subtitles of the film.

[89] Speaking about her own choreography in general, Wen states in a public talk that "What we are doing is to convert performing into doing, to do one task well, to change dancing into doing. That is very important." (我们其实是把演变成做，把这件事情做好了，把跳变成做，这是非常重要的.) Mu Yu in conversation with Wen Hui and Jin Xing, December 21, 2019.

opening scene mentioned above is immediately followed by an intertitle that frames the film as an interrogation of the politics of memory. The intertitle reads,

> Third Grandma is my father's aunt. Her name is Su Meiling. Until 2011, I didn't know that there was this 'third grandma' in my family. Even up to his death, my father never mentioned her. In the beginning of 2011, I returned to my native Yunnan Province to learn about my family's history. I met my third grandma for the first time. She was already 84 years old. It was like she has been sitting there on that mountain waiting for me to come. Waiting for fifty years. She recounted to me her precious collection of our family's history and stories.
>
> "To forget" and "to be forgotten." Why forget? Why forgotten? This is why I went searching for third grandma.

Written in first-person voice, this disembodied static text narrates Wen's delayed encounter with her great aunt. Su came from a landlord family that was persecuted and labeled a class enemy during Mao's era. Wen's father, a school teacher, never mentioned her name to Wen to avoid being associated with a "bad family background" (Reynaud 2015, 199). It was through her participation in the Folk Memory Project in 2011 that Wen Hui discovered Su's existence by returning to her father's hometown in Yunnan. Since Su was someone Wen's family intentionally erased in the family history for political reasons, the very act of documenting Su's everyday life constitutes a form of resistance to this willed amnesia of a family member prompted by class-based political oppression. The questions of "why forget" and "why forgotten" bestow her search for third grandmother social historical meanings. In *Dance with Third Grandmother*, instead of directly engaging with specific memories of the past, Wen interrogates the very process of remembering and forgetting. This broader social historical commentary on the politics of memory is achieved precisely by making the film personal and relatable.

The recurring scenes of Wen and Su dancing together render their bodies as interfaces of their past and present. To access Su's embodied memories, Wen situates her own body in time

and space to encounter Su and her life stories inscribed on her body. If the shots of Su's everyday physical labor represents Wen's visual encounter of Su through the camera, dancing with Su manifests their corporeal encounter. Through kinesthetic exchange, Wen and Su carry out a cross-generational dialogue by accessing each other's bodily histories and memories. A closer look at their duet scenes reveals that Wen does not initiate any movement but only reacts to Su's kinesthetic impulse through an attentive listening to her bodily motion. Wen and Su's duets are performed at a slow and meditative pace. Sitting next to Wen, Su grabs onto Wen's wrist, gently pulling or lifting one of Wen's arms over their heads or wrapping her arm around Su's torso (see Figures 7 and 8). Wen, first pausing and sensing for a brief moment, reacts to Su's body and slowly morphs her own body into a new position, which often ends up in an intimate embrace with Su followed by their laughter. In this duet, Su is the leader who initiates the movement, while Wen is the follower who resists her urge to move due to her dance training.[90] This subtlety in their intention of movement is vividly displayed in the frontal stationary shots that document their interaction. Their duets embody a physical enactment of a listening process, transmitting a specific way of knowing through physical expression. This physical form of listening and responding enabled through the sense of touch activates their kinesthetic empathy for each other's experiences.[91] This corporeal understanding of each other is open-ended and fluid, resisting any form of reduction.

[90] Mu Yu in conversation with Wen Hui and Jin Xing, December 21, 2019.

[91] Many dance scholars informed my thinking about kinesthetic empathy. For example, Deidre Sklar (1994) uses the term "kinesthetic empathy" to denote the ability for one to participate in another's movement and sensory experience. Susan Foster (2010) explores the shifting understanding of choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy historically from 1700 to the present time. She conceives the notion of empathy a productive term to theorize "the potential of one body's kinesthetic organization to infer the experience of the other" (Foster 2010, 175). Foster argues that empathy is understood differently across time and is shaped by and reflects shifting structures of power. The edited volume *Touching and Being Touched: Kinesthesia and Empathy in Dance and Movement* (2003) further illuminates kinesthesia

Figure 7. Film still from *Dance with Third Grandmother* (director: Wen Hui). With permission from Wen Hui.


Figure 8. Film still from *Dance with Third Grandmother* (director: Wen Hui). With permission from Wen Hui.

and empathy as two key concepts for understanding different ways of and relations conveyed through touching and being touched in dance.

Moreover, brief conversations between Wen and Su during their kinesthetic exchange further highlight that the act of remembering takes place on the level of the corporeal. As Wen and Su dance together, they also carry out conversations in their local dialect. Wen asks, "Where are you?" Su answers, "I'm here." Wen asks, "Do you see me?" Su states, "I see you. Can you see me?" Wen responds, "Yes. I see you." Variations of dialogues as such take place in each duet scene. In all of these scenes, when Su or Wen answers, "I see you," they are actually not directly gazing at each other. Sometimes, Wen's eyes are actually completely covered by Su's hands, making it impossible for her to see Su (see Figure 9). It is in these moments of contradictions between seeing and not seeing that the sense of touch becomes the sense of vision. To see and to be seen correspond to the phrases "to forget" and "to be forgotten" that Wen wrote in the intertitle at the beginning of the film. Both indicate a subject position that performs the seeing and forgetting and a passive object position that is either seen or forgotten. They point to an imbalance of a power dynamic. Through corporeal exchange, Wen and Su construct an intersubjective relationship in which to touch is also to be touched. Writing about politics of touch through Argentine tango, dance scholar Erin Manning states, "touch is not simply the laying of hands. Touch is the act of reaching towards, of creating space-time through the worlding that occurs when bodies move" (2009, xiv). The mutual and non-hierarchical interaction of reaching towards each other cultivates space of in-betweenness and intersects two worlds of experiences. In other words, touching is worldmaking. In Wen and Su's gestural exchange—Su gently covering Wen's eyes, caressing Wen's arm, Wen and Su rubbing or patting on each other's back—it is through touch new shared memories are created, and embodied memories are transmitted.

Figure 9. Film still from *Dance with Third Grandmother* (director: Wen Hui). With permission from Wen Hui.

The corporeal exchange between Wen and Su on screen, documented through a portable digital camera and edited through a choreographic logic, became traces or remains of their original performance. While the documentary provides an audio-visual inscription of their encounter, this form of archive is inherently partial. The framing of the camera and the editing process constantly point to the selectiveness and partiality of recorded memories. In other words, the process of documentary filmmaking becomes a practice of reminiscence in relation to body, memory, disappearance, and forgetfulness. For instance, in Wen and Su's duet scene recorded by a camera fixed at the same position, a jump cut often disrupts the continuity of their movement. Jump cut is an editing technique that compresses a continuous take by removing a number of frames of the same take (Wang 2014). Cuts as such work to condense the film time while making visible the passage of time in the profilmic space. The choice of jump cut makes legible an intentional erasure of a part of their original performance in front of the camera, pointing to a space of loss, in-betweenness, disappearance and absence. While these long takes evoke the

aesthetic of on the spot realism that I elaborated earlier, the jump cuts also imply a deliberate construction of reality by selecting specific parts of their interaction taking place in the long take.

Wen's editing choices suggest that Wen is particularly drawn to moments of her interaction with Su that consistently embody the process of active listening through the body. These choices also reflect her choreographic vision in which dance is not seen as a performance for the camera but an enactment of everyday actions. To make dance appear less like a performance but a "playful" activity between Wen and Su, Wen draws our attention to the moments of their interaction when they transition out of or suddenly disrupt their continuous bodily motion. These moments of "not dancing" take place when Wen asks Su if she is tired, when Su wonders if Wen would get itchy from the millets on the ground, and when they laugh out loud from joy while reaching out towards each other for an embrace. It is in this deliberate inclusion of these moments of interactions that Wen choreographs on screen what she calls "dance of life" (shenghuo wudao 生活舞蹈). Here, we see again how Wen's choreographic strategies and techniques of documentary filmmaking intersect to result in a hybrid practice that blurs the boundaries between art and everyday life.

In addition, the intentional selection of what to archive is driven by Wen's feminist politics. Out of all the activities that Su performs each day, Wen puts a strong focus on Su's domestic labor. This choice of underscoring female labor reflects her feminist position carried out throughout her independent works. Wen traces her emergence of feminist consciousness to her first piece created for the Living Dance Studio, entitled *100 Verbs* (1994) (Mu 2019). This one-hour dance theater production is based entirely on one hundred actions that she and her collaborators identified from everyday gestures, such as hanging linens, taking off clothes, wiping glasses, pulling water into wooden buckets. Discussing this piece at a public talk at

Shanghai Theater in 2019, Wen spoke about a sense of urge for female liberation she experienced at the time, which led her to include a lot of movement of women performing domestic labor (Wen Hui, interview with the author, June 17, 2018). This intentional choice to expose female domestic labor is consistent with one understanding of Chinese feminism in the new era after 1978. This understanding of feminist movement responds to state-led socialist feminism during the Mao era that constructed female subjects based on the prototype of their male counterparts, thus masculinizing females (Yu 2015).[92] This new phase of Chinese feminist movement during the economic reform advocates for a "return to female identity" or feminine quality (Zhong 2006, 637), leading to the emergence of a new translation for feminism in China, *nüxingzhuyi* (women's gender-ism/feminine-ism) (Yu 2015).[93] The filming and editing of *Dance with Third Grandmother* reflects Wen's continuation in not only presenting female experiences from a woman's perspective but also constructing female subjectivities through her works. However, it is important to note that Wen's choice to represent a rural woman's domestic labor also deviates significantly from Chinese state feminism in a capitalist China. According to Chinese feminist scholar Wang Zheng (2017), the reform-era Chinese feminism radically transformed from socialist state feminism into a market-oriented one that aligns with the values

[92] It is important to note that the construction of masculinized image female subjects does not represent the Chinese socialist state feminism in the entire Mao era. Chinese feminist historian Wang Zheng's recent book *Finding Women in the State* (2017) provides a nuanced accounts of how socialist feminists adopted various strategies and tactics to maneuver within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s patriarchal system and volatile political environment in order to advance their fight towards gender equality and women's liberation between 1949 and 1964.

[93] The translation of feminism, *nüxingzhuyi*, emerged during this phase, in the 1990s, to highlight feminine quality. This translation denotes Chinese women's movement through a softer and less aggressive tone than an earlier translation *nüquanzhuyi* (Yu 2015). *Nüquanzhuyi*, a term adopted from the Japanese translation of feminism during the May Fourth Movement, emphasizes the fight for women's rights (Yu 2015) This first phase of feminism in China intertwines with anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolutions.

of privatization, marketization and consumerism. Using recent issues of *Women of China*, an official publication of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) since 1949, as salient examples, Wang demonstrates how the new form of state feminism systematically excludes visual representation of "[r]ural peasants, urban migrants, laid-off workers, and anyone whose life story might disrupt the myth of a classless modernity" (252) to tailor to middle-class and high-income urban women. Thus, Wen's ongoing artistic effort in representing marginalized people and accounting their stories indicates an inheritance of socialist state feminists' efforts in empowering laboring women, based on Wang Zheng's framework. While Wen asks us to reflect upon the politics of memory through her film, I suggest that Wen's own politics, especially the rise of her feminist consciousness, determines her own process of remembering and forgetting in her creative practice, which I will elaborate further in the next section.

A Rise of Feminist Consciousness

In Chinese contemporary dance, feminist dance has not been formally defined or extensively explored. A rising number of female choreographers created dances that construct female characters and enact their physiological and psychological experiences. For instance, Wang Mei's *Thunderstorm and Rain* (*Leiheyu* 雷和雨), Wang Yabin's *Blue Clothes* (*Qingyi* 青衣), Shu Qiao's *Mrs Xianglin* (*Xianglinsao* 祥林嫂), Wang Yuanyuan's *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅) re-interpret and re-construct historical and fictional female characters from a female perspective. Some other works such as Jin Xing's *Four Happiness* (*Sixi* 四喜) and Wang Mei's *The Goddess of the River Luo* (*Luoshenfu* 洛神赋) expose patriarchal oppression and challenge conventional notions of femininity. Because these portrayals of female experiences take part in large narratives that are not female specific, these works are often conceived as

"colored with feminism" rather than being directly constructed as a feminist dance (Zhou 2017). My exploration of feminism embodied in Wen's work focuses on its relationship to evoking memories through dance on screen.

Dance with Third Grandmother highlights the idea that to remember and to forget are both selective and deliberate processes infused with politics. A deeper examination of how this film is situated within Wen's larger body of work and personal life will further elucidate the never neutral process of archiving memories. Wen's dance theater works and films have consistently expressed her political position that advocates for marginalized voices. As a female artist, Wen has always been particularly interested in women's experiences. Her dance theater and film works, by featuring personal stories of female subjects, fill the gaps of a predominantly male historiography. These narratives enacted through both bodily and verbal accounts share experiences of, for instance, giving birth in *Report of Giving Birth* (2002), being sick in *Report of 37.8 Degree* (2005), and performing in revolutionary ballet operas during the Cultural Revolution in *Red* (2015). In *Dance with Third Grandmother*, however, Wen's feminist critique shines through more overtly in the film's incorporation of images that explicitly invoke the violence of patriarchal oppression.[94]

If the movement scenes throughout this film prioritize personal encounters between Wen and Su in the familial space, a montage scene situated towards the end of the film highlights Su

[94] I do not mean that Wen's previous dance theater productions and film work lack a social critique of patriarchy. Wen's earlier work does offer such critique, though perhaps less explicitly. For instance, in *Report on Giving Birth*, Wu Wenguang holds a camera to voyeuristically film female bodies on stage. These images are projected live on screen during the performance. Scenes as such poignantly comment on the male gaze that objectifies female bodies. In addition, many narratives told by female performers in Wen's works expose the absence of husband, the endless domestic labor, and the gendered social roles in which females partake. However, compared to this film, the feminist critique appears more implicit and less direct.

as a social subject whose lived experiences are shaped by patriarchal rules. The scene starts with Su opening a pig crate, letting out all the pigs that rush towards their meal. It cuts to a close up shot of Su opening her mouth as if she is screaming. However, instead of hearing Su's own voice, we hear a high-pitched sound of a pig screaming in agony. We then see a close-up shot of a foot in a black boot violently pressing down on the head of a pig. The scene cuts back and forth between Su's widely open mouth, the pig in agony underneath the boot, and the flock of pigs looking out from their crate in distress. By juxtaposing the experience of the agonized pig with Su's facial expression, Wen metaphorically associates Su's life experiences under the patriarchal society with the desperate pig stepped upon by a man and the distressed ones inside the crate, deprived of any agency. Though we only see a close-up of the booted foot on screen, its size and shape shows that it unmistakably belongs to a man. Without showing the man's face but only the black leather shoe, this male figure stands in for the patriarchal order of the Chinese society. In *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories* (2011), Su's personal narrative reveals many helpless moments of her life. She witnessed her grandmother being tortured during the Land Reform period due to her family's background as landlord; she also endured the pain of experiencing her own mother committing suicide unable to withstand societal humiliation. Yet, the same person who had to silently withstand gender- and class-based social oppression as a female born into a landlord family was also the one who divorced her husband the moment when divorce was allowed under communist rule.[95] These cries of agony contrasts sharply with Su's bright laughter that repetitively occurs throughout the film, altogether depicting a strong and resilient female character. Through this contrast, Wen demonstrates that the body is simultaneously the victim of violence and a necessary vehicle for healing and salvation.

[95] Su provides such personal account in *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories* (2011).

Situated in her entire body of work, the overt feminist critique of patriarchal domination as presented in *Dance with Third Grandmother* marks the beginning of a new stage of Wen's works in which she is willing to render legible her feminist position. What triggered this shift in Wen's feminist consciousness as conveyed in her work? As a choreographer who creates dance and film based on lived experiences, her own life encounters have also been a major source of influence. It is important to note that when Wen created *Dance with Third Grandmother* between 2012 and 2015, she was no longer involved with the Folk Memory Project (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 28, 2019). By then, Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang, after thirty-three years of partnership, had chosen to walk on separate paths. Wu continued to pursue the Folk Memory Project while Wen decided to focus on her own dance making. Unlike her first film, which is explicitly credited as taking part in the Memory Project, Wen considers that *Dance with Third Grandmother* is made "in association" with the project. By using the term "in association," Wen simply acknowledges that the subject matter of the film, Su Meiling, was someone Wen discovered during her work with the Folk Memory Project, but the production of this second film is a fully independent work by Wen Hui. This distinction is a critical one because it explicates both a continuation and intentional departure in aesthetics and formal approaches from works belonging to the Folk Memory Project. For instance, in this film, by further privileging corporeal performance, Wen's voice as a choreographer is heightened in comparison with her first film which foregrounds oral history interviews, a methodology employed in the majority of films coming out of the Memory Project. While the filming process adopts many techniques shared by other documentaries in the project, the editing process in this film resembles more of a choreographic assembly of raw movement materials in the form of footage. Through making

Dance with Third Grandmother outside the rubric of the Memory Project, Wen's own voice as a filmmaker with a background as a choreographer becomes much more pronounced.

The rise of feminist consciousness as reflected in her film derives from a gradual recognition of her own complacency in perpetuating patriarchal norms in her past. Recalling her previous collaboration with Wu, Wen mentioned that Wu always put his name up front in the credits as director and concept generator even when his actual contribution would be more like a dramaturg (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 28, 2019). While Wen always stayed in the rehearsal room working with dancers, Wu would only drop into the studio from time to time to give some feedback or offer some suggestions (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 28, 2019). However, when asked to write about their works or give a talk or interview, Wen always let Wu take the role of the writer and spokesman as she perceived that Wu was an articulate writer and eloquent speaker, whereas Wen focused on rehearsals and other logistics of production. The disparity displayed in the way Wen's works are credited and presented demonstrates unequal values assigned to gendered labor. These text-based archives also shifted the narrative of the history, making the male figure appear more prominent than his actual contributions bear out.

The gendered erasure of memory intensifies after Wen and Wu's separation. Wu Wenguang continued to travel internationally to engage in conversations about the Folk Memory Project, but Wen Hui's name has since been rarely mentioned even though she was the co-founder and had contributed significantly to both theater and film components of the project. I have personally witnessed this deliberate erasure of Wen's existence from this project during Wu's visit to UCLA in November 2019. When asked what spurred Wu's interest in incorporating performances in documentaries, Wu traced back to his encounter with a local opera

practice in the 1990s in Beijing. Never did he mention Wen's name or how their over thirty years of collaboration were instrumental in the hybrid practice that integrates performance in documentary as seen in both Wu's practices and his students'. When showing the audience photos of rehearsals for a performance at Caochangdi Workstation in which Wen was also present, Wu did not acknowledge her presence and presented the performance component of the project as if he were the sole orchestrator for a collaborative process.[96] Through his verbal and text-based process of archiving and re-enacting the history of the Folk Memory Project, Wu participates in the erasure and rewriting of the history of Chinese independent documentaries. In this way, Wen Hui's own life, experiencing an individual erasure, differs from but resonates with the experience of being forgotten facilitated by the politics of the Chinese state as her third grandmother, Su Meiling.

The uneven social recognition between Wen and Wu is not unique amongst artist couples in China. For instance, during the 1989 China Avant-garde Exhibition, female performance artist Xiao Lu discharged a gunshot as part of her work *Dialogue*, resulting in an immediate shut down of the exhibition at the National Museum of China. Tang Song, a male artist on scene who later became Xiao's life partner for many years, was mistakenly detained first as a co-conspirator but ever since has shared the credit for this historically significant performance art piece solely devised by Xiao.[97] Only recently, Xiao, after leaving Tang, started to claim her history but

[96] Similarly, in an interview between Michael Berry and Wu Wenguang about the Folk Memory Project published in *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China* (2016), Wu often used the term "we" instead of "I," when implying certain performance project came from a collaborative effort. Yet he never mentioned Wen Hui's name in the interview.

[97] Tang not only shares credit with Xiao, his name is often listed before Xiao, for example, in Thomas J. Berghuis's book *Performance Art in China* (2006). In Minglu Gao's book *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (2011), Gao mentioned about receiving two letters from Xiao Lu in 2004 privately declaring her solo authorship of *Dialogue* after staying silent for 15 years

received controversial responses. Wang Yanan, a dancer and theater performer with whom Wen worked closely, encountered a similar fate as Wen in her partnership with Tian Gebing. A pioneer of independent Chinese theater and founder of Paper Tiger Theater Studio, Tian is often credited as the solo director who devised the concept of the performance. Even in works that Wang choreographed, she was only credited as a performer or dancer in the piece.[98] Writing about first-person filmmaking practice, in which the filmmaker explores lived experiences from a first person perspective, Alisa Lebow contends that the "I" is always social, plural and in relation. She states that the first person singular "I" "is always in effect, the first person 'plural' we" (2012, 3). Consistently, the failure to remember that Wen defies in the film is not unique to Su's experience. It is reflected in Wen's own experience as well as many other female artists. Dancing with third grandmother embodies more than Wen's commemoration of Su in action. It gestures an invitation to an active process of remembering that counters any gendered, class-based, or economics-based erasure of history.

The most recent exhibition of *Dance with Third Grandmother* took place at Inside-Out Art Museum (Zhongjian Meishuguan) in Beijing in the fall of 2019. The film was part of a solo show that retrospectively examines Wen's last twenty-five years of dance career since the beginning of her independent dance career in 1994. *Dance with Third Grandmother* was centrally displayed on a white wall of a corridor that participates in constructing an archive of Wen's career as a choreographer. The exhibition was a collaborative effort between Wen Hui

(161). In my conversation with Wen, she mentioned to me Xiao's experience of remaining silent and felt a need to claim her own authorship in her works in collaboration with Wu.

[98] The information was first obtained from my conversation with Wen Hui on August 29, 2019. Checking the performance credits for different productions listed on Paper Tiger Studio's website also demonstrates that Tian's name is always listed under "director and concept," and Wang is always listed under "dancers."

and curator Su Wei. Wen decided not to emphasize Wu Wenguang's contribution through any additional text, except for when his name showed up on screen or in performance programs in the credits section, or in press articles. Instead, she focused on displaying her own work and documentation of her choreographic process. By doing so, Wen was reclaiming her own history as an independent artist. During my visit to the exhibition, Wen shared with me with a sense of excitement that she decided to openly call herself a feminist, whereas in the past she did not feel comfortable to do so as feminism had a negative connotation in China. Looking forward, she hoped to make works that would exemplify feminist themes (Wen Hui, interview with the author, August 29, 2019). *Dance with Third Grandmother* marks a turning point in her career. It is simultaneously a process that embodies third grandmother's memories and Wen's own. Situating *Dance with Third Grandmother* in Wen's personal journey and her body of works testifies to the gendered politics in archiving memories.

Conclusion

In sum, *Dance with Third Grandmother* integrates Wen's investigation of the body as a living archive and independent documentary practice as an act of archiving of individual and social memories to challenge, rewrite, and fill the gap of official and mainstream historiography. In this film, Wen deters from her common practice both in her dance theater works and in her previous film, which combines physical enactment of memories with verbal accounts of personal narratives. Instead, Wen investigates a broad question of what led to forgetting and being forgotten by prioritizing physicality and performance. Through Wen and her third grandmother's gestural and kinesthetic exchange, the body becomes an interface for accessing each other's histories and memories that are inscribed on the body. Their corporeal performance enacts the

very process of remembering as a political action to resist the system of power that results in the forgetting in the first place. Connecting Wen's film in her personal encounter sheds light on the never-neutral process of remembering and forgetting, which is imbricated with politics and hierarchies of power.

Situating *Dance with Third Grandmother* in the scope of this dissertation project, I highlight its distinct approach to dance filmmaking that stands out from the dominant mode of experimental dance film production in the PRC. The majority of works feature professional dancers; the dance in these films is mostly pre-choreographed but occasionally also improvised on spot; the production is often pre-planned with a specific end product in mind; music and sound effects are often incorporated to construct specific mood or ambience. *Dance with Third Grandmother*, in contrast, results from an exploratory and open-ended collaborative process that resembles ethnographic fieldwork. First, Wen immersed herself in Su's life for two weeks to get to know Su. The filming was not imposed on Su but became part of her life. Dancing was also not forced on Su's body but cultivated through a shared experience of "play" between Wen and Su. Rather than being a one-time event of filming that is product-oriented and goal-driven, both filming and dancing became new parts of Su's life during Wen's stay. This participatory mode of filmmaking, as Bill Nichols (2010) articulates, emphasizes the direct interaction between the filmmaker and the film subjects that co-produce what becomes the film. Second, Wen does not treat dancing as a performance for the camera but sees rhythmic movement in everyday actions. The choreography takes place in the editing process in which raw footage of movement materials is assembled based on specific logic. Moreover, consistent with the approach of low budget independent documentary production, Wen used natural light, an inexpensive portable digital camera, and synch sound directly recorded through the camera. The medium of production fits

the context of production. This approach defies the pursuit for high production value and commercial appeal trending in experimental dance film, in which each image on screen becomes a site of desire and attraction. Therefore, as an independent dance film, *Dance with Third Grandmother* offers an alternative methodology to approaching dance filmmaking and conceives dance film as a site of historiography.

Nevertheless, in spite of its significance, *Dance with Third Grandmother* is not mentioned in a recent article published on *Literary Gazette* (Zhongguo wenyi bao 中国文艺报) that attempts to sum up the seventy years of dance and moving image making in the PRC since 1949 by prominent screendance scholar Liu Chun (2019). This omission is surprising given the fact that Wen is an important contemporary artist who has dedicated most of her independent dance career to explore the intersection of documentary and dance whether through dance theater productions or on film. *Dance with Third Grandmother* is also amongst a small number of experimental dance films that circulated both internationally and domestically in well reputed venues. In the article, as a professor at the Chinese National Academy of Arts (Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan 中国艺术研究院) and an active member of the Chinese Dancers Association, Liu puts a strong focus on dance and moving image productions either sponsored by the state or affiliated with a state institution. In archiving the history of dance and moving image in China, Liu neglects many independent dance film productions that embrace different aesthetics and feature marginalized voices.

Dance with Third Grandmother takes part in a rising number of independent films that integrates dance performance and documentary filmmaking. For instance, theater artist Li Ning has made a number of films that situate performance in public space. For instance, his feature-length documentary *Tape* (2010) intertwines his struggle with establishing his performance

troupe and his shifting family life before, during and after the 2008 Olympic Games. As China anticipated hosting Olympic Games, rapid urbanization process took place in the city of Jinan, resulting in mass construction and forced relocation of urban residents. In this film, Li inserts unusual performances of various forms of bodies on trash piles and in demolished residential buildings to provoke viewers to ponder how a rapid process of urban renewal also performs alienation on the very people who live there. Cao Fei's *Whose Utopia* (2006, 20 min) depicts the lives and dreams of migrant workers at Osram factory through a close observation of the production process within the factory. The film juxtaposes the workers' performance of manual labor along the assembly line with five workers' dance and music performances. The insertion of dance in this film constructs a fairytale-like fantasy that contrasts against normative everyday activities taking place in the factory space. Artist couple Xiaoke and Zihan's *Dance Republic* features mid-aged or elderly women dancing in public space. Similar to the way Wen utilized the footage for *Dance with Third Grandmother*, Xiaoke and Zihan also recycles the footage for *Dance Republic* and incorporates it in a dance theater performance version of the same title. The documentary is simultaneously a document to be recycled and re-signified in a new performance context. While these films employ dramatically different approaches in incorporating dance performances, they share in common that the bodies on screen challenge the conventional rules of the space and contest the systemization of official history.

To end this chapter, I want to reassert the repetitive verbal exchange between Wen and Su when Su covered Wen's eyes with her hands. "Do you see me?" Su asks. "I see you," Wen answers. To remember or to forget is often a matter of willingness and imagination. As I am writing the last words of this chapter, I realize how much time I have spent on selecting what to include or exclude from Wen's life encounters and from the film text. As I attempt to bring out

new understanding of Wen's work and her contribution, I also participate in the process of remembering and forgetting in order to put forward my own claims. Yet, it is only through the never-ceasing effort to question the politics of memory can we uncover more missing pieces from the mosaic of history.

Chapter Three
Searching for Home in the "Periphery": Experimental Dance Shorts with Locally Specific Aesthetics

Introduction

This chapter focuses on two experimental dance shorts that circulated widely in the international screendance festival circuit: *This Is A Chicken Coop* (这是一个鸡笼 2016) by independent choreographer-director Ergao (二高, original name: He Qiwo 何其沃, born in 1985) and *Gatha* (颂 2018) by choreographer-director Tang Chenglong (汤成龙, born in 1982). Both dance films have garnered significant international attention and received prestigious awards.[99] *This Is A Chicken Coop* takes place in an ancient village near Guangdong in the southeastern corner of China. The film juxtaposes surrealistic images of naked bodies of men and women sculpturally integrating with landscapes and architectures in an ancient village with documentary-like footage that provides a taste of mundane life in the village. *Gatha,* on the other hand*,* narrates through movement two Buddhist brothers' painstaking pilgrimage through Tibet.

While their award-winning status first brought these two works to my attention, both dance films stood out to me also because of their intentional engagement with locally-specific visual elements, histories, cultural artifacts and cultural practices that informed their cinematic and choreographic strategies. These tactics are not the most common dance filmmaking practices

[99] After its premiere at Jumping Frames International Dance Video Festival in Hong Kong, *This Is A Chicken Coop* was subsequently presented at a number of prestigious international dance film festivals including the POOL International Tanz Film Festival in Germany, the Rollout Dance Film Festival in Macau as the Grand Jury Award winner, CINE CORP Dance Film Festival in France, and Light Moves Festival of Screendance in Ireland, to name a few. Similarly, *Gatha* received the Best Short Dance Film award at San Francisco Dance Film Festival and the Audience Choice Award from Jumping Frames. The film was also screened at a number of highly reputed international screendance festivals including the IMZ Music and Media Festival in Austria and Cinedans in Amsterdam, making *Gatha* one of the most recognized dance films by a Chinese choreographer in the global screendance scene up to date.

in the context of mainland China. As experimental dance filmmaking have become increasingly popular in the most recent decade, I have observed that only a small number of recent experimental dance films evoke Chinese dance forms or are marked with identifiably Chinese visual expressions. The majority of works employ modern and postmodern dance and perform in sites that also appear culturally unmarked (e.g., studio space, empty road, abandoned buildings). The aesthetic inclination departs from dance onscreen experiments in the 1990s and 2000s initiated by Bai Zhiqun through the space of Chinese national television, in which the focus was on presenting Chinese dance forms and cultural themes to the mass audience. My observation resonates with that of Liu Chun (刘春), prominent screendance scholar and artist whom I discussed in Chapter One. In his recent article published in *China Art Gazette* (Zhongguo yishubao 中国艺术报), which sums up the seventy-year history of screendance in China, Liu Chun points out that post-2000 dance films reveal "a rise in individual consciousness (个体意识觉醒)" (2019, trans. author). These works "foreground individual memories, emotions and experiences" (trans. author) and tend to utilize modern dance rather than Chinese folk or classical dance. Using Ergao and Tang's dance films as case studies, this chapter extends Liu's statement by arguing that exploring individual experiences through experimental dance film can also take place through engaging with locally specific aesthetics and cultural practices.

In this chapter, I analyze Ergao and Tang's creative decisions to turn towards sites and experiences outside the urban center—an ancient Cantonese village and Tibet—as spatial, temporal, and spiritual manifestation of the sentiment of nostalgia. The term "nostalgia," originally associated with a pathological condition in the seventeenth century, was later commonly understood as individuals' feeling of "homesickness" (Wilson 2005). Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2001, xiii).

Yet she also asserts that home can be understood in multifarious ways, which broadens the possibilities for interpreting nostalgia in relation to Ergao and Tang's dance films. If nostalgia for "home" in Ergao's case is a longing for a different time and place, then for Tang, it could be understood as a spiritual longing.

The desire to search for home is not solely a modern phenomenon but what Svetlana Boym calls "a symptom of our age, a historical emotion" (2001, xvi). In other words, nostalgia becomes even more prominently felt when drastic societal changes have rapidly altered the material, cultural, and spiritual topographies of life. As a historical emotion running through Chinese cultural production, nostalgia appears in a rich reservoir of literary and cinematic texts that cast a nostalgic eye toward native soil and pastoral landscapes as a response to social changes and an underlying sense of rootlessness. These cultural texts range from the "native soil" (xiangtu 乡土) literature that emerged during the May Fourth Movement to Mao-era Yangge theater, Chinese folk dance, and rural paintings, and to the root-seeking (*xungen* 寻根) literature movement in post-Mao China in the 1980s and fifth generation filmmakers' films in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on various disciplines and traditions, these artists grounded their cultural creativity in the soil—far away from urban spaces. In these works, the soil—which emits a home-like "structure of feeling," to borrow Raymond Williams' (1977, 132) words— is both a metaphor for the past and a site of imagination where active cultural reinvention can take place.

In her book *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*, cultural critic Rey Chow identifies the prevalence of nostalgia in contemporary Chinese cinema, manifesting in different forms, whether it is "the sentiment of homesickness," "a tendency to reminisce about old times," a romanticization of an irretrievable past, or "a fantasized state of oneness" (2007, 49). As diverse as its forms are, the object of nostalgia, in Chow's view, "is, arguably, often in

the form of a concrete place, time, and event" (52). Rural life and "remote geographic areas beyond Han Chinese boundaries" are often employed as sites of nostalgia where cultural self-reflection takes place, particularly in films by the fifth-generation Chinese directors from the 1980s and 1990s.

Analyzing Ergao and Tang's dance films, I argue that the ancient Cantonese village and Tibet, respectively, become the sites of nostalgia through which the filmmakers reflect upon their social and cultural experiences in twenty-first-century neoliberal China and, even more specifically, in China's urban centers. Their films also effectively mobilize corporeal construction—that is, the placement, manipulation, and choreography of bodies in the filmic space—as an alternative mode of cultural reflection on the changes wrought by modernity. Even as their films offer critiques of capitalism and modernity in postsocialist China, Ergao and Tang invoke nostalgia on screen in heterogeneous, complex, and sometimes uneven ways. As experimental as they are in terms of unsettling time, space, and corporeal construction, Ergao and Tang's films are also mediated by various contradictions that further reflect their own urban experiences.

In my analysis of Ergao and Tang's use of space, time, and bodies, I foreground the interplay of temporality and corporality in articulating nostalgia. Exploring the interplay of technology and temporality in Chinese cinema, Sean Metzger and Olivia Khoo (2009) propose five dimensions of temporality that serve as productive analytic frameworks for understanding Chinese modernity. These categories include (1) the diegesis (e.g., the narrative progression of the film; sound and music taking place in the filmic space); (2) the extradiegetic (e.g., the sound and music that does not come directly from the filmic space and is added in post-production); (3) the audience's experience of time in viewing a film; (4) the temporal progression of the

cinematic apparatus itself (e.g., frame rate, shot length); and (5) periodization, which denotes retroactive periodizing labels that help frame audience perception of a work (16-17). My analysis examines many of these categories to explore how, in constructing these various dimensions of time, Ergao and Tang make particular choreographic and cinematic decisions that respond to, critique, and attempt to re-narrate their personal experiences in urban China. I also emphasize the experience of time as embodied by the performers in the diegetic dimension to reveal the kinds of bodies constructed on screen, as well to track how time and space are enacted and unsettled through corporeal performance.

The last part of the chapter takes a turn from discussing the production to the circulation of dance films to deliver an open-ended interrogation of the global reception of experimental dance films by Chinese artists. Both dance films present alternative visualities about China that are situated in the peripheries of mainland Chinese cultural imaginary: Ergao's work takes place at a Cantonese village, and Tang's work, in the Tibetan mountains. Yet they are also visuals rather familiar to Western audiences, which make them legible in the global film festival scene. This discussion sheds light on how imaginings of China are translated to a global audience through the international film festival circuit, a space that uses countries of production as markers for diversity and scale. Furthermore, I point to filmmakers' keen awareness of the impact of global reception on the domestic reception of their work in China to illustrate that domestic and global receptions of Chinese dance films do not exist in isolation but rather in relation to each other.

Sources of Nostalgia: Shared Experience of the Post-1980s Generation

My reading of Ergao and Tang's dance films through the lens of nostalgia first requires a contextual understanding of some of their shared lived experiences. Generational labels have served as a useful periodizing tool for grouping and categorizing works of art and their creators. Such an approach is informed by the understanding that particular social and political conditions across a period of time give rise to specific artistic forms and aesthetics that make up some shared characteristics in works of art created by the defined generation.[100] I consider Ergao and Tang's dance films part of the productions by a group urban choreographers from the post-1980s generation. Though their lived experiences are not uniform, their distinct encounters fully taking place in a post-Mao China inform their dance productions in ways that differ from the generations of choreographers that come before them. Many of their works intertwine with and speak to their experiences of urban life, whether or not directly invoking visuals that stand in for city life or embody city dwellers.

Ergao and Tang Chenglong share much in common in their upbringing. Ergao was born in Yangjiang (阳江), a small city near Guangzhou in 1985, and Tang was born in 1982 in Changsha, the capital city of Hunan Province. Their lives have taken place in a post-Mao China that has witnessed a consistent and rapid socio-economic transformation. Like many other young

[100] The use of these labels are particularly common in film studies, literary studies and visual art. For instance, with regard to scholarship on Chinese films, labels such as "fourth generation," "fifth generation" and "sixth generation" of Chinese filmmakers are amongst the most frequently deployed terms. In addition, Chinese film scholar Qi Wang (2014) adopts the term "forsaken generation" to refer to Chinese filmmakers born between 1960 and 1970 whose peculiar interest in self-inscription through filmmaking is reflective of their generational experience of "interrupted historicity" as a socialist China transitioned to embrace capitalism, commercialism and globalization. Zhang Zhen (2007) uses the term "urban generation" to denote Chinese cinema that emerged against the backdrop of China's unprecedented large-scale urbanization and globalization at the turn of the twenty-first century. These works are characterized by the ubiquity of visuals that present a Chinese urban space under demolition and reconstruction and often point the camera at marginal populations in urban space.

people from their generation, Ergao and Tang grew up in urban China witnessing skyscrapers devouring pastoral lands, watching in real time how transnational and global cultures infiltrated, shifted, and re-fabricated local cultures, seeing streets once crowded with bicycles become packed with cars, and watching migratory flows of people from rural areas and small towns altering the demographics of cities—until one day they also joined the crowds of migrants to other cities. Buzzwords that have emerged in their lifetime capture the reality of an increasingly capitalistic, global, and commercial life. These words include *zhuanxing* (转型 transformation), *gaizhi* (改制 structural reform), *xiagang* (下岗 layoff), *chuangye* (创业 entrepreneurship), *chuguo* (出国 go abroad), *haigui* (海归或海龟 returnees from abroad, also referred to as sea turtles), *oumeifeng* (欧美风 Euro-American fashion trend), *rihanfeng* (日韩风 Japanese and Korean fashion trend), to name only a few. As the years have passed, the speed of change never slowed down but has only further accelerated. For Ergao, Tang, and others in their generation, instability profoundly characterizes their everyday experiences.

Ergao's choreographic identity is largely influenced by his own migratory experience. Born in 1985, Ergao grew up in Yangjiang (阳江), a small city near Guangzhou (Ergao, interview with the author, November 26, 2019). At age fourteen, he moved to Guangzhou to study Chinese dance at the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Academy. Upon graduation, he received modern dance training through a co-sponsored college program by the Guangdong Modern Dance Company and the Guangdong Dance Academy. Two years later, Ergao left Guangdong for another familiar yet foreign metropolis, Hong Kong, to continue studying modern dance at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. It is in this program where Ergao realized that he wanted to pursue a career as an independent choreographer. After completing the program in 2007, Ergao decided to return to Guangdong to establish his own

dance company, Ergao Dance Production Group (二高表演), dedicated to the creation of live dance performances and later also of dance films.[101]

Childhood memories and migratory experiences have deeply informed Ergao's dance works. In a public talk titled "My Identity, My Homesickness and My Choreographic Works" ("Shenfen rentong, xiangchou, he wudao" 身份认同,乡愁,和舞蹈) through TED x Xiguan in 2019, Ergao recounts stories from his upbringing: his photography project dressing like twins with his father in the suburb of Yangjiang, his first time eating a hamburger from McDonald's and bringing home two hundred yuan worth of hamburger and French fries from Guangdong all the way to Yangjiang through a seven-hour bus ride, his dance experience in Hong Kong, and the complex emotions he experienced seeing his mother working as a working class employee at a McDonald's in Hong Kong years later. In this performance lecture, a blue and red-striped plastic fabric often seen at urban construction sites covers the stool where he sits on stage and drapes down across the floor, signifying how urban renewals have been a constant backdrop in his life and in his work. As he shifts to discuss his dance experience, he grabs one end of the fabric, waving it forward and backward in the air as if performing a Chinese classical long sleeve dance. Such performance implies that this backdrop of urbanization has become an active choreographic element in his dance.

Many of Ergao's choreographies suture together Ergao's personal memories, collective memories, his identity quest, and nostalgic longings. For example, *Disco-Teca* (*Lailai wuting* 来

[101] In 2007, the concept of independent choreographers was still fresh, with only a handful of them having made a name in mainland China. Ergao was very inspired by Wen Hui, the artist I discussed in Chapter Two, and had the opportunity to workshop and present his works at the Young Choreographers (青年编导) Program at Cross Arts Festival (交叉艺术节) organized by Wen and her then partner Wu Wenguang at the Caochangdi Workstation in Beijing in the early stage of his independent career (Ergao, interview with the author, November 26 2019).

来舞厅, 2015) explores the 80s disco culture in China; *Dimsum Hour* (*Lanke: Yizhong liangjian* 烂柯: 一盅两件, 2018) re-enacts his childhood memories of Guangdong tea house in the 90s as an important local tradition that provides him a sense of belonging; *This Is A Chicken Coop*, which I will discuss in detail in this chapter, responds to the phenomenon of urban migration and renewal in the 2010s. Ergao's choreographies consistently explore cultural identities in the context of contemporary urban China, particularly in the Cantonese cultural context. Grounded in his personal memories, this self-reflexive approach to choreography led Ergao to become especially attentive to local cultural practices and traditions. To Ergao, dance—whether it is a live performance or on screen—serves as a productive site to reimagine the relevance of cultural traditions in contemporary life.

Migration between cities has also been a recurring theme in Tang Chenglong's life. Born in 1982 in Changsha, the capital city of Hunan Province, Tang left home at the age of fourteen to study dance at the Beijing Disabled Persons' Federation's Dance Academy (北京残联舞蹈学校) (Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, December 10, 2019). He then continued his professional dance training at the Beijing Dance Academy beginning in 2000, majoring in Chinese classical dance. Upon graduation, Tang went on to dance professionally at Zhengzhou Song and Dance Theater (郑州歌舞剧院) in Henan Province. While all his previous training was in Chinese classical and folk dance, he had his first experience performing modern dance through an evening-length dance drama titled *Shaolin in the Wind* (*Fengzhong Shaolin* 风中少林 2005). The choreography of this work draws from both Chinese martial arts and modern dance. Reflecting upon his dance career, Tang mentioned that this production acted as a pivotal moment, inspiring him to also become a choreographer instead of solely a performer (Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, December 10, 2019). Currently, Tang works as a

choreographer at Wuxi Song and Dance Theater (无锡歌舞剧院), a state-owned local dance company in Jiangsu Province. He has participated in choreographing a number of evening-length dance dramas such as *Jasmine Flowers* (*Molihua* 茉莉花 2010), *Flowers of War* (*Jinling shisanchai* 金陵十三钗 2013), and *Nine-spotted Deer* (*Jiuselu* 九色鹿 2016), all of which are based on folk, national, or classical narratives.

While Tang's "day job" is to create and perform Chinese dance dramas in a state-owned dance company, dance film, a personal passion of his, became the art medium where he could directly engage with his own lived experiences. Without any training in film, Tang started experimenting with putting dance on screen in 2012 and has thus far created six short dance films. Tang's dance films reflect his choreographic experiences in dance dramas, in which Tang often constructs a hybrid corporeality that blends together Chinese folk and classical dance with modern dance. Many of his dance films resemble a short form dance drama with a narrative arc rather than merely exploring conceptual ideas. They overlap in their engagement with the theme of loss and tragedy and in the cultivation of intense emotional experiences.

If Ergao's works present a commonly understood notion of nostalgia that projects longing for a bygone past, Tang's dance films suggest a different dimension of nostalgia that searches for a spiritual home. As a Buddhist, Tang has centered spirituality as a recurring theme in his dance and film works. His very first dance film *The Zen Road* (*Chanlu* 禅路 2012) exposes an encounter between a monk and an urban youth who is immersed in the clubbing and drinking scene. Employing martial arts choreography, the film recounts the story of the young man's spiritual transformation after his decision to leave the city temporarily to study under the monk in the deep mountains. In contrast, two other dance films, *8032* and *Kitchen* (*Pao* 庖) depict respectively sexual desire that leads to a man drowning in a bathtub and greed that leads to

violent fight over food. As overcoming sexual desire and greed is an important tenet of Buddhist practice and belief, the oscillation between seeking spirituality and exposing various kinds of desires in Tang's works is reflective of his personal spiritual struggle. To him, religion is his refuge in a materially-driven urban life. This idea of home departs from Ergao's conceptualization, which is more rooted in the Cantonese cultural fabric, particularly in village life of the region. This difference is determinant of their contrasting approaches and thematic explorations in *This Is A Chicken Coop* and *Gatha*.

"Home" as a Temporal and Corporeal Construction: Ergao's *This Is A Chicken Coop*

Ducks quacking, dogs barking, birds chirping: experimental dance film *This Is A Chicken Coop* opens in the idyllic landscape of a duck farm (see Figure 10). The camera quietly observes hundreds of ducks crowding towards their coop. A wooden electrical pole stands in the center of a lake surrounded by vast greenery in the background, painting a picture of a rural village at dawn. Just as viewers start to wonder why the ducks would rush away from the camera in a sense of urgency, we see a naked woman. Wearing a rooster-shaped prop made from colorful fabric, she walks slowly towards the duck pack. The ducks cooperatively make space for her, parting around her and rushing into the lake. The linear walking pattern of the woman and the curvilinear path drawn by the ducks result in a spatial choreography that appears well-rehearsed yet fully improvised. While this one-minute-long opening shot filmed through a stationary camera allows for a quiet unfolding of the action in front of the camera, it also surprises the viewers with the insertion of a naked body in a rooster costume in the midst of a duck pack. The opening scene marks the overarching stylistic choices consistently carried out through the entire film: the use of long takes and static camera, and the insertion of unexpected juxtapositions.

Figure 10. Film still from *This Is a Chicken Coop* (director: Ergao). With permission from Ergao.

This Is A Chicken Coop is constructed through a collage of disparate visual compositions. These images are built upon the material fabric of the village life: a flock of ducks swimming in a lake, an old restaurant decorated with a full wall of red posters, tile-laid roofs in the style of traditional Cantonese architecture, local residents sitting and chatting under a tree to kill time, etc. In the midst of the village landscape, a group of naked dancers at times perform gestures that resemble chickens as the title of the film suggests and at times become as extension of the environment. As an experimental film made up of fragmented montage, *This Is A Chicken Coop* does not project an identifiable arc of progression in terms of character and plot development, nor does it indicate a linear progression of time. Its lack of discernible logical progression leaves ample space for ambiguity and lends itself to multiple interpretations.

My reading of this dance film is first informed by its synopsis and then confirmed by my personal interview with Ergao. The English-language synopsis of the film, which was published on Ergao Dance Production Group's website as well as in program notes of various dance film festivals where the work was shown, provides a perspective to access this work:

With China's reform and opening up which began in 1979, it became [sic] big differences

> among areas' economic development level. The population migration occurred with accelerated urbanization process, like birds. The cognition of hometown and native place has changed qualitatively. … City is like a modern chicken coop, and people are like the domesticated chicken. Imagining human beings returning to an original state and conventional rules no longer apply. Imagining human beings are objectified and the next dominating species have a completely different social system—what would the world be like? … (Ergao Dance Production Group 2021)[102]

According to this text, conceptually, Ergao intends to create a dance film that responds to the sense of displacement resulting from the rapid urbanization process that has accompanied China's economic reform. Reading this synopsis prior to viewing the film, I first imagined a film taking place in an urban space where migrants flood into the city and live like chickens in "a modern chicken coop," in the form of confined skyscrapers or office cubicles. Yet what the film actually presents subverts all of these expectations with little direct visual reference to urban space.[103]

When I asked Ergao about the choice of setting this work in a village, Ergao did not answer my question directly but started to talk about his experience of living in Guangdong as a migrant from a smaller city. He shared with me the following in a pensive tone:

> To me, perhaps everywhere could be home, but nowhere feels like home. Even when I returned to my home, because of all the changes that have taken place in the city, I still do not feel it is home. I could not feel a sense of rootedness or belonging. My work asks the questions of where our home is and what can help reconcile our sense of anxiety towards our own identity (Ergao, interview with the author, trans. author, November 26, 2019).

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[102] The Chinese version of the synopsis is identical with the English translation.

[103] If the synopsis of a dance film represents the choreographer/director's intention behind the making of the work, which could depart from what the work actually presents to an audience, in reading *This Is A Chicken Coop*, I chose to be informed by it. The synopsis of a dance film constitutes an important paratext for the work, particularly in its circulation in the festival space. Often read by the audience upon entering a festival space or in advance on the Internet, it lends clues for viewers to access a screendance work. Thus, this information is crucial in shaping how an audience engages with and interprets this rather elusive experimental work. By intentionally allowing the synopsis written by Ergao to shape my interpretation of this work, I take on the position of a festival audience trying to make sense of the complex visual juxtapositions and temporal experience constructed through the work.

To Ergao, place, identity, and the search for a sense of home are interconnected. Langtou Village in Guangzhou became a potent site of nostalgia where Ergao searched for a sense of rootedness through his film.[104] My analysis will reveal how Ergao's film, while attempting to evoke a sense of harmony consistent with his experience of the village, also exposes a range of disconnects through the construction of contrasting temporalities and corporealities.

Embodying the Temporality of the Village

This Is A Chicken Coop maintains an unusually slow-paced viewing experience throughout the entire film. In this work, spectators are confronted with a sense of slowness and quietude that borders the fine line between boredom and satisfaction. The weight of duration is acutely felt as a result of a combined effect from the duration of the shot, the mostly static camera, and slow-paced, subtle or repetitive movement on screen. While there exists a convention of slow cinema in global art films, in dance films, it has rarely been explored. It is even less common to see the embrace of slow cinema in experimental dance films in China.

Throughout the film, *This Is A Chicken Coop* frequently employs the filmic device of long takes as an overarching cinematic strategy. The 17-minute, 17-second-long film consists of a total of 93 shots, making the average shot length eleven seconds. Both the opening shot and the final shot last over fifty seconds, making up the longest two shots in the film. Intermittently

[104] While scholars disagree on whether nostalgia is more connected to a longing for a different time or another place, most acknowledge the intertwining relationship between temporality and spatiality in nostalgic desire. For instance, in his article "Nostalgia for Ruins," literary scholar Andreas Huyssen (2006) asserts, "nostalgic longing for a past is always also a longing for another place" (7). Studying fiction that feature female protagonists, Roberta Rubenstein (2001) articulates that nostalgia is not merely a spatial concept but more importantly a temporal registry. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2001, xv) states, "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams."

dispersed throughout the film are prolonged shots that sustain a duration of between 20 and 30 seconds. Theorizing long takes in narrative cinema, film scholars John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (2017) probe the question of when we can call out "long takes" in films. The authors resist defining long takes based on the metrical length of the shot. Instead, they consider that long takes refer to shots that "are longer than normal or what we are used to" (6). In other words, long takes relate to a subjective experience of time.

In this work, the camera usually remains stationary, presenting a fragmented and suspended moment in time that does not provide any hint on how the film arrives at a particular scene and where it is heading towards. In only a few occasions, the camera pans horizontally or tilts vertically, directing the viewer's gaze to a specific area on screen. These camera movements are executed at an extremely slow pace, not drawing too much attention to the camera itself but allowing the viewers to continue perusing the carefully composed mise-en-scène.[105]

On top of the prolonged shots with minimum camera movement which already cultivates a sense of composure and quietness, the experience of a drawn-out passage of time is further heightened as the majority of the shots present highly contained motion on screen. Sometimes, the choreography focuses on localized areas of a group of naked dancers' bodies or a site itself: for instance, the trembling of the muscles at the neck as one performs the repetitive action of swallowing, the uneven and percussive motion of the head turning towards different directions, or the wavering ripples of a lake in a static shot. Sometimes, the illusion of movement results from a change in the focal length of the camera lens, also called a rack focus, which draws our

[105] Theorizing long takes in the context of global art cinema, Lutz Koepnick points to the productive potential of boredom in this cinematic rendering of time. Koepnick (2017) articulates that long takes have the potential to enable viewers to *wonder* in the durational experience of the image. *This Is A Chicken Coop*, by evoking a sense of stillness and not devising an easily discernible logical link between shots, facilitates the audience's ability to *wonder* and explore unexpected information presented in each shot.

attention from one part of the screen to another; other times, it occurs because of a shift in lighting when the cloud suddenly blocks the sun, changing the texture of the space. Many times, only one thing or one person is moving while all other elements on screen remain still. For instance, in a shot towards the end of the film, we see nine bodies bending downward with their arms wrapping around their legs behind their knees as if they were trying to have their heads touch their toes. Their fully exposed bottoms point towards the sky. What allows us to distinguish this image from a photography still are the quivering leaves surrounding them. Such mise-en-scène, delivering a painterly sense of composition, harmoniously integrates these sculpture-like bodies within the landscape, quiet and nonintrusive.

In creating this work, Ergao allowed his temporal experience of the village to guide how he devised his cinematic and choreographic strategies. Ergao reflected,

> If you are in a Chinese village, you would see this kind of picture: the elders sit alone at the door for an entire day. As an energetic young person, when I first saw this, I initially felt sorry for these old people. But when I lived in this village (to make this film), I realized that they were just experiencing time differently. I was very touched by them. (Ergao, interview with the author, trans. author, November 25, 2019)

The suspended, elongated experience of time by the elders is embodied through the quietness of the camera and the repetitive bodily motion. This cinematic and choreographic choices projects a sense of being stuck in time and space.

Ergao continued to share with me several other experiences he encountered in the village that allowed him to understand a different sense of time: an 87-year-old local elder who spoke about her imminent death in a matter of fact manner; a funeral procession that circled around the village carrying a coffin, which departs from Ergao's knowledge of death in the city that often takes place in a hospital rather than at home; and his conversation with the elders who awoke memories of his childhood being with his grandparents (Ergao, interview with the author,

November 25, 2019). These elderly local residents' different experience of time contrasts sharply with Ergao's life in urban space; yet, it is simultaneously familiar to him and is reminiscent of his childhood. These disparate encounters cultivate an affective experience that conflates suspended time, the idea of home, and childhood memories into an intertwined web of nostalgia.

Ambiguous Embodiment: Animals, Humans, or In-between

Besides evoking the temporality of the village through cinematic languages, another prominent feature in *This Is A Chicken Coop* is Ergao's construction of peculiar naked bodies on screen. At first glance, the naked bodies, both male and female, create a shock effect since situating fully exposed bodies in public space and in dance performance remains a taboo in the PRC and are heavily policed because of the association of nudity with moral obscenity. Why does Ergao make such a bold choice to use nudity as such an important component of the film? What do these bodies represent? How are they constructed?

The film does not convey a definite answer but rather presents ambiguity in what these bodies signify. The naked performers, being the most featured characters in this dance film, are unmarked by any signifiers, such as clothing, that could locate them at specific time in history. They communicate a sense of timelessness, which contrasts with the embodiment of local residents who signal a historical specificity. Throughout the film, the naked bodies never appear in the same shot with the locals. Rather, they are situated at sites that are more abstract than specific (e.g., among or in front of bushes, on a rooftop, and inside an empty building). For instance, in one scene, we see the group of naked beings slowly walking upstairs as if hypnotized, in an empty building that resembles an abandoned construction site. The ritual-like

unison performed by the naked characters renders a ghostly eeriness, marking these characters as specters that are able to transcend time.

However, at other times, these bodies perform gestures that can be clearly associated with images of chickens. For example, in some scenes, these bodies perform mechanical and repetitive gestures that resemble the movement of a chicken. They move their heads forward and backward percussively like chickens or shape their hands to resemble a chicken beak. In another scene, we are confronted with an image of three naked bodies hanging from the ceiling, but the image is shown upside down. They extend their legs forward, bodies swinging slightly like a pendulum. This composition recalls fully-plucked chickens hanging at a butcher's shop in a market place waiting to be sold (see Figure 11). By turning this image upside down, these bodies appear floating in mid-air, defying the law of gravity. The inverted view challenges our normal perspective, raising the question of whether what we see is reality or its allegory.

Figure 11. Film still from *This Is A Chicken Coop* (director: Ergao). With permission from Ergao.

In addition, these bodies also remain fully still at times, integrating into the environment where they situate. For instance, under a large tree with widely spread roots and branches, we see these performers with fully exposed bodies, in pairs, posed in positions of breastfeeding. The

male dancers lay down in the arms of the female dancers who embrace them. This image conjures Renaissance paintings of nude men and women in the garden or in the woods. In Renaissance paintings, however, the female body is often presented as passive and languish with exaggerated curvature, in order to satisfy the desire of the male artist and spectators (Berger 1972). In Ergao's film, however, both male and female performers appear stoic, emotionally detached from their actions, neither conveying any sexual or erotic desire nor appearing as sexualized objects. Their motionlessness evokes that of mannequins. Specific gestural phrases such as breastfeeding in this scene and eating, kissing and embracing in other scenes underline the primal nature of these mysterious beings. These images convey an ambiguity about whether they are humans or animals, or somewhere in between an animal state and an acculturated human state.

In contemporary visual art and performance art in China, naked bodies, particularly male bodies, are increasingly used for a variety of different reasons, oftentimes acting as a site for delivering social and political commentary.[106] From contemporary concert dance to dance film, grotesque, aberrant, and ambiguous embodiment is also often constructed for various purposes of subversion. Dance scholar Sophie Walon (2016) theorizes corporeal creation in experimental dance films that disrupts conventional notions of the body. Examining films by a few high-profile European directors such as Thierry De Mey and Wim Vandekeybus, Walon argues that the construction of out-of-ordinary, "pathological," "animalistic," "monstrous," "overtly (or

[106] For example, international acclaimed performance artist Ma Liuming often uses his own naked body, a man's body that exhibits feminine quality, as the main subject of his performance to investigate the concept of sexual ambiguity. Another performance artist Zhang Xuan also employs nudity in his performances, putting his body on top of a large block of ice or allowing his body to be covered by flies and earthworms, for instance. Unlike Ma who uses his naked body to address issues of sexuality, Zhang considers that the fully naked body is necessary for building contact with and strengthening perception of the physical environment and the objects that contact the body. Both Ma and Zhang's performance art works are well received in the West (Qian 1999).

differently) sexualized," morphing and mutable corporealities in these works should not be merely seen as an aesthetic creation. Instead, such representation of what she refers to as "bizarre corporealities" (2016, 321) is derived from an embodied philosophy that projects a desire for emancipation from hierarchical power and to resist the force of "social, economic and political processes of bodily standardization" (2016, 321) that yield able, heterosexual, and stable bodies.

In *This Is A Chicken Coop*, Ergao's corporeal construction of the naked beings echoes Walon's argument to a certain degree. The ahistorical bodies that blur the boundaries between animals and humans challenge the stability of the body as one definable category. This kind of ambiguous construction liberates the body from the need to act according to social rules of mankind in a modern society. However, Ergao's critique through the construction of these naked beings is not necessarily a radical one. In fact, these ambiguous bodies also display a rather homogenous cast of young, fit, mostly Asian dancers (except for one white female) with gendered and abled bodies. While some compositions of these bodies on screen make their gendered bodies appear more androgynous (e.g., when the dancers face away from the camera, showing only their backs, or when the female dancer is costumed with a rooster prop that implies a male animal figure), some other shots heighten the gendered differences (e.g., when female dancers are holding male dancers at a position that resembles breastfeeding). Therefore, Ergao's corporeal intervention resists some social categories while reinforcing some others.

I argue that the subversive potential of the naked bodies in *This Is A Chicken Coop* is more than the attempt to break free from the standardization of the body but instead, present a corporeal manifestation of a different time. When asked about his choreographic strategy in making this work, Ergao reflects:

> We cannot escape consumerism any more. My closet is filled with clothes, but I often still feel I do not have enough to wear. I am trying to find something that can give me a

> sense of balance. When the society is pushing forward, I want my body to search towards an opposite direction, to go backward. Perhaps, it is through this kind of battle, I could find a balance. (Ergao, interview with the author, trans. author, November 25, 2019)

Ergao's words imply an association between his construction of the peculiar and at times animal-like naked bodies with an embodiment of a past tense. To him, going backward constitutes an embodied experience and thus can be constructed on a corporeal level through dance. Going "backward" through the body has become Ergao's ongoing effort to counterbalance the overwhelming and incessantly regenerating trends in a neoliberal capitalist global economy that is associated with Chinese modernity. In choreographing the dance performance, Ergao's desire to "search towards an opposite direction" also led him to mostly shift away from exhibiting spectacular technical skills of the dancers that mark their professional training background. Instead, Ergao choreographs simple, repetitive movements that, in his own words, "anyone could do." Through gestural phrases such as bending the arms like a rooster's neck, shaping the hands into a beak shape, waving the hip from left to right, moving the neck forward repetitively, and simply walking, Ergao resists kinesthetic spectacles, which he associates with a capitalist logic of consumption and modernity. Ergao considers naked bodies to represent the undecorated natural human state, which is associated with the idea of the past. These bodies—relative to costumed bodies—can better integrate with the environment of the village, respecting and embodying its quality rather than disrupting it (Ergao, interview with the author, trans. author, November 25, 2019). Notably, this particular cinematic and choreographic construction of the body as a critique of consumption and modernity also places Ergao's film into the niche category of dance, performance art, and films that circulate internationally precisely because the forms are thought to resist capitalist logic or other hegemonic values.

Temporal and Visual Juxtaposition

As much as Ergao attempts to embody the temporality of the village by embracing slowness and through constructing the naked corporeality, the dance film also presents a series of temporal juxtapositions to communicate a sense of disconnect through visual contrasts on screen. For example, one of the visual juxtapositions takes place in several scenes that present both dancers who play the role of village adolescents and actual local residents who happened to be on site during filming. These local villagers were intentionally included in the frame of the camera. In these scenes, these local residents are going about their everyday lives: elderly men and women chat under a tree, an elderly woman eats a meal in a restaurant, and a man walks by while pushing a stroller with a baby inside. While their actions were not choreographed, each scene is carefully constructed. Within the same frame, one dancer situates her body nearby the local residents but does not directly interact with them. They simply share the same space. The young dancer is dressed in a red top and red skirt with hair pulled up in two pigtails, a typical hair style for young Chinese girls. This look signifies youthfulness, which contrasts sharply with the local residents clothed in outfits of muted colors.

As much as the dancers attempt to perform as young people in the village, their performance exaggerates the sense of out-of-placeness rather than presenting a seamless integration. For example, in a restaurant scene, a young girl, sitting next to an elderly woman who is having a meal, quietly drinks tea. The elderly woman is fully aware of the presence of the camera by at times staring into it. When the scene recurs in a wide shot, the girl pours tea into a tea pot and then fidgets her body, whereas the elderly woman continues to enjoy her meal. When this scene reappears the third time, the young dancer stands in front of the elderly woman who remains sitting at the table. With hands in a prayer position in front her chest, the dancer swings

her hips in the shape of a figure eight. The elderly woman sits still and looks at her "performance." In this scene, the young dancer gives new meaning to the tea house, converting it from a space of leisure to a site of acrobatic performance.

Similarly, in a scene taking place on the street, the locals, including a street vendor and three elderly men and women are having a conversation under a big tree to kill time. Their dialogue in Cantonese can be heard through the camera, making up one of the primary sound elements in the scene. Meanwhile, a dancer with pigtails sits on a motorcycle next to them, staring forward with an ironic smile. When the same scene reappears in the film, the dancer starts to perform robotic exercises, projecting vitality and youthful energy, whereas the elders continue engaging in their conversation (see Figure 12). These young characters' lack of bodily stillness projects an anxiety towards suspended time whereas the local residents are constructed to embody a calmness and contentment towards an elongated experience of time. In other words, the young girls and the villagers are constructed to embody contrasting temporal experiences.

Figure 12. Film still from *This Is A Chicken Coop* (director: Ergao). With permission from Ergao.

The insertion of young performers in the midst of the local elders and the children of the village makes visible the absence of local young and middle-aged people. In this film, the young

performers stand in for the bodies of the young people who are absent in the village. Such an absence implicitly suggests the migration of the young workforce from the village to cities, leaving behind children and the elders. As much as the village reassures Ergao with a sense of stability and a different temporal quality, the insertion of the youngsters subtly exposes the fact that the village is also not untouched by the process of urbanization. Scenes as such extends from Ergao's personal reflection on his personal migratory experience to a societal one.

In this dance film, the disparate temporalities embodied by the onscreen characters are also projected through a range of recurring visual markers that reference Ergao's personal memories and social memories. Yet, these visual signs also appear out of place, conveying a sense of eeriness. For instance, in several shots taking place in a storage room filled with colorful electric kiddie rides, we see a group of naked men and women cramming inside a row of neatly lined-up rides that no longer fit their grown-up bodies. The displacement of these kiddie rides from shopping centers and amusement parks to a dusted storage room invokes a sense of loss. The misfit in size of these machines to the dancers' bodies visually marks the passage of time and points to a never-returning past. As objects of entertainment that are supposed to conjure fanciful imagination and spark joy for little children, these well-preserved yet idled machines serve a different purpose here. They simultaneously mark a different point in time and act as extensions of these dancers' sculptural bodies.

Another locally specific visual marker of the past is the rooster prop that appears in the beginning and at the end of the film. This prop references a vernacular tradition of *jigonglan* (鸡公榄 Master Rooster) that first emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in Guangzhou (Jigonglan, n.d.). *Jigonglan* denotes street vendors dressed in a rooster prop to sell olives while blowing a horn instrument called *suona* to draw attention from potential customers. In our conversation, Ergao

recalled his memory of childhood when he would buy olives from these vendors directly from his window upstairs, and *Jigonglan* would throw olives towards him from downstairs (Ergao, interview with the author, November 26, 2019). Though it has become much rarer to find in Guangzhou, this tradition continues today but appears paradoxically in the most commercial districts in Guangzhou. In this film, the rooster prop is also completely taken out of context just like the electric kiddie rides. The original function of the rooster prop is perhaps only legible to Cantonese locals and people familiar with this tradition. Here, the rooster prop presents the only unmistakably chicken figure in this film, standing out amongst a pack of ducks, just like how it stands out in the busy commercial districts in the city.

In addition, traces of the socialist past slip into the film at unexpected moments. In one scene, a male dancer in an Adidas T-shirt and blue jeans circles around himself as if dancing disco in front of a wall marked with a slogan that writes, "Discipline is regarded as an honor; studying hard will lead to improvement," ("守纪律为荣，勤学习可进"), typical socialist rhetoric that promotes discipline and hard work. In another scene, a young couple, also performed by the dancers, stand in stillness with a white dog in front of a broken wooden chest that lays on the ground. The man wears Burberry pants; the woman carries a Gucci purse. Their outfits prompt the viewers to suspect that this young couple may be visitors from the city or migrants who temporarily returned home. On top of the chest appear several words: "revolution till the end" (革命到底), "fight" (打), "home" (家), and "have" (有). These texts, written with water instead of ink, embody an ephemerality. The random placement of these individual words prompts the viewers who can read Chinese to make sense of their collective meanings by mentally combining them. Amongst these four words, the phrase "revolution till the end" most directly recalls a revolutionary past that hovers over the present. This memory of the collective

pursuit of communist ideals at a time when the social value of anti-commercialism was embraced sharply contrasts with the commercial brand-costumed bodies of the urban middle-class looking couple that signals a cosmopolitan lifestyle embraced in postsocialist modern China.[107] Here, symbols of communist revolution are placed side by side with symbols of capitalism and consumerism. This shot exemplifies what Carlos Rojas succinctly summarizes as the condition of postsocialist China, which is haunted by the co-existence of three apparitions: "specters of Marx, shades of Mao, and the ghosts of global capitalism" (2016, 1–12). These scenes serve as a reminder that socialist memories continue to impact the post-Mao present in a subtle yet undeniable way. All of these visual juxtapositions communicate an inability to fully fit into the environment of the ancient village that is fantasized as a home.

The intentionally constructed sense of out-of-placeness and the disconnect between disparate visual elements on screen discussed above are just a few examples of the many kinds of intentional incoherence in this film. In order to devise a cinematic strategy that is consistent with the temporal experience of the village, Ergao deliberately chose to let go of using stabilizers that could produce smooth camera movement, a technique commonly seen in screendance and commercial music videos to create a heightened sense of motion. His refusal to imitate practices of filming movement prevalent in popular media and many existing screendance works indicates his efforts to disassociate himself from the pursuit of visual spectacles that are both hypnotizing and pacifying, as Adorno ([1963] 1975) has long cautioned regarding the cultural industry.[108]

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[107] Lisa Rofel suggests that the idea of consumption directly intertwines with embodiment of a new postsocialist cosmopolitan subjects, at the heart of which lies desire (2007, 118).

[108] In his widely referenced 1963 article "Cultural Industry Reconsidered," Adorno has long critiqued the pacifying effect of the cultural industry which reinforces stereotypes, promote standardization, and commodifies cultural forms. Adorno's anticipation is more than realized in today's mainstream media culture.

However, Ergao is not consistent with this approach throughout the film. While he hopes to resist technology as represented by highly choreographed camera movement and the use of stabilizers, in a few scenes, Ergao also incorporates drone shots to provide a bird's eye view of the lake filled with ducks and a top view of the village architectures. Drone shots—often associated with high production value, new technology and trendiness—represent precisely the opposite of what he intends to deliver. The fact that Ergao was not able to fully let go of cinematic devices that are associated with popular culture further reflects the contradiction in Ergao's lived condition of residing in a fast-paced city while searching for a different experience of time.

Overall, in *This Is A Chicken Coop*, Ergao's aesthetic of nostalgia is built upon the aesthetic of the village: its aura, its architecture, texts on its walls, and its people, as well as the construction of naked bodies that blend into various sites in the village. Grounding his cinematic and choreographic strategies in the ancient village as a site and as a *lived* experience of time, Ergao constructs a dance film that invites a *spectatorial* experience of time that appears fragmented and slow. Even with rhythmic variations, the film still creates a sense of being stuck in time and space. The viewing experience that Ergao's work delivers is not a failure in engaging the viewers, but an intentional construction that makes evident through the transnational cosmopolitan audiences' impatience how they experience time in modern life. However, despite Ergao's effort to fit the bodies into the environment of an ancient Cantonese village, the film also present various layers of incongruity and disconnect. The film's inability to fully integrate the viewer into the rhythm of life and experience of the village reflects Ergao's own personal struggle of finding a sense of belonging even when he returns to his hometown.

A Journey towards A Spiritual Home: Tang Chenglong's *Gatha*

While *This Is A Chicken Coop* forecloses any effort to construct a discernible storyline based on its fragmented images, *Gatha* narrates through movement a readily accessible tale of faith and mourning, onto which Tang projects his own spiritual yearning. Against the backdrop of bare mountains, *Gatha* opens with an image of a naked man slowly walking away from the camera in between two figures kneeling on the ground, whose faces are covered by large-sized grotesque-looking masks. This striking image is followed with a series of shots that present two men performing a highly specific and recognizable movement of prostration, a practice commonly associated with Tibetan pilgrimage. Clapping their palms attached to a pair of wooden boards while taking a few steps forward, they fall to their knees and propel their torsos forward until their full bodies and foreheads touch the ground. Staying on the ground, they bring up their hands over their head in a prayer position before lifting themselves up from the ground and then repeat the entire movement sequence again. These two characters with shaved heads, clothed in long robes in muted colors, are ambiguously portrayed as two Buddhist monks, brothers, or friends. The drone camera smoothly glides across the sky, gradually revealing the seemingly endless mountainous road on which the two faithful men have courageously embarked on a pilgrimage. The highly specific embodiment of prostration makes up the main movement motif, recurring throughout the film in different variations to reflect the progression of the narrative arc.

The narrative unfolding of *Gatha* does not strictly follow a linear progression of time but also inserts flashbacks and scenes that do not suggest a definitive temporal placement. The main body of the film presents the journey of two monks embarking on a pilgrimage towards the sacred mountain Kang Rinpoche (also known as Mount Kailash). The lighthearted yet arduous

journey is vividly depicted as the two protagonists climb up sand dunes, run through woods, playfully dance by a river, prostrate along highways, share a meal mixed with water and *qinke* (青稞, a type of grain commonly used in Tibetan diets), and then reach a Buddhist temple where they pray. An upbeat dance choreography is followed by a quick montage sequence that presents a series of mystic signs of grotesque masks hanging in the air, a stone marked with skulls, and a candle flame that suddenly extinguishes. These visual symbols and the dance scene serve as a bridge to transition the viewer back to the pilgrimage—this time, with only one brother in sight. The next part of the film intercuts the solo pilgrim's performance of prostration on the road with scenes of his mourning for his lost companion and flashbacks of their last few moments together. These flashbacks partially reveal what happened to the deceased monk by presenting images of the monk falling down on the road and rolling down a hill while the other monk tries to grab onto him but in vain. Such a narrative structure engages the viewers by building in suspense and urgency while giving them ample room for imagination. The tragedy followed by the single monk's continuous journey highlights that the risks and sacrifices are an integral part of the pilgrimage.

The word "gatha" is a Sanskrit term that means "a speech," "a song" or "a verse" (Datta 1988, 1374). In Buddhist practice, gathas are short verses from the sutra for recitation and singing. By titling the film *Gatha*, Tang makes explicit the dance film's influence from Buddhist religion while also framing the narrative itself as a gatha, or in other words, a story of praise that glorifies enduring faith and human connection. My analysis of *Gatha* focuses on how Tang engages with Tibetan Buddhist cultural practices and local visual symbols to devise cinematic and choreographic strategies that integrate urban pop culture with Tibetan traditions.

Temporal Variations

While Ergao's *This Is A Chicken Coop* creates a consistent, slow temporal experience throughout the film, *Gatha* adopts contrasting cinematic strategies to construct different rhythmic structures. In the film, the temporal variation tailors to specific choreographed actions. The act of prostration, a recurring motif throughout the film, is always filmed with a stationary camera. The quietness of the camera allows the actions in front of the camera to unfold at its own pace. It also construes a sense of holiness and seriousness as if the camera is paying homage to the continuous performance of prostration as an act of piety. Except for the opening sequence in which the prostration is framed in a medium shot, the remaining shots of this action are always presented in a wide shot, which reveals more of the landscape around the dancers. This deliberate framing strategy, on one hand, makes the human figures appear smaller by surrounding them with insurmountable mountains and endless road ahead. On the other hand, the stationary wide shot also renders legible the extremely limited progress the protagonists make with each performance of prostration. In addition, by putting the two brothers side by side with quickly passing vehicles that bury them with dust and smoke, the director invites the audience's empathetic viewing experience by highlighting an arduous spiritual journey. By repetitively presenting the movement motif of prostration, but at a range of differently looking terrains and landscapes, Tang communicates the long distance the two brothers are able to conquer with their persistent efforts.

However, when it comes to filming the dance scenes, the camera suddenly becomes dynamic. While the stationary camera that presents the action of prostration can be seen as a realist approach to cinematography, the moving camera in the dance scene adopts a surrealist approach to construct an affective experience. In the first dance scene, a Steadicam follows the two dancers performing a duet after taking a rest at a river. As if performing a contact

improvisation, they lift each other up and flip the other person over the back or over the shoulder. Intercut between wide shots and medium shots, the choreography also includes everyday movement of child-like play such as wrestling, splashing water at each other, and clapping ankles together while holding each other's shoulders side by side, trying to see who could trip over the other person (see Figure 13). The relatively mobile camera further emphasizes the light-heartedness of this scene. Here, Tang challenges the dominant depiction of both the monk figure as a stoic, serious, and often in solitude and that of the spiritual practice of pilgrimage. In Tang's construction, the journey of pilgrimage is not a monotone journey of endurance but also involves moments of laughter and fun. Incorporating playful moments of the everyday interaction between the two monks also makes the journey of pilgrimage relatable and mundane.

Figure 13. Film still from *Gatha* (director: Tang Chenglong). With permission from Tang Chenglong.

In the second dance scene, the cinematic techniques become even more playful in its interaction with the dance choreography. The camera and the editing technique, together, play an integral role in shaping the energy and temporal experience of the scene. This dance scene occurs immediately after the two monks reached a temple and before the reveal of one companion's death. The dance scene begins with a series of close-ups. Black fabric cuffs covered with a few small bells, and a small amount of red fur wraps around the dancers' biceps. A headband with

hanging black threads fully covering the eyes encircle their heads. A necklace made of strings of red fur that resembles the hair of a lion surrounds their necks and covers their bare chests. The detailed depiction of unusually costumed half-naked male bodies intercuts with wide shots of the environment, which presents a sacred ground with voluminous strings of colorful Tibetan prayer flags (see Figure 14). This exotic and tribal-influenced costume contrasts with the robes they wore earlier, constructing the two performers as different characters from the two monks.

Figure 14. Film still from *Gatha* (director: Tang Chenglong). With permission from Tang Chenglong.

All of these shots are cut at the downbeat of the drum. Each shot begins at fast motion and then immediately transition to slow motion. This temporal variation within a single shot creates a pulsing rhythm, cultivating a sense of movement and suspense even when there is very little movement in the filmic space. As the drum beats double in speed, the dancers respond to the rhythmic music with percussive and pulsive up and down contraction of the torso. Crisp yet grounded, the two dancers bounce with their body weight dropped downwards, knees bent. Their arms expand open and then quickly close in to form a prayer position. Their torsos arch back and then bend down, precisely at the down beat of the drum. Their hands are molded into various shapes of Buddhist mudras. Pulsing their shoulders up and down while making a circle around their torsos, they bent their knees before opening up explosively their chests and arms. Shaking

their heads on a sagittal plane, they jump forward with one leg while raising the other leg to the side, arms spreading upward and knees remaining bent.

The rhythmic intensity of the dance performance is enhanced by the constantly moving camera and the quick cuts between movements. In this scene, the choreography of the camera follows the same pulsive rhythm as the dance. As the dancers crawls backwards, the camera dollies towards them and continues to approach them as they freeze suddenly. The camera goes around the dancers as they circle around each other. The same shot never lasts for more than the duration of two downbeats, varying in length and alternating between shots from different angles, frontal or oblique. The sudden change of camera angles is accompanied with the swift change of directions in the dance choreography itself. Such juxtaposition heightens the visual feast. Occasionally, a jump cut takes place, reminding the viewer of the missing frames within the shot and the constructed nature of the scene. These jump cuts perfectly match the rhythmic structure of the drum beats. Towards the end of the sequence, the camera rapidly flies towards the center of the prayer flag structure as the two dancers run towards and past the camera. The opposition of their directions collide to create a visual illusion of an explosive speed of the motion. The camera continues to move towards the flags and then tilt upwards pointing at the sky as if inscribing the spiritual quest embodied through the dance onto the prayer flags and then projected to the heaven, or a spiritual realm.

The cinematic and choreographic strategies co-constitute a spectacular and high energy performance that could only exist on screen and cannot be reproduced in a live performance version. The rapid dollying-in and out of the camera, the quick cuts, sudden change of camera angles, and the constant camera motion in this scene correspond to camera techniques often seen in popular music videos in the twenty-first-century Chinese mediascape. Tang's adoption of the

music video aesthetics and Ergao's rejection of them both point to the significant influence of music video as a media genre in popular cultures in China on the development of screendance. In the first chapter, I also pointed out that Bai Zhiqun's video dance experimentation also inherited music video aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s. In my interview with Ergao, he mentioned that in his first dance film workshops through "New Works Forum: Screendance" organized by Hong Kong Kowloon Cultural District, one of the instructors, Ou Xue'er (欧雪儿), was a music video director who had worked closely with popular Chinese singer Wang Fei (or Faye Wong 王菲) (Ergao, interview with the author, November 26, 2019). As music video often manifests cutting-edge audiovisual technologies, its aesthetics in the 2010s differ significantly from previous trends, adapting to changes in new media technologies and popular cultures. Yet, this popular genre continues to exert influences on how dance filmmakers conceive movement on screen as both art forms embrace montage and foreground corporeal performance. Citing music video aesthetics to present a dance that references Tibetan religious themes presents an unexpected juxtaposition, which blurs the boundaries between religion and popular culture.

Embodying Tibetan Traditions

The ironic integration of two seemingly separate categories as discussed above is further highlighted through the hybrid corporality constructed onscreen. In this scene, Tang heavily references contemporary versions of Tibetan sacred monastic dance (fawu 法舞), often referred to as *Cham* dances (羌姆).[109] *Cham* takes part in the system of tantric practices in Tibetan

[109] Besides kinetically referencing *Cham*, Tang also employs masks, which are often used as a part of the costume in *cham* performance. These masks are not considered as inanimate objects but are believed to embody the deity they represent (Pearlman 2002).

Buddhism for spiritual purposes (Pearlman 2002, 101). It could also be performed as a form of shamanistic practices which aim to get rid of any negativity and promote well-being for a specific community. *Cham* is not a monolithic or stable dance form but includes various different styles depending on the specific monastery and occasions of the performance.[110] Having evolved in parallel with the development of Buddhism in Tibet since the seventh century, *cham* dances embody a contentious and complicated history.

In spite of the wide variations on how *cham* dances can be performed, some movement qualities appear consistent across these different variations. For example, In the text *The Origin of Cham Dance* (jingangqumo shenmu yuanqi 金刚驱魔神舞源起, n.d.), Lama Jiamutu Tubudan denotes the type of corporeality *cham* dances construct (as cited in Jiamutu Kaichao 2012). He states

> The upper body appears as a lion, waist like a serpent, joints like wheels, muscles relaxed, blood boiling up, comportment appearing dignified, dance at a slow tempo, knees bent, skeletal structure looking relaxed and uplifting, all presenting a sense of bravery, power and strength.[111]

While sharing some resemblance to the movement quality depicted in this passage, the dance in Tang's version does not fully corresponds to the description. One most obviously deviation is the speed of the movement. While the traditional *cham* dance is performed at a relatively slow tempo, Tang's choreography is performed at a fast tempo.

The choreography in this scene does not attempt to imitate exactly how *cham* dances are performed. Instead, Tang innovates new movement vocabularies by combining hip hop dance

[110] In her book on Tibetan sacred dance, Ellen Pearlman (2002) described various representative *chams* including skeleton dance, deer dance, black hat dance, a dance where one dresses like an old man from Mongolia, etc.

[111] Translated by the author from the original: "上身犹如狮子，腰部如盘绕，关节像幻轮，肌肉当放松，血脉似沸腾，举止应尊严，作舞亦缓慢，膝盖要弯曲，骨骼现安乐，皆勇显威猛."

vocabularies with some identifiable movement quality of *cham*. Tang draws from some typical movement vocabularies in contemporary reconstruction of *cham*, for instance, jumping with one leg lifted, rotating in mid-air with arms spread out, pulsing rhythmically up and down, etc (see Figure 15). These gestures are rhythmically accented and are blended with floor sequences of flipping and turning with arms supporting the upper body, as well as high jumps and flips in the air. Their palpitating upper bodies at the accents of the hip hop beats are often followed by a short freeze in motion. The dancers always present a relaxed demeanor which becomes even more visible during the moment of freeze. The music of the dance scene, coming from several instruments employed in a *cham* performance, a type of handled drum (*rGna*), hand drums (*damaru*), and the gong, produce rhythmic and percussive beats that resemble hip hop beats. All of these qualities mark the influence of hip hop dance on Tang's choreography. Performing the percussive, high energy dance movement, these bare-chested dancers present a mode of hypermasculinity that is associated more with hip hop culture than with *cham.*[112] In this scene, Tang creates an unexpected integration of identifiable markers of *cham* dance linked to an ancient Tibetan religious tradition with contemporary street dance kinesthetic associated with transnational urban popular culture. Enhanced by the music video style filming and editing techniques, this intentionally hybrid construction presents a sense of playfulness while providing an alternative representation of Tibetan rituals from a perspective of an urban artist.

[112] In addition, the hybrid corporality is also exhibited through the costuming of the dancers. Like the dance choreography, rather than reproducing the traditional costume for *cham*, such as colorful long robe with grotesque masks, Tang incorporates elements from the original costume aesthetic but creates a refreshing fashionable look with tribal aesthetic. Instead of being fully clothed in long robes, the dancers are bare chested, exposing a semi-erotic muscular male bodies. The black strings in the head band draws directly from the hanging strings on the "black hat" costume used in *Shanag*, a form of *cham* dance. The red hair or fur hanging on the neck resembles the hair in the lion-looking masks in the ritual performance of *cham*.

Figure 15. Film still from *Gatha* (director: Tang Chenglong). With permission from Tang Chenglong.

Besides the ritual dance form evoked in this dance scene, Tang also references several other local religious practices based on Buddhist beliefs that contributed to his corporeal construction, including, for instance, the practice of sky burial (*tianzang* 天葬, or bya-gtor in Tibetan language). In Tibetan tradition, sky burial involves a ritual that presents the deceased body at a site of high elevation to feed the body to vultures. The body is unclothed. According to Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, this ritual allows the soul of the deceased to rise to heaven along with the vulture (Tsiden Chudrun 2012). In the film, Tang does not explicitly show this practice but uses several shots to allude to it: a shot of an eagle hovering in the sky after we learn about one monk's death, a shot of an unclothed body in the opening of the film, and a shot of a piece of the brother's clothing dug out of a stone pile. If closely observed, we could notice that after the monk in crimson robe digs out the deceased monk's robe, the next time we see the same character, he is then clothed in the dark grey robe. This subtle change in clothing evokes a Tibetan cultural belief that the belongings of the dead become an embodiment of the deceased person, and as such, they need to be treasured and collected. In the surviving monk's act of continuing the journey of pilgrimage with his deceased brother's robe, *both* brothers were able to reach "home" by arriving at the sacred mountain together on a symbolic and spiritual level.

If searching for a sense of belonging through spirituality is what first motivated Tang to create this film, the resulting work presents a visual feast that cites a range of cultural practices and beliefs in Tibetan Buddhism. In pre-production, Tang has conducted extensive research on Tibetan Buddhism and its various practices and symbols. Tang firmly believes that in order to film a dance in a culture to which he is an outsider, he has to first gain an in-depth understanding of the culture. He advocates to dance filmmakers that to make a film at an unfamiliar site, "one has to respect the site, understand the local cultures, and represent these cultures in a way that are respectful to the locals" (Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, trans. author, December 10, 2019). Yet, in his film, Tang does not intend to represent Tibetan cultures to convey authenticity, but instead use them to inspire new visual and kinesthetic vocabularies that appear refreshing and distinctive. This integration and reinterpretation of Tibetan religious practices and cultures suggest that Tang's dance film is more of a product of his personal reflection than a work that intends to reproduce an impression of Tibet. Reflecting upon his experience of modernity, Tang articulates:

> Nowadays, many things are too practical, including our life in mainland China. We actually have not grown from being weak and small. I want to use dance film to explore spirituality. As our material life developed in China, we no longer have problems with food, home, and transportation, but I feel people have become hollow, lonely, lost, and empty. There is isolation between people. This probably results from a lack of spirituality as we experience such rapid material growth. (Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, trans. author, December 10, 2019.)

As the modern life aims to shift us away from the process of suffering and towards a maximization of material comfort and instant gratification, Tang reminds us, through the journey of pilgrimage and death, that hardship and suffering may be a way to reconnect us to a spiritual home. As a Buddhist practitioner himself, Tang continues, "I think it is good to believe in Buddhism. The religion brings sunshine and positive energy to help counter the messiness (乱七

八糟) of this world" ((Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, trans. author, December 10, 2019). In other words, the pristine landscape of Tibet and its religious culture offers Tang an alternative vision to the ostensibly progressive yet alienating forces of modernity.

In this light, *This Is Chicken Coop* and *Gatha* share in common that the desire to search for "home" is deeply intertwined with the very process of reconstructing local aesthetic elements. In Ergao's film, the ancient Cantonese village became not only the backdrop where the choreographed dance and everyday life of the villagers take place, but it also embodies a temporality that serves as the guiding post for Ergao's choreography and his construction of cinematic time. In Tang's work, the choreographer's spiritual nostalgia found its most relevant corporeal manifestation in the act of prostration and other rituals practiced in Tibetan Buddhism. Using prostration as an overarching movement motif, Tang depicts an arduous and emotional journey of faith through movement, music, and visual elements that reference various local cultural beliefs and practices. Instead of reproducing formulaic imageries of China, both Ergao and Tang chose to situate their dance films at sites outside of urban centers to generate choreographic and cinematic expressions that display decentered Chinese visualities.

A Romanticized Vision of Non-Urban Sites?

Writing about nostalgia, Margaret Hillenbrand states, "Just as the West needed the East to define itself, so has the countryside played the necessary other to the city, ostensibly furnishing the fantasies of home it could not yet host" (2010, 173). The cinematic imaginations of an ancient Cantonese village and the remote region of Tibet, both of which were located in geographic and cultural peripheries within mainland China, bring to light the dynamic interaction between "center" and "periphery." If we consider the urban centers where Tang and Ergao live

as the quintessential embodiment of modern China, an image and lifestyle of Chinese modernity, then the periphery and the margin, as sites of nostalgia, become an imaginary alternative to the urban modernity and a critique of what the "center" lacks. Is Ergao and Tang's vision of the "peripheral" sites necessarily a fantasized one?

This Is A Chicken Coop is not a realistic depiction but an intentional construction of the village environment. Ergao shared with me that in reality, the locations where the filming took place was filled with trash and appeared very messy and dirty (Ergao, interview with the author, November 25, 2019). But through composition and framing, these unpleasant visuals were all excluded from the camera frame. This deliberate construction presents the village as tranquil, idyllic, and picturesque, diverging from the hustle and bustle of city life.

The fantasized vision of Tibet also becomes visible when comparing *Gatha* with feature film *Kang Rinpoche* (冈仁波齐, also titled *Paths of the Soul*, 2017) by Beijing-born director Yang Zhang, which was released in China right before *Gatha* went into production. The two films present contrasting visualizations of pilgrimage. The road film *Kang Rinpoche* recounts the journey of pilgrimage to Lhasa by a group of Tibetan villagers. The film was shot in a realist style with a mostly static camera filming from the eye level and has no musical score. The film viscerally depicts the challenges, dangers, pain and hardships these pilgrims endure during their journey in which a child is born, and an elderly man passes away. This unscripted, documentary-like cinematic rendition of pilgrimage does not center the Tibetan landscape but instead focuses on the small community of pilgrims, which is in a stark contrast to *Gatha*'s dramatized and fantasized depiction of pilgrimage.

While the film *Kang Rinpoche* prioritizes revealing the details of the journey of pilgrims through a realist approach, *Gatha* is interested in highlighting the symbolic ideals that pilgrimage

represents (e.g., perseverance, piety, and relentless faith) and embodying these ideals through choreography.[113] Such an approach calls for a more dynamic cinematic strategy. The film adopts a series of drone shots that glide through the blue sky, over bare mountains, across crystal-clear water, and past herds of yaks to deliver a bird's eye view of the picturesque landscape. This approach contrasts with *Kang Rinpoche* in which the landscape is always in the background rather than the main focus of any given shot. Throughout the work, Tang also foregrounds various religious visual symbols, such as the monastic temples, grotesque masks, and voluminous prayer flags in bright colors hanging in strings, as well as the rattling sounds of meditation bells and Tibetan folk songs in Tibetan language. All of these exotic images and sounds audio-visually paint a romanticized experience of Tibet. In this light, Tang's vision of Tibet is inevitably a fantasized one.

The sentiment of nostalgia and a self-Orientalizing gaze overlap in that they both romanticize. Rey Chow points out that it is what she refers to as "primitive passions" that spur an "Oriental's orientalism" (1995, 171). In Chow's conception, "primitive passions" denote a structure of feeling that manifests in a fascination with a lost "origin," which shares something in common with nostalgia (22). Writing about works by Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou

[113] Having seen *Kang Rinpoche* prior to his film shoot, Tang vowed to create a different visual and kinesthetic experience from this feature film by highlighting the specificity of dance film as a medium. He hoped that the dance choreography could make the film more visually and kinesthetically dynamic. As a hybrid artistic medium, dance film also has the potential of corporeal storytelling. The medium encourages a choreographic approach to cinematography and editing, which led to radically different cinematic strategies compared to the conventions of documentary and narrative filmmaking. Yet putting dance on screen also means that the way the dance is framed as well as other visual and aural elements that contextualize the dance are all subject to different ways of reading through the conventions of cinema.

(e.g., *Judou* and *Red Sorghum*),[114] Chow contends that, by deliberately constructing visualities of ethnic details, myths, and a seductive-looking feudal China with his choice of vivid colors, Zhang caters to a foreign audience and projects a self-Orientalizing gaze. This self-Orientalizing gaze in Chow's view is a self-conscious gaze at one's own history and origin that equates to a form of self-writing or what she calls "autoethnography." This type of gaze complicates the East-West binary framework that only takes into account a Western orientalism that results in the popularity of Chinese films that exhibits romanticized visuals of China.

While Ergao's and Tang's dance films echo the Fifth Generation filmmakers' depiction of ethnic subjects and cultures and the use of rural landscapes or remote regions as film sites, in both Tang's and Ergao's cases, the position of the self is further complicated. Ergao and Tang turn towards cultures and communities that they are both related to yet also distant from. For Ergao, the ancient village where his film takes place can be seen as an imagined, not actual, "home" that summons his childhood memories. However, the aura of the site and the cultures it embodies takes part in the Cantonese cultural fabric that has significantly shaped Ergao's identity. Thus, Ergao is simultaneously an insider and an outsider to the experience of the village that the film investigates. In Tang's case, Tibetan Buddhist cultures are still mostly foreign to Tang, a Han Chinese Buddhist practitioner. Yet Tang frames Tibetan cultures as part of Chinese cultural identities when speaking about this work.[115] In this way, Tang is simultaneously gazing at a culture that is unfamiliar to him while treating it as a culture to which he relates. Initially not

[114] The Fifth Generation filmmakers belong to a rather coherent cohort of directors with similar lived experiences. In the 1960s, most of them were sent away from their own families and city homes to labor in the countryside before they attended the Beijing Film Academy in late 1970s.

[115] This framing is not just Tang's own. In fact, regarding ethnic cultures as an integral part of Chinese national identity reflects the official national ethnic identity policy through the concept of the multiethnic Chinese nation or *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族). This concept was originally developed during the Republican era prior to the founding of the PRC (Leibold 2007).

intended for a global audience, *Gatha* targets non-Tibetan mainland Chinese audiences who are equally foreign to Tibetan cultural practices. Thus, the way Tang negotiates his relationship to his film subjects shows that the positions of the self and the other are not fixed but interchangeable. These positions are shaped by not just Tang's own religious beliefs but also national cultural policies that have influenced many Chinese citizens' understandings of ethnic minority cultures in relation to Chinese cultures.

Unlike the films by Fifth Generation directors who respond to a China in transition in the 1980s and 1990s and their shared generational experience being sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, Ergao's and Tang's dance films intend to react to Chinese modernity enveloped by capitalist materialism as experienced in the twenty-first century. Ergao's *This Is A Chicken Coop* avoids representing village life as an outdated lifestyle but abstracts the village life into an expression of time that embraces slowness to reflect upon the temporal experience of modernity. In Tang's work, the practice of pilgrimage is not at all associated with backwardness but signifies a timeless spiritual practice that remains relevant to contemporary life. This relatedness is emphasized through the hybrid corporeality that borrows from both *cham* and urban hip hop practice. Thus, the nostalgia expressed through Ergao and Tang's films is not a regressive emotion that looks backward. The past is not an escape. Rather, responding to commercialized and materialistic Chinese urban lifestyles, Ergao and Tang search for a point of counterbalance to compensate for different kinds of loss that modernity has produced.

Instead of claiming authenticity in their representation of Cantonese village life and Tibetan religious practices, both works re-signify local and regional cultures through unexpected visual, temporal, and corporeal juxtapositions. In *This Is A Chicken Coop*, Ergao seeks to present a sense of harmony between bodies on screen and the environment of the village. At the same

time, the dance film also exposes layers of contradictions and incongruity in their relationships. In *Gatha,* in contrast, Tang's visual and kinesthetic juxtaposition blends popular urban cultures with religious practices to deconstruct a conventional representation of Tibetan cultures as traditional and ancient. Thus, these two experimental dance films would be more appropriately read as a self-reflexive projection of their personal experiences in urban cities rather than an embodiment of local cultures at their face values. By doing so, both Ergao and Tang project a cultural critique of the over-commercialized urban centers that lack ritual and spirituality.

The Interaction between Domestic Production and Global Reception

While Ergao and Tang chose to ground their films in Cantonese and Tibetan contexts that are often considered as the periphery of mainland China, both dance films present visualities that are not unfamiliar to Western audiences. The Cantonese and Tibetan cultures are often portrayed as alternative or antithetical representations of mainland China, though in very different ways. For example, Hong Kong blockbusters and the widespread diasporic Cantonese communities render Cantonese cultures globally recognizable. Hollywood commercializes images of Tibet as well as Tibetan Buddhism to construct an orientalist imagination of the region to project American's fascination and exaltation of Tibetan cultures against the demonized representation of China (Mullen 1998). As Dina Iordanova suggests, "The discovery of Chinese cinema certainly takes place through the festival circuit, and so to a large extent does the discovery of China itself" (2017, 218). As dance films exhibit imageries of China on both visual and kinesthetic levels, how much have these two films' international success resulted from their display of regional and local distinctiveness that differs from stereotypical representations of China? What do their receptions reveal about screendance exhibition? As these two works

entered global circulation, would these regional aesthetics and cultural expressions be easily reduced to national ones, since film festivals often label works by the country of origin of the filmmaker or the country of production to better measure and display their international reach? Drawing on analyses of festival programs, interviews, and press articles, I discuss here some specific examples of festivals that screened Tang's and Ergao's films to uncover the cultural politics behind their exhibition.

Though many major screendance festivals overlap in the films they select each year, each festival also presents its own agenda through their programming and curatorial processes. The reception of Ergao's and Tang's films in specific festivals reflects disparate narratives of China embraced by these festivals. For example, *This Is A Chicken Coop* was commissioned by and premiered at Jumping Frames International Dance Video Festival in Hong Kong.[116] The sponsorship from Jumping Frames in support of this production as well as several other works by Ergao is consistent with the festival's geopolitical position. As the largest dance film festival in Asia, Jumping Frames puts a high priority on showcasing works by dance filmmakers across East and Southeast Asia. The majority of works that the festival presents are created by artists based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, mainland China, as well as in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore.[117] Because of its proximity to Guangdong and its ongoing collaboration with the Guangdong Dance Company, Cantonese choreographers and directors like Ergao are frequent

[116] Like many dance filmmakers in China, Ergao did not start working with the medium of screendance until 2014 when he created his debut dance film *Lucy* (2014), funded by Jumping Frames International Dance Video Festival in Hong Kong. The work was exhibited at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival's Short Film Corner (Cannes Court Métrage). Since then, Ergao continued to experiment with dance film, creating both live performance versions and screen versions for the same choreographic concept. Jumping Frames has been a frequent funder and site of exhibition for Ergao's works.

[117] Experimental dance films by mainland Chinese artists only became more visible in the past five years.

collaborators. My conversation with Raymond Wong, the curator and organizer of the festival, reveals that Jumping Frames, while taking part in the global network of screendance festivals, distinguishes itself from other festivals with a strong interest in promoting both a Chinese aesthetic and a pan-Asian aesthetic (Raymond Wong, interview with the author, September 17, 2018). It is important to note that what Wong refers to as "Chinese" departs from the term's affiliation with China as a nation-state but more about its association with sinophone cultures affiliated with the greater China, which at times also encompass the Chinese diaspora (for instance, its collaboration with diasporic Taiwanese choreographer Cheng-Chieh Yu based in the US that resulted in the production of the 2015 dance film *Martiality, Not Fighting*). Thus, Ergao's works that often engage with Cantonese cultures and traditions align with Jumping Frames' position of promoting Chinese artists and their works that advocate for decentered expressions of Chineseness.

Similarly and more explicitly, the inclusion of Chinese dance films that present local and regional aesthetic expressions could also reflect a deliberate curatorial effort by some festivals to deconstruct essentialized, monolithic, and Orientalized images of China and instead highlight the idea of "multiple Chinas." In the case of the site-specific video installations at Fabbrica Europa Festival in Italy in 2019,[118] Ergao's *This Is A Chicken Coop* was included as one of thirteen short dance films by choreographers based in mainland China and Hong Kong to showcase multifaceted expressions of Chineseness in a "contemporary" sense ("China Focus" 2019). This short list of dance films includes several works created through the Young Artist Platform Program, which was carried out by the Chinese Dancers' Association in 2016. The program

[118] Note that Fabbrica Europa Festival is not a dance film-specific festival. But its dance film component shares similarity to other dance film festivals of small scale, which presents a much smaller program and reflects a more focused theme.

sponsored ten works through choreographer-director collaborations to feature a new generation of dance artists in mainland China, most belonging to the post-1980s generation. These ten dance films made up the "I'm a Dancer" series, each featuring one emerging Chinese dancers. On one hand, the series aims to promote young Chinese dancers, and on the other hand, it hopes to promote short experimental dance film as an art form. The two works that employ Chinese dance forms are both included in the program presented at Fabbrica Europa Festival —Hu Qingzhe's *Seeking* (额日勒•寻 2018, 4 min) that features contemporary Mongolian dance, and Wang Yabing and Guan Hangyu's collaboration, *Unlimit* (度 2018, 3 min) which presents Wang's performance of long sleeve dance (水袖舞), a form of Chinese classical dance, edited in a fragmented way that breaks down the logic of the original choreography. In addition, Wen Hui's *Dance with Third Grandmother* was also part of the screening. All of these works, in one way or the other, deconstruct stereotypical and formulaic conceptions of China, by either reimagining Chinese classical or folk dance, creating new narratives about Chinese history, or evoking locally specific cultures, in order to contribute to the construction of a multicentric vision of China. This approach aligns with Dina Iordanova's (2017) findings from examining the presence of Chinese films in global film festivals. She argues that a uniform vision of China no longer serves the "post-American" world and that Western audiences now desire to see a complex representation of new China.

In addition, the Fabbrica Europa Festival also sought to identify ostensibly universal linkages between the film exhibited and its mostly European audiences. At the same festival, Ergao conducted a four-day screendance workshop in which he used "chicken" as a transnational object of nostalgia to create conversations surrounding memories and relationships to native soil with European dancers. These dancers then created a series of short dance films that responded

to their own reflections on issues of urbanization and the notion of home (Ergao Dance Production Group 2020). The exhibition of his work, along with the workshop, suggests that the sentiment of nostalgia is transnationally relatable and could spur creative collaboration across cultural and national boundaries.

With regard to Tang's *Gatha*, its reception by *DesArts//DesCiné Festival* in France reproduces the binary notions of the West versus the Orient while simultaneously reversing its conventional hierarchy. Tang shared with me a conversation he had with Anna Alexandra, the director of *DesArts//DesCinés Festival* in Saint-Etienne, France. Tang paraphrased Alexandra's words when she was asked why Tang's work was granted the Grand Jury Award:

> 'It was because you [Tang] are using the body to tell a story. I would like to show your work to European dance filmmakers. They are all just showing off technical skills but do not return to their heart. That is why I gave you this big award. I want European filmmakers to also return to the state of the origin.' (Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, trans. author, December 10, 2019)

Alexandra's response towards Tang's film (assuming it was an accurate depiction of what she said to Tang) presents an interesting reversal of the mode of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said (1978) that presumes Western superiority. In this case, based on Alexandra's viewpoint, Tang's work sets an example for European directors to emulate, in the way that it foregrounds the relentless spiritual pursuit and human connection against Tibet's exotic landscape. Its focus on humanity is framed as the salvation for the trap of technology prioritized by European dance filmmakers. However, Alexandra's rhetoric simultaneously reinforces a binary framework, in which the Orient is seen as embodying an ancient, primitive culture that is closer to "the origin" of humanity while the West represents advanced technology and the ability to employ these technologies through cinematic expressions (however overdone and less desirable they might be, in Alexandra's view of screendance). Even as Tang's film has become the model to emulate in

an ostensible subversion of the East-West binary, Alexandra returns to a binary opposition of the Orient as primitive "origin" and the West as the advanced hub of "technical skills."

Besides being touted as an exemplary work in its approach to screendance in non-screendance festivals, *Gatha* immediately became associated with national politics because of its depiction of Tibet. Presented at the Los Angeles-based Dances with Film Festival, a festival that primarily focuses on presenting independent films, *Gatha* was screened as part of its short film program called "Spotlight: Kids from China" in 2018. In a press article, critic J. B. Spins (2018) opens by framing Tibet as a "nation" experiencing "despoilment." Towards the end of the article, he reiterates his political opinion and associates it with his reading of Tang's film, stating, "This is one of the most ambitious and rewarding dance films in years, but it also serves as a timely reminder of what is at risk in occupied Tibet." Though Tang has no intention to associate this film with the Tibetan Independence Movement, its depiction of a fantisized image of Tibetan landscape, the practice of pilgrimage, and the dynamic choreography are collectively read as the "authentic" Tibet that is at risk of being attacked and disappearing. Such a reading implies that Tang may share the desire to preserve the integrity of Tibet as a political entity confronted by the threat and occupation of the Chinese government. This arbitrarily constructed narrative about *Gatha* adds a new unintended meaning to the film.[119] Such interpretation is a misrepresentation of Tang's work in order to fit within the popular American narrative that supports the Tibetan Independence Movement as a pursuit of freedom and democracy while portraying the Chinese government as authoritarian.

[119] Writing about Chinese Film Festivals in New York, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong (2017) suggests that as a film travels through different festivals, it could acquire new meanings due to the shifting contexts of the festival.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the image of the Tibetan monks in Tang's film is an already established visual trope in the Western context. Jane Naomi Iwamura (2011) points out in her book *Virtual Orientalism* that American audiences have a strong fascination towards what she calls "the oriental monk," which conjures a stereotypical image of a spiritually committed Asian male figure with a particular manner of dress and behavior. This specific identification is a product of "a series of historical encounters and imaginative engagements" through popular media and culture (2011, 6). Iwamura refers to the development of this type of Orientalized stereotypes through screen as "virtual orientalism," where the visual elements presented in media construct the viewers' virtual experience of the site and subject, turning them into a form of reality. Western audiences' familiarity with this trope makes Tang's film accessible. The fact that the imagination of the Oriental monk is also constructed by an "oriental" director makes such construction appear even more authentic. Therefore, it is not surprising that Tang's film is picked up by many international film festivals and are praised in the transnational film network.

The examples above present different ways that *This Is A Chicken Coop* and *Gatha* have been framed by various festivals on a global scale that are at times subject to an Orientalist gaze. Both Tibetan and Cantonese cultures and visualities remain central to the representation of China in the global film festival circuits. In the circulation of these two films, they fit within different narratives about China and convey multi-faceted manifestations of new China, particularly from the perspective of a new generation of choreographers and directors. These dance films by post-1980s Chinese artists simultaneously present aesthetic innovations that challenge film festivals' Eurocentric position. Therefore, while Chinese urban centers reimagine themselves through the rural and culturally marginal, such reimagination is also consumed, exoticized, and embraced by

the global film market. Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen uses the term "global nativism" to frame "world cinema" that capitalizes upon local distinctiveness (2000, 177). "Global nativism," in Chen's words, refers to "exotic images of native and national local histories and signs" that are fetishized as "selling points" in global circulation of art cinema (Chen 2000, 177). The successful reception of these experimental dance films that project recognizable symbols of Chineseness provokes the fine line between an Orientalizing gaze and efforts to decolonize aesthetics in the context of global screendance.

In addition, the global circulation of these two films also points out that the production, circulation, and reception of screendance are closely intertwined. Transnational circulation of dance films by Chinese artists also impacts dance filmmaking within China. In regard to the example of Tang Chenglong, the popular reception of *Gatha* in the global film scene helps shape an internalized logic clearly stated in the following words by Tang: "I am Chinese, and I have Chinese ways of thinking, Chinese ways of communicating, and rich Chinese cultural heritage, which they (Euro-American artists) do not have. This is how dance films by Chinese artists could stand out" (Tang Chenglong, interview with the author, trans. author, December 10, 2020). The popular reception of *Gatha* was unexpected for Tang who originally did not think of globally disseminating this dance film. After its success, however, Tang realized how native cultures could bring currency to his film in the global film scene precisely by portraying local distinctiveness. Following the exhibition of *Gatha* at *DesArts//DesCiné Festival* in France, the festival commissioned Tang to create another dance film, *L'Apât* (姜公, to be released). A co-production between the festival and Tang himself, *L'Apât* reinterprets a Chinese classical narrative of the eleventh-century Chinese noble Jiang Ziya (also referred to as Jiang Taigong) fishing without bait and aims to make the story relevant to the current time and a global

audience. This subsequent production reaffirms Tang's commitment to creating dance films that are rooted in Chinese cultures while highlighting their contemporary relevance.

In addition, what Tang refers to as the "Chinese logic" is reiterated by Chinese dance scholar and critic Li Jiaojiao (2019) who wrote a review of *Gatha* after the film received awards from three major festivals. Like Tang, Li equally attributes *Gatha*'s success to its embodiment of Chinese cultures. Li states

> *Gatha* appears different from other dance films created in China that tend to imitate western dance films. Adopting the narrative convention of cinema, this film tells a Chinese story through Chinese logic and conveys Chinese sentiments. By doing so, it moved Euro-American dance film festival judges (trans. author).

Li's words raise two interesting points. First, Li's review unquestionably frames Tibetan-ness as an ethnic and regional identity under the umbrella of Chinese national identity.[120] This framing is understandable as it reflects the Chinese nationality discourse that considers China a multicultural and multiethnic nation to which Tibetan cultures belong. However, such a conception fails to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Tibetan cultures from the mainland Chinese cultures as a national category. It also implies a cultural hierarchy within postsocialist China that easily appropriates ethnic cultures for political reasons such as displaying China's rich and diverse cultures on global platforms.

[120] Such a framing can be traced to the beginning of the PRC when minority groups are framed as equal partners with the Han majority for the construction of the PRC's multiethnic national identity. Discussing the minority dance and the Chinese nationality discourse in the early years of the PRC, Emily Wilcox (2016) challenges the framework of "internal orientalism" for understanding minority dance. Instead, Wilcox argues that minority dancers are framed as contributing members of the PRC and embody "a unified, multiethnic Chinese national identity constructed against an image of foreign, especially U.S., aggressors" at the time (369). Wilcox also acknowledges that with the framing of minorities in dance at the present time differs from the early years of the PRC and needs to be reassessed based on the specific social, cultural and political conditions of the time.

Second, Li acknowledges that it has been rare for Chinese dance filmmakers to tap into local and ethnic cultural expressions. Most of them employ predominantly modern and postmodern dance vocabularies.[121] This view is consistent with Liu Chun's observation on the dance film scene in China that I discussed in Chapter One. However, the recent few years have also seen an increasing number of dance films that explicitly evoke Chinese cultural elements. For instance, besides the few films exhibited at the 2019 Fabbrica Europa Festival that I mentioned earlier, one work in Wu Zhen (吴振)'s *The Song of Guqin* series (古琴系列), which screened at Dance on Camera Festival in New York in 2016, features a choreography of multiple pairs of hands drawing from hand gestures in Chinese classical dance performed to the sound of guqin. Hu Xiaojiao (胡晓娇)'s *Nuo* (*Nuo yuan* 傩•缘 2017), a dance documentary, screened at the same festival in 2018, explores the preservation and stage adaptation process of a folk dance form *nuo*. A handful of dance filmmakers whom I interviewed also conveyed a similar intention as Tang in that they hoped to create works that embrace elements of Chinese culture, both at national, regional, and local levels.

My interview with dance scholar Zhang Zhaoxia (张朝霞) further illustrates the interaction between global reception and domestic screendance production. Zhang is one of the first Chinese scholars to publish a book on dance and media in China*, Theorizing New Media Dance* (*Xinmeiti wudao gailun* 新媒体舞蹈概论 2012). She has also been an active supporter and advocate for screendance, organizing various annual events and festivals to promote the art form. When asked about her vision of dance film development in China, Zhang states,

> It is important to bring Chinese dance films to international platforms. If a work wins awards, then we can promote the work in China and say that this work receives

[121] Many of these works are sporadically screened in international dance film festivals but have never received the same amount of recognition as *This Is A Chicken Coop* and *Gatha*.

> international awards. Just like how art films were promoted in the past. The promotion of dance films should also follow this path. (Zhang Zhaoxia, interview with the author, trans. author, August 24, 2018)

In other words, Zhang considers global reception a productive engine for dance film development within China by providing various incentives to both artists and institutions. Informed by the global visibility of Chinese art cinema and perhaps also the convention of domestic dance competitions that promote dance artists and grant status to their works, Zhang envisions a similar path for dance film—using awards and platforms for exhibition as stimuli. While Zhang's comment reveals the importance of international reception of screendance and the desire for Chinese dance film artists to actively engage in this kind of global dialogue, she also presents a paradox. As she encourages dance film artists to "compete" in the global dance film scene, the value of a dance film is still measured by international film festivals that largely operate based on Euro-American aesthetic standards.

In recent years, as Chinese dance filmmakers started to have more access to submit their works to international film festivals,[122] they started to consciously or subconsciously reconsider Chinese cultural traditions, identities, and kinesthetic expressions as cultural currency that could distinguish their works from others in the global dance film scene. This heightened visibility resulted in part from Chinese dance filmmakers' growing interest in participating in the global screendance festival scene. This desire is confirmed as many of the recent screendance works created by Chinese artists include titles and end credits in English, which implies that these works were intended for global consumption. In Chapter One, I discussed how early experiments

[122] Because of the Internet control in mainland China, many sites for festival submission are not accessible within China. However, with increased global travels and connections abroad, many artists now find different ways to submit their works. While experimental dance film as an artistic category has emerged in mainland China for over two decades, the global visibility of works by Chinese artists is only a recent phenomenon.

in dance filmmaking on China's central television space initially embraced Chinese folk and classical dance forms when targeting explicitly domestic audiences. However, as experimental dance film entered higher education and independent dance space, it became more associated with modern dance. The positive global reception of *This Is A Chicken Coop* and *Gatha* may lead more Chinese dance filmmakers to draw on national, regional, and local cultures and to blend them with their own authorial styles and interpretations. This self-reflexive engagement with culturally specific aesthetics could provide sources for choreographies and cinematic innovation. The successful international reception could potentially spark new trends in dance filmmaking or filmmaking in general.[123] Ergao and Tang's films, and their popular reception, signal an important moment in dance film development in mainland China in which the focus has shifted from an exploration of the individual experience to cultural reflection, and from imitating western aesthetics to innovating new dance film aesthetics based on culturally specific aesthetics.

[123] Examining the programming and curation of dance film festivals, Douglas Rosenberg (2012) points out that the network of dance film festivals somewhat overlaps in programming. The works that are repetitively selected by major festival point to the new trend in dance filmmaking.

Epilogue
New Opportunities Under Crisis: Screendance in the PRC during COVID-19

In this dissertation, I explored various new experiments in screendance by four generations of Chinese dance artists in the PRC since the 1990s. This hybrid experimental art form that explores the creative potential between dance and film medium takes on multifarious forms and circulates in a wide range of artistic spaces, such as Chinese television, cinema, theatrical space, galleries, and the Internet. These new approaches to dance filmmaking highlight how film technology takes part in dance making and contributes to the invention of new visual and kinesthetic expressions that are symptomatic of China's postsocialist social and cultural shifts.

The rapidly shifting screendance scene in China since the start of my research makes it inevitable that this project only represents a partial picture of the prominent aesthetic experimentations in screendance practices. In this project, I focused primarily on three modes of dance filmmaking that emerged since the early 1990s in the PRC: video dance on television, experimental dance documentary, and experimental dance shorts. Each mode draws from different artistic genealogies and responds to disparate facets of China's postsocialist conditions. While Chapter One focuses on the beginning of new screendance experiments, Chapters Two and Three explore more recent dance films, some of which were created during the time of this research.

The rising popularity of dance filmmaking within China can be attributed to an increase in the availability of platforms for the exhibition of dance film through a series of state-sponsored initiatives carried out by the Chinese Dancers Association.[124] As mentioned in

[124] In 2016, Chinese Dancers Association sponsored a One-Minute Dance Film competition (Liu 2019). From the competition, a group of artists were selected to attend a dance film workshop held in the

Chapter Three, since 2016, the Chinese Dancers Association initiated a series of activities to promote experimental dance film, including organizing screendance workshops,[125] holding one-minute screendance competitions, producing the "Impressions of Dancers" dance film series, sponsoring the first and second China Video Dance Exhibitions, as well as bringing Chinese dance films into international dance film festivals to facilitate transnational dialogues on screendance. These new opportunities for studying, experimenting and presenting dance films both within and beyond China's domestic context resulted in a sudden explosion of works by a new generation of choreographers, dancers, filmmakers, and media artists as well as an increased scholarly interest in screendance. In those years, experimental dance films have quickly transitioned from being a rarely discussed art practice to a "hot topic" amongst dance artists in China.

As I continued to monitor the screendance scene in China during the writing of this dissertation, I realized that the 2020 global pandemic became a historical moment that not only further fueled screendance experimentation in the PRC but also opened up new ways for its domestic and global production, dissemination, and consumption. Due to the pandemic, the

summer of 2017. After the workshop, Chinese Dancers Association sponsored ten dance films, each production is made up of one dancer/choreographer and a filmmaker or media artist. All of them were participants at the workshop as well. Collectively, these ten short films make up what has been called the "I'm a Dancer" series (中国舞者映像展). In December of the same year, Chinese Dancers Association also organized the first China Dance Video Exhibition featuring four categories of dance films, including promotional dance films, dance advertisements, experimental dance film, and narrative dance films (China Dance Video Exhibition 2019). In 2019, the second China Dance Video Exhibition was held in December (Dan 2019). A one-week long dance film workshop accompanied the exhibition. All of these platforms have contributed to the development of dance film in mainland China.

[125] Workshops on experimental dance filmmaking through universities and during domestic dance festivals also frequently took place during these years in both coastal cities and cities in the Western region of China such as Chengdu and Chongqing. workshops on experimental dance filmmaking through universities and during domestic dance festivals also frequently took place during these years in both coastal cities and cities in the Western region of China such as Chengdu and Chongqing.

growing fascination with filming dance and exhibiting dance on screen suddenly became a necessity when the screen of all sorts (e.g., windows, computer screens, cellphone screens, television screens, face shields) turned into the primary interface for communication during the time of quarantine and isolation.

I decided to end this dissertation with a discussion on screendance created during the pandemic for several reasons. First, the new wave of screendance enthusiasm in China presents new implications for the future of screendance, but it also makes scholarly inquiry of this new art phenomenon even more critical and timely. Second, the unforeseen technological innovation in the production and dissemination of screendance further highlights the instability of this experimental art form. Moreover, the scale of the influence from the Chinese state on screendance production reiterates one of my arguments that socialist legacy persists in new experiments in screendance in postsocialist China. In what follows, I will first briefly contextualize the screendance scene during the pandemic in China and in relation to the US where I have resided during the pandemic. I will then provide a few examples of experimental dance films created during the pandemic as these works allow us to further theorize screendance as an artistic medium particularly relevant to and reflective of the technology-driven globalized modernity. Situating these works in the context of China's response to the pandemic further demonstrates the multifarious functions of screendance in postsocialist China and its intertwining relationships with both the state and individual citizens' experiences.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on the Dance Field

COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that had already started to spread across the global towards the end of 2019, first came to the world's attention in January 2020 when the city of

Wuhan reported a cluster of pneumonia cases. On January 23, Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in China with a population of over 11 million, went into lockdown. Soon after, many other cities in China began a voluntary lockdown. Bustling cities in China suddenly became eerily empty as people stayed indoors to avoid any unnecessary contact with people outside their own households. A month or two later, with somewhat curtailed yet still continuous global human flow, it became increasingly apparent that COVID-19 was no longer a regional epidemic but a global pandemic that afflicted populations in most parts of the world.

The pandemic testifies to human flow across the globe at an unprecedented scale and speed that made efforts to halt a rapidly spreading virus difficult if not impossible. To counter the spread of the virus, this flow has to be restricted. Governments around the world took on various measures informed by their disparate political positions, such as closing the border, halting visa processing, quarantining upon arrival at a new destination, and obeying "stay at home" orders of various kinds. It is under this condition of physical isolation that the *screen* has become the most important and frequently used interface to maintain human connection, to facilitate the continuation of productivity under the regime of capitalism, and to make art.

In China, along with the majority of countries and regions around the world, the pandemic has drastically changed how people live, work, interact with others. It also significantly changed how people make dances. For months, dance studios were closed. Dance classes were held over the Internet and accessed through screens of different sizes (e.g., cellphone, iPad, and computer screens, etc.). Most performances were halted. Yet, the desire to dance and create never stopped. Dance artists within China and across the globe had to re-engage with the question of what it means to be a dancer and a choreographer during a pandemic, and how an embodied practice like dance can intervene in a new lived reality where direct human

contact is significantly limited through social distancing. Many creative solutions emerged soon after the lockdown: holding dance classes outdoors, taking online classes, holding performances at backyards, through drive-through theaters, choreographing dance over the Internet (via zoom or other software), and many more. In most of these solutions, the screen also became the new space where dancing bodies interact with one another.

Because of its inherent relationship to screen as a site of production and transmission, experimental dance film became especially fitting to address the new conditions of life experienced by people around the globe. First, experimental dance filmmaking has a lower barrier of entry compared to commercial films. Its production value is not solely defined by the budget of production or the cost of the equipment. With increased access to different kinds of digital technologies, such as cellphones with high definition video capability, editing apps and software, computers, and video cameras,[126] it is possible nowadays for any dancers and choreographers with access to a camera and an editing app to make a dance film. Second, dance film presents both a visual and embodied experience that exceeds a documentation of a live dance performance. It is not a reproduction of a performance that always conjures an original form but a creative practice in itself. As such, dance film can directly engage with the viewers as an independent art form itself rather than being always affiliated with a live performance version. Thus, during the pandemic, dance film has been able to continue reaching audiences without evoking a sense of loss like virtual dance performances often do. Third, dance film does not attach its production to a designated location such as a stage of certain size. Any location can serve as the stage for dance to take place in the making of a dance film. All of these above-

[126] In Su Yutong's (2021) article, which discusses COVID-19 themed screendance in China, mentions the following editing apps that are popular amongst dance filmmakers: "cool edit," "ps," "Jianying," and "pr."

mentioned characteristics of dance film make this art form particularly relevant during a time of isolation and explain why the turn towards screendance has become a global phenomenon.

Screendance is inherently an interdisciplinary art form that crosses boundaries. By foregrounding movement, it crosses the boundary of verbal language. Through the screen, it crosses the boundary of geographical and national borders. During the global pandemic, screendance became the site where dance continues to transmit to the audience when theaters are closed. It became a platform where choreographing and filming with a group of dancers in distance is possible. It also became a creative space where shared and disparate lived experiences during this global health crisis are reflected upon. Dance film seems to offer an ideal creative solution for dance artists under many kinds of creative constraints. Consequently, across the globe, dance artists who had not picked up a camera in the past found a reason to engage with dance film as the most relevant site of dance creation and transmissions of the moment.

Chinese Dance Artists' Responses to the Pandemic

As the virus affects people at many regions and nation-states, taking away lives while sickening many others, the responses to the pandemic have been intensely politicized based on disparate national interests and narratives of freedom. Screendance has also been entangled amidst these various national narratives and manifest in different forms. In the fall of 2020, I was approached by Professor Xu Hang (徐颃) at the Beijing Dance Academy to co-chair a panel on screendance created specifically during the pandemic at the BDA Dance Symposium, a global gathering of dance artists and scholars "over the cloud" (云端, or online). To curate this panel, I gathered and watched a number of dance films created by artists in the US and China, as well as in other parts of world to identify some overlapping themes. While Professor Xu was initially

interested in emphasizing the theme of love, compassion and hope during the time of crisis, I found that dance films created in the US did not directly correspond to these themes.

A large number of COVID-19 themed dance films in the US fall into three somewhat overlapping categories. The first group of dance films emerged in 2020 address feelings of frustration, fear, isolation, and loneliness. These works often take place at the residence of the artists or in an outdoor space where performers wear masks, a symbolic costume choice that situates the film during the specific time of public health crisis. The second group of works feature an ensemble dance constructed via zoom to show the potential of being able to move together during time of isolation. These works tend to use a range of editing techniques such as presenting a collage of shots in different frame sizes on a single screen to construct a digital manifestation of togetherness (e.g., Francesca Harper's *Still*, 2020). The third group of dance films addresses issues of racial justice, fueled by brutal murders of black lives (including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Eric Garner) over the summer of 2020 in the US. These works foreground racial injustice while also making it explicit that the context of the production takes place during a pandemic through visual markers such as masks and gloves (e.g., Jade Charon's *Gold*, 2020).

These dance films exhibit a stark contrast with works created in China which mostly evoke a sense of unity, hope and compassion, and glorify the beauty in humanity. It is through this stark contrast with the works created in the US context during the same time period that the specificity of dance film practices in China becomes prominently visible. Many dance films by Chinese dance artists use dance to narrate stories of healthcare workers and their families, explicitly framing these frontline workers as heroes. They also depict positive portrayals of the Chinese government's efforts in fighting the virus. Phrases like "Hello Wuhan" (你好, 武汉),

"Go China" (Zhongguo jiayou 中国加油), "Go Wuhan" (Wuhan jiayou 武汉加油) are often incorporated into these films to express a sense of solidarity towards the national effort in battling with the global health crisis. Most of these works circulate to audiences through new media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and various video streaming sites. They partake in the collective efforts towards fighting against the pandemic by incorporating explicit terms such as *kangyi* (抗疫) or *zhanyi* (战役) ("fighting against the virus") on screen or in their titles. The Chinese characters *kang* (抗) and *zhan* (战), often utilized in the context of wars, have been continuously engaged in public rhetoric during times of crisis—for instance, during the fight against one of the most severe flooding episodes in the twentieth century along parts of the Yangtze River in 1998, during the SARS outbreak in 2002, and during the devastating Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008. It is during these moments of unprecedented challenges that these slogans that contain words like "combating" and "fighting" recur, effectively framing the crisis at hand—the flood, the earthquake, and the virus—as a common enemy of the Chinese nation. These devastating moments of crisis rejuvenate the sentiment of Chinese nationalism, which is further propagated through arts and cultural productions.

The prevalence of COVID-19 themed screendance productions was not an accidental happening. It was a direct result of state promoted artistic efforts. Responding to the call from President Xi Jinping, China Literary and Art Volunteer's Association (CLAVA 中国文艺志愿者协会) published a document on January 29, 2020, summoning arts and cultural workers to use literature and art as means to contribute to the fight against the pandemic and as spiritual support (China Literary and Art Volunteer's Association 2020). Within two weeks, Chinese Dancers Association (2020) also published a report providing detailed guidelines to orient dance artists' creation of COVID-19 themed dance productions. The report encourages dance artists to focus

on “main-melody” productions that communicate “positive messages” and to forbid works that render negative portrayals of the masses or heroic figures. The report also advocates that the dance works should serve the masses and root the content in everyday life. Innovation is another emphasis in the document, which also encourages circulation of dance works through new media platforms, an increasingly important channel of arts and cultural dissemination.

Immediately after these calls, a number of dance institutions, professional dance companies and troupes, and individual artists participated in the production of dance films that respond to the theme of “Dance Against the Pandemic” (以舞抗疫). According to Meng Meng (2020), 385 COVID-19 themed dance films (including a small number of overlapping dance videos across platforms) were published through ten most representative dance-related public WeChat Accounts within two months—between early February to the end of March, resulting in an unprecedented enthusiasm towards dance film production. Out of these works, 77 percent correspond to the category of using dance to embody positive energy that contributes to the collective fight against the virus (Meng 2020, 25). The remaining works either focus on “mass entertainment” (15 percent) or “self-expression” (8 percent).

Corporeal and Cinematic Articulation of Hope

In this section, I highlight three short dance films created within this context, all of which were presented at the screendance panel that I co-chaired during the Beijing Dance Academy Dance Symposium in November 2020 and have been widely circulated through new media platforms within China. These works include two short dance films *Hand Guard* (*Shou hu* 手•护 2020) and *Together* (*Zai yiqi* 在一起 2020) produced by the Beijing Dance Academy, as well as

The Sun Also Rises (2020) directed and edited by Chen Yujie (陈玉洁),[127] professor at Southwest University in Chongqing. The first two films recount stories of healthcare workers through corporeal enactment while the third film presents a collage of everyday life experienced by individual dancers and their families under lockdown. A close reading of these works reveals how Chinese dance artists creatively engage with the specificity of the screendance medium to participate in the nation-wide artistic mobilization during the pandemic.

Hand Guard and *Together* are both directed by prominent dance scholar and the current Vice-President of the Beijing Dance Academy, Xu Rui (许锐), and filmed and edited by multi-media artist Wu Zhen (吴振), who has also published many articles on screendance and created a number of short dance videos that circulated internationally. Both films were shot in a theater stage with only the dancers and the props lit. Under such lighting, the stage presents itself as an abstract space that connotes two different sites at various moments in the dance suggested by the dance choreography, the costume, and the props: an abstract "non-space" that represents an internal world of the dancer and a hospital.

Against the sounds of difficult breathing, *Hand Guard* opens with a close up of a young woman staring into the camera against a void background of darkness. The woman is fully lit with back light which creates an angelic rim around her body. She lowers her head and covers her ears and then crosses her arms to embrace her shoulders. She lifts up her head as if searching for something hopeful and then cringes her upper body as if fear is still overwhelming. As she continues to ripple her arms above and around her head and chest, the camera dollies across the floor in front her, creating the illusion that she is moving across the screen.

[127] This dance film does not have a Chinese title. Its English title borrows that of Ernest Hemingway's first major novel, published in 1926.

The scene that follows consists of a montage of a series of actions performed by the same woman now dressed as a doctor fully-covered with protective gear. She puts on large goggles to protect her eyes, then puts on gloves and checks a patient's lung function with a stethoscope. She looks at the temperature meter and prepares a needle. These highly selected actions closely correspond to the medical examination for COVID patients and explicitly situate the film in the context of the pandemic. In a close-up shot, a hand in a glove reaches out slowly to hold onto the patient's hand. We see another hand in glove gently pat the patient's hand as if reassuring him that he will be ok. The carefully choreographed hand movements in this scene convey the deep care of a healthcare worker for her patient. It recalls a scene from Wu Hao's academy award-shortlisted documentary *76 Days* (2020), which records life at a hospital in Wuhan during duration of the lockdown, in which a nurse held an elderly woman's hand as he comforted her and told her that he was her family there in the hospital when her actually family could not visit her.

The final scene features close up shots of a hand choreography against a beam of warm lights coming from the top right corner of the screen. One hand playfully chases the other like two birds flying around one another. At times, the hands transform into a butterfly fluttering its wings. At times, the pair of hands reaches towards the light. At times, they shape into a budding flower. In the end, the hands form the shape of a heart. As the camera slowly dollies out, we see the protagonist lowers her hands, still in the shape of a heart, in front of her chest, as if sending love to all the patients suffering from COVID and to health workers. These rather literal symbolic hand gestures and shapes convey a sense of hope at the time of despair.

The choreographer and performer of *Hand Guard* is dance artist Liu Yan. At the peak of her career in 2008, Liu was invited to perform the only dance solo at the Olympic Opening

ceremony directed by Zhang Yimou, a rare honor for a young dancer. At the time, Liu was only 26 years old. Unfortunately, due to an accident during rehearsal a few days before the ceremony, Liu fell from a three-meter high platform held up by a group of men and became paralyzed from her waist down. Not defeated by fate, Liu has continued to devote her life to dance and has since been exploring and innovating "hand dance" (手舞). Liu herself is a quintessential embodiment of determination, hope, and perseverance in face of challenging circumstances. To Liu, hands are not only symbols of connection and care but also a site where choreography can continue taking place after the tragic accident through which she lived. In this dance film, a pair of hands—so malleable and symbolic—becomes the principle set of performers on screen. The artistic medium of dance film is especially equipped to construct meanings through a localized area of the body, which Liu also recognized through this collaboration. She has vowed to continue making dance films in the future and believes that dance film could help elongate her dance career (Liu Yan, personal communication, November 1, 2020).

Xu's second film *Together* uses a similar narrative strategy of corporeal storytelling to depict well-circulated narratives of medical workers who had to be away from their loved ones to combat the virus for the nation. This dance film is choreographed by Wang Yabin (王亚彬), a highly-regarded dancer and choreographer in China. Wang is the performer in Bai Zhiqun's *Fan Dance Water Ink Painting* (*Shanwu danqing* 扇舞丹青) that I discussed in Chapter One. She was also featured in the "I'm a Dancer" series, directly taking part in the production of experimental dance film *Unlimit* (*Du* 度 2018) mentioned in Chapter 3. In *Together*, also taking place on a theater stage, a glass screen separates two partners. A man dressed like a medical worker in full protective gear conducts his work on one side of the screen, where a woman gestures her longing for him on the other side. The two dancers at times perform in unison which constructs their

characters as lovers who connect with each other while being apart from one another. At times, they try to touch each other's hands by putting them against the screen that separates them physically. This image is very relatable and readable as it recalls many photos that have circulated through the Internet globally during the pandemic. Some of these images depict family members visiting their elderly family members through the glass window, trying to kiss and touch them, or medical workers trying to touch their loved ones' hands through a window or door.

The accessibility of the dance film to a general public is enhanced through its music. Accompanied by a popular song with the lyrics that states, "I can only tell you I love you through the phone," we see the dancers shape their hands like a phone (with the hand in a fist position while curling up the thumb and the little finger), matching the lyrics. The inclusion of a song with lyrics that directly speak to the challenging emotional experience of being apart, as well as the choreography of symbolic everyday gestures that communicate love and longing, makes the dance highly legible to people who may be unfamiliar with contemporary dance.

Hand Guard and *Together* both respond to the call to "combat the virus with one heart and provide assistance through the arts" (同心战役，艺术助力) (Beijing Dance Academy 2020). In these two works, the dancing bodies enact popular stories published in news articles during the most intense period of the pandemic in China, expressing gratitude and respect towards frontline workers. While these two dance films may appear cliché and overtly literal, they effectively communicate a positive and encouraging message to the mass audience in China. Works like these recall what Bai Zhiqun firmly believed in when she was experimenting with DTV in the 1990s and 2000s that DTV should convey positive sentiments to the mass audiences and make dance accessible to the public. Thus, while many previously state-sponsored dance

films tend to be more avant-garde and prioritizes individual choreographers' personal artistic expressions, during the era of COVID, numerous dance films have taken on a different function—to make screendance a productive new site for disseminating dance to the masses in a relatable and consumable way. This turn points to a persistence of socialist cultural sentiments within the context of postsocialist dance productions.

The Sun Also Rises, an independent dance film project, takes on a different approach from Xu's works discussed above. Instead of focusing on frontline workers, director Chen Yujie turns the camera towards everyday lived reality during the lockdown.[128] Responding to the sudden isolation as a result of the lockdown, Chen decided to construct a sense of togetherness by crowdsourcing footage of similar yet disparate encounters of over 35 dancers who reside in different cities in China through a remote collaboration via the Internet. The film was shot by individual artists themselves with mostly mobile phones, with Chen providing specific notes on how the footage should be framed. The medium of production speaks volumes about the conditions of the production. Under quarantine, filming dance with a cellphone appropriately reflects the specific conditions that people experience at the time, which is demonstrated through the lack of access to high-end film equipment.

The film opens with an exterior shot of a mostly empty street on a snowy day with only two pedestrians walking in distance from one another, seen from the perspective of someone looking down from the balcony of a tall apartment building. What comes next are a series of shots that present mundane domestic life during the pandemic—for instance, a dog looking out

[128] Chen is the director of the dance program at Southwest University. She is an experienced dance filmmaker and educator. In 2017, Chen was selected as one of the filmmakers commissioned by the Young Artist Platform Program in 2017 and created a dance film in collaboration of choreographer/dancer Xie Xin (谢欣). Currently, Chen is pursuing her PhD studies on screendance at the Ohio State University.

of the window at an apartment, a hand stirring a pot of instant noodles on a stove, four women sitting across from each other at a square table singing prayers, a young man eating silently at a desk filled with bread and milk, a young woman lighting up several rows of candles at a small altar at home, and a group of women playing Mahjong (a Chinese tile-based game). These small details of both bodily stillness and actions vividly paint the picture of how people experience time differently when staying at home. In each moment, these bodies' interactions with a refrigerator, a kitchen counter, a bed, a couch, and a young child reveal their domestic environment, transforming a private space into a theatrical site.

A minute into the film, the montage sequence transitions into a long sequence edited together by matching the end of a movement phrase performed by one person with the beginning of the next movement phrase by the next person taking place at a different site. These match cuts focus on seamlessly connecting the movement while ensuring that the end position of the prior dancer on screen overlaps with the starting position of the next one. This technique threads together people from different places as if they are performing collectively a long dance sequence, each taking on one small phrase. Here, Chen deliberately cites the filming and editing technique that American dance filmmaker Mitchell Rose refers to as "hyper matchcutting." Rose first employed this technique in his 2013 film *Globe Trot* in which he featured 50 filmmakers across 23 countries who filmed dancers each performing one movement phrase from a dance choreographed by Bebe Miller.[129] In his 2016 dance film *Exquisite Corps,* Rose incorporated the same method and assembled together 42 well-known contemporary American choreographers residing in different parts of the country. This film technique transfers extremely well in the

[129] In my article "An Inescapable Dilemma or A Utopia: Examining Social Relations in Mitchell Rose's Dancefilm 'Globe Trot'" (2016), I elaborate in detail the technique of "hyper matchcutting" in this work.

pandemic context when dancers could not gather in the same place. The smooth transition from one dancer to the next in a continuous movement phrase effectively creates a sense of connection and unity.

These young dancers, appearing to be in their 20s and 30s, perform improvised modern dance movement unmarked of any specific cultural identity. Yet, their surroundings reveal much about the environment where they live, which give us a glimpse of who they are. What struck me the most in the video is the co-existence of the confinement of a small domestic space and the implication of a global, cosmopolitan identity that these dancers embody onscreen. For example, all the diegetic sounds uttered by the dancers are in English. Most news coverage audio clips that make up the ambiance sound of some scenes are also spoken in English. In one scene, Tian Tian (田湉)—a Chinese choreographer who is internationally-known for her dance production *Yong* series (俑)—displays a row of books that are mostly with English titles on the covers. The only book that is not in English is a Chinese translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel by a Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez. Chen obviously intended to present this film to a global audience given the fact that English is the primary language used throughout the film, including its title and end credits. By doing so, she also constructs these dancers onscreen as bi-lingual, well-educated, and cosmopolitan subjects whose experience of isolation during the pandemic is transnationally relatable.

Though adopting different choreographic and cinematic approaches from Xu's dance films, Chen's work also aligns with the state guidelines of COVID-themed dance production by engaging with Chinese citizens' everyday life and instilling a sense of hope. With the advancement of the Internet technologies, *The Sun Also Rises* points to possibilities of remote artistic collaboration as a legitimate method of dance filmmaking. The film's citation of Rose's

"hyper-matchcutting" technique and the evocation of dancers' cosmopolitan identities also indicates heightened global connectivity and transnational fluidity, which continues to privilege the capitalist West.

Closing Words

Though experimental dance films that address the theme of "Dance Against the Pandemic" is a temporary phenomenon specific to the early months of the 2020, its impact on screendance will be lasting. During the pandemic, the screen takes on new meaning and functions. Instead of being critiqued as a technology that causes superficial connection and furthers isolation, it became a welcomed space for human interaction and artistic production. As a result, the pandemic has forced many dance artists and students to embrace screendance as a necessary and timely artistic medium and a critical creative space where dance can continue to be imagined and shared. Through the screen, more people outside the professional dance community now know what *wudao yingxiang* (dance-moving image) is. While nationalist sentiment resulted in homogeneity in artistic content of screendance productions in mainland China, new choreographic, filming and editing techniques are also explored and invented, opening up screendance's new creative possibilities.

Meanwhile, new media platforms, from TikTok to WeChat, have become an ever more important site of screendance exhibition and consumption within the PRC, bringing dance film closer to the popular culture. This shift is also facilitated by the participation of many non-professionally trained dancers who made amateur dance videos and disseminate them through these platforms. However, examining the characteristics of COVID-19 themed dance films, dance scholar Su Yutong (2020) presents a concern about how new media platforms' algorithm

may adversely impact its artistic development as the visibility of a given dance film is determined by its audience rating rather than artistic quality. She cautions that high-quality dance films may be buried in the midst of low-quality dance films that have more popular appeal than artistic values. Su's concern is completely valid as platforms of video dissemination impose various rules and regulations that prioritize visibility and profit generation rather than promotion of an art form. However, I foresee an increased diversification of screendance production that will continue to co-exist within popular cultural sphere and amongst artist communities in which choreographers, filmmakers, and visual artists explore rigorously the creative potential of dance film as a specific artistic medium. To encourage artistic innovation of screendance in the PRC, the availability of more exhibition opportunities and spaces, whether it is a dance film festival or exhibition space at galleries, will be crucial.

In addition, I also anticipate more international artistic collaboration and exchanges in dance filmmaking between Chinese artists and artists abroad in the future as the pandemic has opened up more possibilities for artists and scholars across geographic boundaries to gather and collaborate through virtual platforms. However, the seemingly free flow of digital content through the Internet and global interaction in the virtual space is actually limited in practical and sometimes unintended ways. For example, during the pandemic, many international dance film festivals migrate their screenings from a physical site, often at a local theater, to an online format. As a result, people from around the globe could participate in the festival without having to travel to a physical site, which widely increased many festivals' global audience reach and the visibility of their selected dance films. Yet, these festivals often house the films through sites like Vimeo, which is not accessible to audiences in mainland China. Jumping Frames International video dance festival also presented the 2020 edition through online live streaming. However, due

to regional Internet restriction, the screening was only available to audiences residing within Hong Kong. All of these restrictions and limitations raise questions of on whose terms screendance circulates and whose access is restricted. Navigating different levels of surveillance, censorship, and restrictions based on specific regions and nations via the Internet will become necessary in order to facilitate more vibrant and equitable global artistic exchange and sharing.

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