

Performing a Socialist Nation

The Golden Age of Chinese Dance

On the opening pages of the October 1955 issue of *China Pictorial*, a photo spread documents parades held in Beijing to celebrate China's sixth National Day.¹ For the most part, the images depict scenes one might expect for such an event: Mao Zedong and other leaders saluting from atop the rostrum overlooking Tian'anmen Square; schoolchildren walking with bouquets in front of a float displaying the giant slogan "Endorse the Five-Year Plan"; athletes and soldiers marching with flags and guns; military tanks rolling by as warplanes fly overhead; and civilians marching beside a cart displaying a giant tractor. One image, however, seems not to belong. Atop a circular float shaped like a tiered wedding cake stand two rings of dancers in pastel-colored dresses with long hoop skirts and melon-sized lotus blossoms on stalks rising from their skirt edges (figure 13). The dancers' hair is decorated with flowery ornaments, and white flowing scarves sweep down in scallops from their outstretched arms. On the ground, about 150 more dancers wearing nearly identical outfits minus the lotus stalks circle the float on foot in four concentric circles. Dancers in the two outer rings clasp hands, while those on the two inner rings balance lotus blossoms on their outstretched palms. These dancers are part of the National Day parades too. Behind them is the decorated Tian'anmen rostrum and a pillar carrying the phrase "Long Live Chairman Mao!"

The parade dancers described above are performing an adaptation of one of the most widely circulated Chinese dance works of the 1950s and early 1960s: a group piece called "Lotus Dance" (Hehua wu) that was choreographed by Dai Ailian and premiered by the Central Song and Dance Ensemble in 1953.² When presented on stage, "Lotus Dance" is typically performed by nine dancers and lasts about six minutes. Here, it has been adapted to a much larger scale for the parade format.



FIGURE 13. “Lotus Dance” in National Day Parade. Published in *Renmin huabao* 6, no. 10 (October 1955): 3. Photographer: Yuan Fen. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

However, the costumes and body postures depicted in the photograph clearly identify it as the same dance.³ In its composition, “Lotus Dance” is much like the 1951 “Red Silk Dance” discussed in the previous chapter. That is, it presents a new dance form created by merging yangge (northern Han folk dance) with xiqu (traditional Chinese theater). In “Lotus Dance,” the yangge component comes from “lotus lamp” (*hehua deng/lianhua deng*), also known as “walking flower lamp” (*zou huadeng*), a type of popular performance practiced in the northwestern Longzhong cultural region in eastern Gansu and northern Shaanxi.⁴ Hu Sha had introduced the form to PRC stages through the 1949 pageant *Long Live the People’s Victory*, which he codirected with Dai, and from there Dai adapted it again to create “Lotus Dance.” While she was choreographing it, Dai also traveled to northern Shaanxi during the 1953 Spring Festival holiday so that she could observe “lotus lamp” performed in a folk setting.⁵ The xiqu component in “Lotus Dance” comes from Kunqu, a refined theatrical style developed during the sixteenth century that is associated with the Wu cultural area around what is today Shanghai, Zhejiang, and southern Jiangsu. In early versions of “Lotus Dance,” Dai collaborated with Ma Xianglin (1913–1994),

a Kunqu actor who participated in the construction of early Chinese classical dance at CAD and the Beijing Dance School.⁶ In “Lotus Dance,” the dancers sway their upper bodies in slow, graceful lines and circle the stage using rapid, tiny steps that make them appear to be floating, both elements derived from Kunqu movement. With the diaphanous white scarves draped over their light pink upper costumes and long green fringed skirts with adapted lotus “lamps” on their rims, the dance combines disparate performance elements in a new way, producing the new image of whitish-pink blossoms floating serenely on a lake of lily pads.

Despite its clear connection to early PRC dance projects, “Lotus Dance” seems an odd choice for a National Day parade in a socialist country. The dance presents few signs of socialist realism, supposedly the dominant artistic mode of socialism, and it is not clearly linked to themes commonly associated with socialist art, such as class struggle, the military, farming, or factories. Rather, the poetic image of the lotus suggests an underlying religious connotation. As a review published in *Guangming Daily* in 1954 explained, “Lotus Dance” embodies the Buddhist idea of “the lotus that grows in the mud but is not soiled by the mud.”⁷ Despite such apparent incongruities, however, “Lotus Dance” was a widely celebrated expression of socialist China both at home and abroad during the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1953 China’s delegation received an award for the work at the Bucharest World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS, a.k.a. World Youth Festival), at the time a leading international venue for the presentation of socialist art.⁸ A reporter in Romania described the reception of “Lotus Dance” at the festival as follows:

The fame of the art of Chinese dancers has long since become known in all countries. When the announcer introduced the dance team of the ensemble, her words were drowned by a storm of applause. The orchestra strikes up playing the introduction to the music written by Chian Ku [*sic*] and Liu Chi for ‘The Dance of the Lotus Flowers.’ . . . The graceful movements of the young dancers sketch flowers opening up under the warm sun-rays, and then a breeze drives the lotus flowers onto the water’s surface. . . . [It shows] the perfection of Chinese dancers.⁹

Many Chinese dance works won awards at WFYS dance competitions, which PRC delegations attended regularly from 1949 to 1962. Due to the prestige associated with these events in China at the time, winning an award at WFYS typically secured a new work inclusion in subsequent domestic events and international tours. This was one reason for the success of “Red Silk Dance,” which had won an award at the previous WFYS in East Berlin in 1951.¹⁰ It also contributed to the popularity of the three other new Chinese dance works that won awards at Bucharest in 1953: “Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies” (Caicha pudie), “Running Donkey” (Pao lü), and “Lion Dance” (Shi wu), based on Han folk material from Fujian, Hebei, and Hebei, respectively.¹¹ After their success at WFYS, both “Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies” and “Running Donkey,” along with “Lotus Dance,” were popularized in China through a teaching manual like the one published for

“Red Silk Dance.”¹² They also became regular items on dance programs designed to represent China to foreign audiences. In 1954, for example, “Lotus Dance” and “Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies” appeared in a Chinese dance tour to India, and in 1955 “Lotus Dance,” “Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies,” and “Red Silk Dance” all appeared in the program of a Chinese arts delegation to Italy.¹³ A souvenir photo album of Chinese dance gifted to the KOLO ensemble of the former Yugoslavia while it was on tour in China is similarly composed.¹⁴ The album likely commemorated a welcome show performed for visiting KOLO members while they were visiting Beijing.¹⁵

Works like “Lotus Dance” and “Red Silk Dance” continued as symbols of China’s socialist culture at home and abroad into the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957, when the WFYS in Moscow released a new poster for its folk festival, “Red Silk Dance” was among six dances pictured from around the world.¹⁶ Between 1955 and 1958, *Guangming Daily* reports “Lotus Dance” taking the stage in twelve international locales, including (in order) Indonesia, Burma, Vietnam, Czechoslovakia, England, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Egypt, and Japan.¹⁷ And both “Red Silk Dance” and “Lotus Dance” appear in extant performance programs from a Chinese tour to Canada, Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela in 1960 (figure 14).¹⁸ That same year, “Lotus Dance” appeared again in National Day parades in Beijing, now with an updated float design that enveloped the dancers on the central platform in a ring of pink lotus petals.¹⁹ In 1962, when mass performances were held in Beijing to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum of Literature and Arts,” “Lotus Dance” was among the featured works.²⁰ And in 1963, when the Beijing Film Studio released its new color dance film *Colored Butterflies Fluttering About* (*Caidie fenfei*), “Red Silk Dance” was among the twelve dances included.²¹ In 1964, this film was shown in Norway as part of celebrations for the fifteenth anniversary of the PRC, and the United Arab Republic Embassy in China also showed it to celebrate that country’s own national holiday.²²

Thus, rather than being marginal, Chinese dance was at the center of performances of China as a socialist nation at home and internationally during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In this chapter, I examine this period of Chinese dance choreography, looking first at the circulation of Chinese dance abroad and then at a new form of Chinese dance that emerged during this period, the “national dance drama” (*minzu wuju*). I argue that the late 1950s and early 1960s marked the golden age of Chinese dance because it witnessed continued innovations in choreographic form, as well as the expansion of the genre to global visibility. The new dances that emerged during this period continued features of Chinese dance that had been established in the wartime period and the early years of the PRC, such as the three principles of kinesthetic nationalism, ethnic and spatial inclusiveness, and dynamic inheritance and the three styles of Han folk dance, ethnic minority dance, and xiqu-based classical dance. They also demonstrated a transformative surge in professionalism, as the first generation



FIGURE 14. “Lotus Dance” on tour in Canada, Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela. Published in China Art Ensemble performance program, 1960. Photographer unknown. Image obtained from the University of Michigan Asia Library Chinese Dance Collection.

of dancers trained in newly established PRC ensembles and conservatories matured and begin to create and star in their own productions. The new repertoires that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s thus also represented the fruition of years of socialist state investment in labor and infrastructure for creating Chinese dance, such as devising curricula, constructing institutions,

training dancers, and developing and staging new choreography. As the early pioneers ceded the stage to their younger protégés, this era saw the rise of the first generation of dancers and dance works cultivated entirely in China's socialist dance system. In other words, the dancing bodies representing China on stage were socialist in many ways.

In terms of artistic innovation, the most important and lasting development of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which had a lasting impact on Chinese dance choreography, was the emergence of a new, full-length narrative Chinese dance form. As discussed in the previous chapter, early large-scale dance works like *Long Live the People's Victory*, *Peace Dove*, and *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan* were all considered formally insufficient to meet the needs of China's new revolutionary dance culture because none had found an effective way to meld Chinese dance with revolutionary stories. This problem was finally resolved with the premiere of the first full-length national dance drama, *Magic Lotus Lantern* (*Bao liandeng*), in August 1957.²³ Dozens of national dance dramas appeared in the following years, coinciding with a mass campaign known as the Great Leap Forward. Like the earlier WFYS competition pieces, they gained wide visibility as symbols of socialist China at home and abroad. However, while both types of choreography embodied socialist ideals, national dance dramas moved beyond the shorter WFYS works in their ability to explore complex political and social issues. In their treatment of themes such as marriage choice, as well as intersections between sex and gender, ethnicity, class, and race, these productions challenged traditional social hierarchies in ways that demonstrated a new critical outlook within the Chinese dance field. In their use of Chinese dance movement to engage these complex issues, the national dance dramas of the Great Leap Forward set a new standard for Chinese dance choreography.

PERFORMING THE NATION ABROAD: CHINESE DANCE IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

Contrary to common misconceptions, China was not a culturally isolated country during the early decades of the socialist period, nor was it disconnected from the latest trends in global dance creation of the time. The PRC received its first officially recognized international performing arts delegations on the day it was founded, October 1, 1949, and between 1955 and 1968 (after which these activities were stalled temporarily by the Cultural Revolution) an average of sixteen such delegations, the majority of which included dancers, visited China each year.²⁴ Between 1949 and 1962, China sent dance delegations to all seven WFYS dance competitions, in Budapest (1949), East Berlin (1951), Bucharest (1953), Warsaw (1955), Moscow (1957), Vienna (1959), and Helsinki (1962).²⁵ At these competitions, China's dancers interacted with dance groups from all over the world. However,

these were only 7 of the 166 officially sanctioned performing arts delegations that China sent abroad between 1949 and 1967, which included groups presenting dance, drama, music, and acrobatics. During this period, Chinese delegations that featured Chinese dance performed in over sixty countries (listed with date of first appearance): Hungary (1949), East Germany (1951), Poland (1951), the Soviet Union (1951), Romania (1951), Czechoslovakia (1951), Austria (1951), Bulgaria (1951), Albania (1951), Mongolia (1952), India (1954), Burma (1954), Indonesia (1955), France (1955), Belgium (1955), the Netherlands (1955), Switzerland (1955), Italy (1955), the United Kingdom (1955), Yugoslavia (1955), Vietnam (1955), Egypt (1956), Sudan (1956), Ethiopia (1956), Syria (1956), Lebanon (1956), Chile (1956), Uruguay (1956), Brazil (1956), Argentina (1956), West Germany (1956), Afghanistan (1956), New Zealand (1956), Australia (1956), Cambodia (1957), Pakistan (1957), Sri Lanka (1957), Japan (1958), Luxembourg (1958), Iraq (1959), North Korea (1960), Nepal (1960), Venezuela (1960), Colombia (1960), Cuba (1960), Canada (1960), Norway (1961), Sweden (1961), Finland (1961), Algeria (1964), Morocco (1964), Tunisia (1964), Mali (1965), Guinea (1965), Mauritania (1965), Ghana (1965), North Yemen (1966), Zambia (1966), Palestine (1966), Uganda (1966), Laos (1966), Tanzania (1967), and Somalia (1967).²⁶ The United States is conspicuously absent from this list, which may explain the persistent incorrect US perception that China was “cut off from the world” during this time. This notion is accurate only if one equates “the world” with the United States.²⁷

In this section, I examine the presentation of Chinese dance abroad during the 1950s and early 1960s from two angles: the composition of dance programs and the role of Chinese dance at WFYS dance competitions. I believe these activities are important for understanding the development of Chinese dance for several reasons. First, the presentation of Chinese dance abroad marked a rise in the status of dancers as recognized symbols of China’s national culture, as well as an expansion of whose bodies and whose knowledge were generators of cultural prestige on the world stage. Previously, Han men and their artistic products often dominated the representation of Chinese culture abroad. By contrast, in international dance tours of the 1950s and early 1960s, the artistic work of women and ethnic minorities took center stage, allowing them to gain coveted opportunities, elevated social status, and cultural legitimacy. Second, performances of Chinese dance abroad during this period allowed Chinese choreographers to participate in the construction of international dance trends. One stated motivation of early Chinese dance pioneers such as Dai Ailian and Liang Lun was to create novel forms of dance in China that could be performed abroad, so that China would become not only a receiver but also a producer of international dance culture.²⁸ While Dai and Liang both realized this goal through their own Chinese dance performances in the United States and Southeast Asia during the late 1940s, the tours of the 1950s and early 1960s expanded this project to a much larger scale and reach. Lastly, these performances

of Chinese dance abroad also shaped the direction of dance creation in China. As mentioned above, winning awards at WFYS competitions was considered a major honor and often gave new Chinese dance works lasting visibility domestically and internationally. For this reason, Chinese choreographers were incentivized to create works that fit the guidelines and preferences established at WFYS competitions and other international arenas. Performances abroad thus provided an opportunity for Chinese dancers to redefine national culture, gain international influence, and learn about and respond to international dance trends.

On April 29, 1960, a Chinese performance delegation consisting of 101 dancers, Peking opera actors, singers, musicians, and cultural administrators gave a performance in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, in the first show of what would be a six-and-a-half-month tour to Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, and Canada.²⁹ Following a common practice for Chinese state-sponsored international performance delegations both during and after the socialist era, this delegation brought together performers and repertoire from a variety of different ensembles, which were presented abroad under a single group name, China Art Ensemble (*Zhongguo yishutuan*), only used for international tours.³⁰ Two extant performance programs from the tour, together with film footage and print sources documenting the dances it included, offer insight into the performances, including which dances were presented and the images of Chinese socialist culture they embodied.³¹ From the dances presented on this tour, we can see that ethnic and spatial inclusivity, kinesthetic nationalism, and dynamic inheritance were strong structuring principles that guided the composition of this dance program. Additionally, it is evident that the program highlighted women performers and dance styles that represented minority communities and were initially popularized by ethnic minority artists, although the dancers who actually performed the dances in this particular tour were mainly Han.

An intention to represent ethnic and spatial diversity is clearly reflected in the selection of dance works included in the tour. By 1960 dance tour planners had quite a broad range of options to choose from, because during the 1950s, Chinese choreographers and dancers had created hundreds of new dance works, encouraged by the establishment of state-sponsored professional dance ensembles across the country, as well as frequent dance festivals organized at the local, regional, and national levels. Thirty-three of these new works had received awards at WFYS competitions by 1959, of which nineteen were based on Han sources and thirteen on ethnic minority material.³² The dance program that the planners ultimately devised for the 1960 tour included twelve items that represented seven ethnic groups. Among the twelve items, five had Han themes: “Parasol Dance” (*Huasan wu*), “Red Silk Dance,” “Harvest Dance” (*Fengshou le*), “Lotus Dance,” and “In the Rain” (*Zou yu*). The remaining seven were the Dai-themed “Peacock Dance” (*Kongque wu*), Mongol-themed “Pasture Horse” (most likely *Muma wu*, a.k.a.

“Tamed Horse”), Yi-themed “Joyful Nuosu” (Kuaile de luosuo), Uyghur-themed “Dance of the Drum” (Gu wu), Mongol-themed “Ordos Dance” (E’erduosi wu), Tibetan-themed “Reba on the Grassland” (Caoyuan shang de Reba, aka “Yipa on the Steppe”), and Korean-themed “Fan Dance” (Shan wu).³³ The importance placed on non-Han groups in this program reflects the continued CCP investment in recognizing ethnic minority “nationalities” as constituent parts of the Chinese nation during this time, a process that occurred in part through ethnic classification projects and the resultant investment of cultural meaning in what were often newly defined ethnic categories.³⁴ In addition to representing ethnic diversity, the program showed diversity of geographic region. Every major region of the country was represented: “Fan Dance” and “Red Silk Dance” represented the northeast (Jilin and Heilongjiang, respectively); “Tamed Horse” and “Ordos Dance” represented the north (Inner Mongolia); “Dance of the Drum” and “Lotus Dance” represented the northwest (Xinjiang and Gansu/Shaanxi, respectively); “Peacock Dance,” “Joyful Nuosu,” and “Reba on the Grassland” represented the southwest (Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet, respectively); “Parasol Dance” and “Harvest Dance” represented central China (Henan and Jiangxi, respectively); and “In the Rain” represented the southeast (Fujian).³⁵ Thus, in terms of its selection of material, this dance program projected an image of socialist China as a nation of multiple ethnic groups and diverse regional cultures.

From the perspective of dance form, the program highlighted innovative choreography adapted from local material, showing an ongoing commitment to the creative principles of kinesthetic nationalism and dynamic inheritance developed by early Chinese dance pioneers. One way in which this is demonstrated is through the use of stage props adapted from local performance practice. Such props appear in nearly every item in the dance program, such as paper umbrellas and handkerchiefs in “Parasol Dance” and “In the Rain”; handheld percussion instruments the Central Asian *doyra* and the Tibetan *dhyāngro* in “Drum Dance” and “Reba on the Grassland,” respectively; large folding fans in “Fan Dance”; and “big head babies” (*datou wawa*), an oversized doll-like mask used in Han folk performance, in “Harvest Dance.” As demonstrated in extant film recordings of these works, the stage properties served not merely as visual ornaments but were integrated into the dance technique, which drew heavily on folk and regional forms. This can be seen in recordings of “In the Rain” and “Harvest Dance” in the 1959 dance film *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* (*Bai feng chao yang*), which show a clear debt to movement vocabularies and techniques employed in Fujian and Jiangxi local dialect operas and other Han folk performance styles (video 5). “In the Rain” shows this in the dancers’ delicately bouncing footwork, tilting head and torso actions, and circling finger and eye movements. It is also clear in “Harvest Dance” through the dancers’ swinging arms, heads, and hips, sideways kicking feet, and exaggerated comic theatricality. Both recordings also feature musical accompaniment provided by an



VIDEO 5. "In the Rain," from *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun*. Beijing Film Studio, 1959.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.5>



orchestral score that features folk melodies and instruments.³⁶ While dance form clearly takes inspiration from local sources in these works, they also emphasize artistic innovation. "Reba on the Grassland," for example, followed the pattern of "Lotus Dance" and "Red Silk Dance" by bringing together disparate performance elements. As depicted in the 1963 film *Colored Butterflies Fluttering About*, the dance combines a popular form of Tibetan sleeve dance that would normally be performed at social gatherings with more acrobatic movements developed by itinerant performers, such as fast turning sequences and varied drumming techniques (video 6).³⁷ The recording of "Peacock Dance" in *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* also shows significant innovations by adapting a dance style previously performed solo or in pairs into a large group choreography that emphasizes unison movement and geometrical stage formations.³⁸

In terms of whose ingenuity and artistic accomplishment this program highlighted, women and ethnic minority artists both appear as important contributors. Women performers clearly dominated the dance portion of the program. That is, of the twelve dance items it included, eleven featured female performers, and six were danced exclusively by women. This marked a clear departure from performing arts tours that represented China abroad in the early decades of the twentieth century, in which the artists who most often appeared on stage were men, though often performing in female roles.³⁹ When it comes to ethnicity, non-Han artists contributed to this tour too, but as choreographers and models more than as actual performers. Based on the names and photographs in the printed programs, it appears that the majority of dancers included in this tour were of Han ethnicity, making it quite different from the composition of delegations to the WFYS



VIDEO 6. Oumijiacan and ensemble in “Reba on the Grassland,” from *Colored Butterflies Fluttering About*. Beijing Film Studio, 1963.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.6>



competitions, as discussed further below. Thus, for example, the photograph and accompanying caption for the Uyghur item “Dance of the Drum” indicate that the lead role was performed by Zi Huayun (1936–2014), a Han dancer in the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, a group that specialized in Han folk-themed choreography and was made up primarily of Han artists.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, many of the non-Han themed items in the program had been created and originally performed by ethnic minority choreographers and dancers who were recognized officially as the creators of these works. “Dance of the Drum,” for example, was clearly based on the style of Uyghur dance performed and codified by Uyghur dancer Qemberxanim during the 1940s and 1950s; Qemberxanim herself was a leading teacher and cultural figure promoting the styles at this time. In 1957, two dances in this style—“Plate Dance” (Panzi wu) and “Hand Drum Dance” (Shougu wu)—had won awards for China at the WFYS competition in Moscow. At the competition, these dances had been performed by a woman of Tatar ethnicity, known in Chinese as Zuohala Shahemayiwa (b. 1934), who was originally from Xinjiang but at the time had become a soloist in the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Ensemble (Zongzheng gewutuan), one of China’s top professional dance companies.⁴¹ “Ordos Dance,” “Tamed Horse,” and “Reba on the Grassland” had also all been choreographed at least in part by minority choreographers, and they had all been originally performed by ethnic minority dancers in events both in and outside China. “Ordos Dance,” which was choreographed by Manchu dancer Jia Zuoguang (1923–2017) and starred Mongol dancer Siqintariha (b. 1932), won an award at the 1955 WFYS shortly after it appeared in a graduation performance at the Beijing Dance School, where Siqintariha and Jia were both students at the

time.⁴² Likewise, “Reba on the Grassland,” which was co-choreographed by and starred Tibetan dancer Oumijiacan (b. 1928), won an award at the 1957 WFYS, shortly after it premiered at the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble, where Oumijiacan was a lead dancer and choreographer.⁴³ Although the group choreography “Peacock Dance” was created by a Han choreographer, Jin Ming (b. 1926), it was based on a style of dance first developed and performed by a Dai artist originally from Yunnan, Mao Xiang (1923–1986). Mao had won an award for his version of the dance, titled “Peacock Duet” (Shuangren kongque wu) at the 1957 WFYS, the same year that Jin Ming’s “Peacock Dance” also won an award, with the lead performed by a dancer of Korean ethnicity, Cui Meishan (b. 1934).⁴⁴ By 1960, these dances had all been incorporated into a nationally recognized Chinese dance repertoire that was being performed widely by ensembles across China and also toured abroad. Thus, professional dancers were expected to be able to perform these dances regardless of their ethnic background.

As the above discussion demonstrates, the WFYS dance competitions had a tremendous impact on the constitution of Chinese dance repertoires and tour programs during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Of the forty-one Chinese dance works that won awards at these competitions, a large number went on to become canonical works of Chinese dance, and some are still taught and performed regularly, especially by students, today.⁴⁵ This suggests that international performance venues served not only as places to present Chinese dance abroad but also as interactive spaces in which Chinese dance encountered and responded to foreign artists and audiences. Anglophone scholarship on international dance exchange during the Cold War has tended to focus largely on modern dance and ballet, with an emphasis on competition between the two Cold War superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ The WFYS competitions present a different view of dance exchange in this period since, as Pia Koivunen has pointed out, they offered an alternative space in which artists could move beyond “Western conceptions and art forms that were developed in the West” and instead foreground artistic projects more of interest in socialist countries and outside the Western cultural sphere.⁴⁷ While ballet did play an important role in the WFYS dance competitions, the competitions also placed a large emphasis on national dances—for example, Russian and Eastern European folk dance, Indian classical dances, and Central Asian dance. In the context of WFYS dance exchange, choreography performed in these styles not only generated great prestige and excitement but also served as important vehicles of international connectivity and political activism.⁴⁸ Through the structuring of competition rules and the imagery used in promotional materials, WFYS dance competitions encouraged new dance innovation in these styles and presented them as the most important and innovative forms of dance creation happening globally at the time.

The WFYS collection at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam offers significant documentation of these dance competitions, helping to recall an important and underresearched piece of dance history that offers essential international context for the development of Chinese dance. As represented in this collection, World Festivals of Youth and Students were major international gatherings attended by participants from across the world. With the Soviet Union providing the majority of funding and ideological direction, these events placed special emphasis on youth in socialist bloc and formerly colonized countries, as well as left-leaning groups worldwide.⁴⁹ For the Chinese youth who participated, WFYS served as important sites for what Nicolai Volland calls “socialist cosmopolitanism,” as well as for what I have described as China’s postcolonial, Third Worldist, and inter-Asian internationalist aspirations during the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵⁰ It is important to remember that dance competitions were just one of many cultural activities that occurred during these grand events, which had tens of thousands of participants from sometimes more than one hundred countries. In terms of art activities, the 1955 WFYS in Warsaw, for example, included “cultural presentations” of national songs, national dances, ballets, choirs, opera music, symphonic orchestra concerts, theater, pantomime, circus, circus artists, puppet shows, imitators, and amateur concerts, as well as “pre-festival cultural competitions” in literature, journalism, music, fine arts, folklore arts, photography, and film. Dance competitions fell into a separate program held during the festival, known as “international competitions,” which included categories for folk dance, ballet, classic and folk songs, piano, violin, cello, folk music instruments, accordion, harmonica, guitar, and pantomime.⁵¹ In 1957 artists from fifty countries participated in these international competitions, presenting 1,239 performances and winning a total of 945 medals.⁵² The performance of national identity was often an explicit framing of these presentations. For example, a program for the 1953 Bucharest festival included a category called “National Cultural Programs,” in which the schedule included options such as “Poland,” “Romania,” “Indonesia,” “Brazil,” and so on.⁵³

Structural aspects of the WFYS dance competitions, such as rules stipulating age of participants and the style, format, and scale of choreographic entries, created opportunities for younger dancers and pushed choreographers to develop dance works within supported styles. Warsaw’s 1955 rules, following those established in previous years, specified that all competition participants be no more than thirty years of age by December of the festival year.⁵⁴ Since even the youngest among the early Chinese dance pioneers, Liang Lun and Chen Jinjing, were already thirty-four by 1955, this rule effectively restricted participation in the WFYS competitions for the Chinese dance field to that new generation of dancers trained in PRC institutions. Another way that the WFYS rules shaped Chinese dance creation was through the categories of dance entry they permitted. As recent studies by Anthony Shay

and Christina Ezrahi demonstrate, the Soviet Union mainly promoted two styles of dance during the 1950s: state or national folk dance, as represented by groups such as the State Academic Ensemble of Folk Dances of the Peoples of the USSR, led by Igor Moiseyev, and ballet, as represented by ensembles such as the Mariinsky (later Kirov) and the Bolshoi.⁵⁵ This focus in Soviet dance was reflected in the structures of the Soviet-sponsored WFYS dance competitions, at least initially. In 1953 and 1955, for example, dances could win prizes in only two categories: folk dance or ballet.⁵⁶ In 1957 the categories of "Oriental classical dances" and "modern ballroom dancing" were added, and in 1962 "modern dance" appeared as a category of competition for the first time.⁵⁷ However, folk dance was always the major category for countries like China that did not have professional ballet ensembles. (China's first experimental ballet ensemble was established in late 1959, and it did not become an independent national ensemble until 1964.) Before the addition of "Oriental classical dances" as an option, however, Asian classical dance was apparently sometimes presented in the ballet category under the subcategory of "ballet-character dance." In 1953, for example, Bharatanatyam dancer Indrani Rahman won first prize in the solo portion of this subcategory.⁵⁸ The two categories in which Chinese delegations consistently won awards were folk dance and Oriental classical dance, and there is no indication that PRC dancers participated in any of the other dance categories.⁵⁹ Apart from performer age and dance style, WFYS competition rules also governed dance length and number of performers. In 1953, for example, all competition dances had to be between three and fifteen minutes.⁶⁰ In 1955 folk dance entries were limited to seven minutes and allowed a maximum of eight (or, in some documents, six) performers.⁶¹ By 1957 entries for folk dance and Oriental classical dance could have up to sixteen performers.⁶² Sometimes there were separate categories for solo, duet, and group works. While precise regulations fluctuated over time, the general pattern was to encourage the creation of short choreographies in either solo, duet, or group formats.

The official journal of WFYS, *Festival*, frequently published photographs of dance performances, providing a sense of the choreographic sensibilities these events promoted. One of the most common subjects in these images is a group of dancers exhibiting staged versions of Eastern European folk dances. In them, one finds Bulgarian, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, and German ensembles of men and women dressed in national costumes, often including long, full skirts, embroidered or striped aprons, puffy blouses, waist-length vests, and boots. The dancers often appear with their hands clasped or arms linked around each other's shoulders and waists, conveying a sense of community bonding through social dance. A strong sense of motion is present in these images, which frequently depict dancers leaping and twirling through space with their skirts and vests lifting into the air. A sense of momentum, speed, and fun pervades these photographs, and dancers are often shown enjoying the thrill of collaborative movement, such as partnered lifts and spins using centripetal force and counterbalance. Apart from

these images, Asian and Middle Eastern dances are the next most common. Like their Eastern European counterparts, these Uzbek, Indonesian, Indian, Korean, Mongolian, Egyptian, Syrian, Vietnamese, and Chinese groups also appear in national costumes, which often include flowing robes, sashes, head scarves or hats, and jewelry. Props are especially common among the Korean ensembles, who are pictured dynamically wielding swords, drums, and fans. These images of Asian and Middle Eastern ensembles, like those of the Eastern European ensembles, convey a sense of kinetic dynamism apparent both in groups of dancers moving together in space and in solo actions of individual performers. While ballet is occasionally featured in these photographs, it is not the predominant dance style. Thus, from these publications, one gets a sense that national dances—whether in the form of Eastern European folk dances or Asian and Middle Eastern dances of various forms—were the main dance attraction at WFYS.⁶³ The implication was that such forms were the most exciting artistic styles of new dance expression among the various international communities in which China saw itself participating.

By examining dance programs China sent abroad and international events in which Chinese dancers participated during the 1950s and early 1960s, one sees that Chinese dance formed an important medium for China's international cultural engagements and national self-projection during the socialist era. In their frequent tours abroad, Chinese dancers represented China as an ethnically and regionally diverse country in which the artistic contributions of women and ethnic minorities became constitutive components of national culture. Likewise, through their participation in WFYS dance competitions, Chinese dancers and choreographers encountered a global dance scene in which national dance emerged as a vibrant space of artistic creation, as well as a dynamic medium for intercultural communication and the expression of left-leaning youth culture worldwide. On the global stage during this period, Chinese dance circulated as a highly visible symbol of the national culture of socialist China.

CREATING NATIONAL DANCE DRAMA: NARRATIVE DANCE ON THE BASIS OF XIQU

While Chinese dance was circulating abroad as an important symbol of socialist China in international dance tours and festivals, it was also continuing to develop in new directions at home. One reason that the late 1950s and early 1960s can be seen as the first golden age of Chinese dance is that this is the era that brought forth the national dance drama, what many Chinese dance choreographers today continue to regard as the most mature form of Chinese dance choreography. Defined as a narrative dance work with a unified set of characters and linear theatrical plot that uses Chinese dance as its core movement vocabulary, national dance drama represented an important departure from existing choreographic experiments of

either the wartime period or the early PRC. Up to this point, successful examples of Chinese dance creation had mainly consisted of what are known as “dances” (*wudao*): short, typically nonnarrative works that last fifteen minutes or less, as represented by items in the 1940s Frontier Dance productions and WFYS competition pieces and other new Chinese dance repertoires created during the early and mid-1950s. Works from the 1940s such as “The Mute Carries the Cripple,” “Yao Drum,” and “Plate Dance” and works from the 1950s such as “Red Silk Dance,” “Lotus Dance,” “Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies,” “Ordos Dance,” “Peacock Dance,” and “Reba on the Grassland” are all examples of these early short-form Chinese dance choreographies. Because Chinese dance was still an emerging genre when these items were developed, their creators had been concerned primarily with devising new dance vocabularies and stage images by researching and adapting local performance practices and using them to create choreography suited to staged performance, which could then also provide a basis for classroom training. Because the artistic focus at that time had been on new formal movement vocabularies, the creators of these productions had not delved deeply into issues of narrative content, such as the representation of complex characters and theatrical storylines.

Where narrative content had been a concern of wartime and early PRC dance creation by Chinese choreographers was in productions such as Wu Xiaobang’s short-form dance drama *Poppy Flowers* in 1939, the historical pageant *Long Live the People’s Victory* in 1949, and the experimental long-form dance dramas *Peace Dove* and *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan* in 1950.⁶⁴ Although these works had some commonalities with the later national dance dramas, they also differed from them in important ways. One commonality between these works and the later national dance dramas was their relatively large scale. As multiact productions involving dozens or even hundreds of performers, these works set a precedent for evening-length “large-scale” (*daxing*) dance productions in later years, of which national dance dramas were the most numerous. Another commonality between these works and later national dance dramas was their aim to tell stories. *Poppy Flowers*, for example, told the story of a group of peasants resisting unfair treatment, while *Long Live the People’s Victory* narrated China’s modern history and revolution, *Peace Dove* told of a dove who joins with international workers to oppose American warmongering, and *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan* recounted PLA soldiers’ crossing of the sea to fight one of the final battles of the Chinese Civil War. What differentiated these early works from the later national dance dramas, however, was one of two things: (1) theatrical structure or (2) movement vocabulary. Although *Long Live the People’s Victory* used early Chinese dance movement vocabularies derived from Frontier Dance and New Yangge, as a national pageant it covered many different historical periods and did not follow a core set of characters from beginning to end in a single unified narrative. In this sense, *Long Live the People’s Victory* exemplified the

structure not of a dance drama (*wuju*) but of a pageant, or what would be named in China the “large-scale music and dance historical epic” (*daxing yinyue wudao shishi*), of which the most well-known early example was the 1964 production *East Is Red*.⁶⁵ *Poppy Flowers*, *Peace Dove*, and *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan* all had the theatrical structure of a dance drama, in that they had a core set of characters and plot that connected the productions from beginning to end. What makes them different from national dance dramas, however, is that none used the national form—Chinese dance—as their core movement vocabulary. The movement vocabulary for *Peace Dove* was derived from European ballet and Western modern dance, whereas the movement vocabularies for *Poppy Flowers* and *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan* were based on Wu Xiaobang’s New Dance and its related offshoot, military dance. A major reason that Chinese dance choreographers were so concerned with the development of new Chinese dance vocabularies during the early and mid-1950s was that they saw this as the first step to a large-scale Chinese-style narrative dance.

Institutional investment in the creation of national dance drama began in 1953, the same year that the Ministry of Culture made plans to establish the Beijing Dance School. The nation-level ensemble tasked with this project was the Central Experimental Opera Theater (Zhongyang shiyan gejuyuan, hereafter CEOT), or what is today the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (Zhongguo geju wujuyuan), which houses China’s leading Chinese dance ensemble.⁶⁶ The Ministry of Culture established CEOT as an independent institution in May of 1953 under the directorship of Zhou Weizhi (a.k.a. Zhou Weichi, 1916–2014), a Yan’an veteran and husband of Wang Kun (1925–2014), the singer-actress famous for her lead role in the epoch-making 1945 New Yangge opera *White-Haired Girl*. CEOT initially comprised four performance groups: an opera troupe, a dance team, a Western-style orchestra, and a Chinese music ensemble. Over time these divisions expanded and changed frequently, although the dual focus on opera and dance, both supported by instrumental music, remained consistent.⁶⁷ The dance ensemble in CEOT was one of three national-level professional dance groups established by the PRC government in the early 1950s, all three of which were devoted to Chinese dance. Generally speaking, these three ensembles mapped onto the three streams of Chinese dance, with the Central Song and Dance Ensemble focusing on Han folk dance, the CAN Cultural Work Troupe (later the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble) focusing on ethnic minority dance, and CEOT focusing on xiqu-based Chinese classical dance, although all three groups at times crossed styles. The first two ensembles specialized in short-form repertoires, and many of the new works that won awards in WFYS dance competitions were either created by these two ensembles or later entered their performance repertoires. As mentioned above, members of these ensembles also frequently populated the groups sent to perform abroad on international tours.

Like all of China's early national ensembles, CEOT was initially seeded within an academic institution, from which it then broke off to form an independent performance unit. Like the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, CEOT had been born out of the Central Academy of Drama (CAD) Dance Ensemble established in late 1949 that was led by Dai Ailian. After its failed experiment with *Peace Dove* in 1950, the group was restructured to focus on Chinese dance. In 1951 a group of dance, opera, and music performers was transferred in from Beijing People's Art Theater when that theater was restructured into a spoken drama ensemble, and in December 1951, a newly expanded Central Academy of Drama Attached Song and Dance Theater (Zhongyang xiju xueyuan fushu gewu juyuan) was established, still under Dai's leadership.⁶⁸ The first performance after this transition was a gala of ethnic minority dance. However, like *Peace Dove*, this avenue of experimentation was short-lived, since, as discussed in the previous chapter, the CAN group was set up to recruit and train ethnic minority dancers for this purpose. In 1952 the CAD group found its calling when the Ministry of Culture organized a national xiqu festival in Beijing, which involved more than three thousand xiqu artists presenting twenty-one different regional forms from across China.⁶⁹ Taking advantage of the influx of folk artists to the capital, the CAD group studied a variety of regional xiqu works, in styles such as Hunan flower drum theater (*huaguxi*), Huangmei opera, Sichuan opera, Min opera, and Huai opera. In the fall of 1952, part of this group broke off to join with the dancers that had just returned from a European tour following the WFYS festival in East Berlin, and together they formed the Central Song and Dance Ensemble. Those who stayed behind at CAD focused on continuing to explore the intersection of dance and xiqu, and it was they who formed the core members of CEOT when it was founded in 1953.⁷⁰

This growing focus on the relationship between dance and xiqu of course coincided with the completion of Choe Seung-hui's course at CAD in 1952, discussed in the previous chapter, which produced an early Chinese classical dance teaching program on the basis of xiqu movement that Choe developed in collaboration with xiqu artists. Following this model, CEOT also used a dance curriculum based on xiqu movement to train its young performers. In July 1953, *China Pictorial* ran a photo spread on dance training in the newly established CEOT, which showed dance students (all young women) in a variety of postures clearly adapted from xiqu movement (figure 15).⁷¹ One mark of xiqu training documented in these photographs is the students' hand gestures. For example, the dancers point with the index figure up and diagonally out at eye level, the other fingers curled in and the pinky slightly raised, as they look in the direction pointed with the head on a slight angle. Or they hold their hands in the "orchid finger" (*lanhua zhi*) position, a technique traditionally used in male xiqu actors' performances of female-role characters, in which the dancer hyperextends her fingers, pressing the first joint of the middle finger forward and pinching the thumb in to meet it, then rotating her



FIGURE 15. China Experimental Opera Theater Dance Team in training. Published in *Renmin huabao* 4, no. 8 (1953): 36. Photographers: Huang Honghui and Hu Songjia. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

wrist so that the palm faces outward. Another mark of xiqu training visible in the photographs is the twisting body positions, in which the dancers' feet, hips, torso, and head act like a corkscrew in space, lending a sense of three-dimensionality and dynamic energy to each position. Of the six photographs included in the spread, only one shows ballet training, as indicated by the dancers' turnout (a practice used in ballet, in which the dancer rotates her legs out from the hip sockets so that the knees and toes point diagonally out or to the side, rather than forward) and straight leg extension ending in a pointed foot. This use of turnout does not appear in the other five photographs, all of which show various kinds of xiqu-based movement. In all five of these photographs, dancers are shown practicing on a floor covered in a thick carpet, also a fixture of xiqu performance that is not used in ballet.

The article accompanying the photographs explains that the dancers are mainly being trained in “Chinese classical dance” (now the standard term for xiqu-based dance), supplemented by courses in Chinese folk and ethnic minority dance and ballet basics. It credits Kunqu actors Han Shichang, Bai Yunsheng, and Ma Xianglin with developing the Chinese classical dance curriculum the dancers are learning. Further invoking Choe’s language in her article on Chinese classical dance published in the *People’s Daily* in 1951, it describes them as researching dance movements in xiqu and then “adding organization, refinement, and further development to make them into systematic dance.”⁷² One of the photographs shows Han Shichang personally teaching two students a movement adapted from xiqu, the twisting seated position known as the “crouching fish” (*wo yu*), as other students look on eagerly to learn from Han’s guidance.

These early news reports on CEOT clearly linked its mission with the creation of national dance drama, a project that was also associated directly with training performers in the techniques of Chinese dance, especially xiqu-based Chinese classical dance. The article in the *China Pictorial* photo spread described above, when introducing CEOT, explained, “Its task is to cultivate dancers for the Opera Theater and to prepare conditions for the future establishment of national dance drama.”⁷³ The article then went on to explain that the team had nearly one hundred members who had been recruited from across the entire country and that dancers from other ensembles visited CEOT to receive short-term dance training. A few months later the *People’s Daily* published another photograph of CEOT dancers practicing xiqu postures on its front cover, with a caption conveying the same message, again focusing on Chinese classical dance training as the means to preparing national dance drama.⁷⁴ This emphasis on technical training is not surprising given the ongoing concern with professionalism and new dance vocabularies expressed in writings by dance leaders during the early PRC years. In her endorsement of Choe Seung-hui’s dance training curricula in 1950, for example, Chen Jinqing had argued that “studying technique is also to increase capacity for performing characters.”⁷⁵ However, because this foundation in Chinese classical dance technique was regarded as so essential, it took several years before the first national dance dramas were actually produced.

Training dancers was not the only form of preparation needed to lay the ground for national dance drama. Chinese dance critics, for example, also had to introduce the concept of national dance drama to audiences, while choreographers had to learn how to design and stage these large-scale narrative dance productions, which had few precedents in local performance culture. Unlike in many other parts of the world, China did not have a strong local tradition of staging stories entirely through movement without words, which Chinese choreographers took to be the basic definition of dance drama. Thus, as with the creation of professional dance teaching curricula, they sought to learn existing

approaches and structures from other dance traditions, which they intended to adapt to allow for the expression of local forms and content. In the case of national dance drama, Soviet ballet became the most commonly cited foreign model. In part this had to do with timing, since national dance drama emerged at the very moment that Sino-Soviet friendship peaked, which was also a time when narrative dance forms from other Asian countries were also being toured widely in China.⁷⁶ In 1954, reviewing a Soviet production of the ballet *La Esmeralda* then on tour in China, choreographer and critic You Huihai (b. 1925) wrote, “Seeing *La Esmeralda* makes us deeply inspired, and we naturally can’t help showing excitement for when our Chinese dance artists will be able to learn from the Moscow Music Theater [*sic*] to create a complete Chinese national dance drama.”⁷⁷ In early 1955, another choreographer and critic, Gao Di’an (b. 1916), published an article proposing a theoretical framework for understanding national dance drama in relation to Soviet ballet. Namely, he argued that national dance drama could grow out of Chinese performing arts traditions (such as xiqu) in the same way that Soviet ballet had grown out of the Russian classical ballet tradition.⁷⁸ It was important for Gao that national dance drama borrow theoretical elements from Soviet ballet, such as the principle of socialist realism, but use both local content and local forms. To emphasize the latter, he referred to national dance drama as “national-form dance drama,” meaning that it would be composed using Chinese dance vocabularies, not ballet. Possible themes for these new works, according to Gao, included the creation stories of Pangu, Nüwa, and Hou Yi, popular literature such as *Journey to the West* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and modern revolutionary history. In terms of form, Gao wrote, national dance drama would incorporate all three styles of Chinese dance, including Han folk dance, ethnic minority dance, and xiqu-based Chinese classical dance, with the goal of updating these styles through constant innovation.

The last step in preparing for the emergence of national dance drama was training choreographers. In the fall of 1955, the Beijing Dance School launched what would be the first of two special two-year courses in dance drama choreography. To benefit from the Sino-Soviet friendship agreements that allowed for Soviet experts to travel to China and work in local institutions, the school set up both of these courses under Soviet instructors. The first course, which lasted from 1955 to 1957, was taught by Soviet character dancer Viktor Ivanovich Tsaplin and cultivated the first cohort of national dance drama choreographers and national dance drama scenarios, including those behind *Magic Lotus Lantern*.⁷⁹ The second course, taught from 1957 to 1960 by classical ballet dancer and choreographer Petr Gusev (1904–1987), took a slightly different course, emphasizing the staging of ballet productions by Chinese dancers and the creation of dance dramas that blended Chinese dance and ballet technique. The much-touted first Chinese production of the classic Russian ballet *Swan Lake* was staged under Gusev’s guidance, as discussed further in the next chapter.

CEOT premiered its first experimental small-scale national dance drama, *Stealing Immortal Herbs* (*Dao xiancao*), in the fall of 1955; two other similar productions followed in the spring of 1957, culminating in its premiere of the first large-scale national dance drama, *Magic Lotus Lantern*, in August of 1957.⁸⁰ All of these works showed a close resemblance to xiqu, both in dance form and narrative content, and they were all produced through collaborations between dancers and xiqu practitioners. *Stealing Immortal Herbs*, choreographed by Zheng Baoyun (b. 1927?),⁸¹ was based on a scene from the Chinese story cycle of the *White Snake* (*Baishe zhuan*) and took direct inspiration from Peking opera and Shaoxing opera (*Yueju*) productions of this popular tale.⁸² Two xiqu performers also worked on its choreography: Peking opera actor Zhang Chunhua on the fight scenes, and Kunqu actor Ma Xianglin on the movements and postures of Bai Suzhen, the main character.⁸³ Three photographs of *Stealing Immortal Herbs* were published in *Dance News* in 1956 and show the use of xiqu-inspired costumes and hair ornamentation, fight scenes using the double sword technique common in xiqu performance, and postures from xiqu movement such as the supplicating kneeling walk and a deep lunge stance known in Chinese classical dance terminology as the “bow step” (*gong bu*).⁸⁴ *Magic Lotus Lantern* showed a similar basis in xiqu aesthetics and themes. A direct product of the first Beijing Dance School choreography course led by Tsaplin, it was codirected by two graduates of the course, Huang Boshou (b. 1931) and Li Zhonglin (1933–2018), who had created the work as their final project. Li Shaochun (1919–1975), a renowned Peking opera actor, cosupervised *Magic Lotus Lantern* along with Tsaplin.⁸⁵

Like *Stealing Immortal Herbs*, *Magic Lotus Lantern* was also based on a popular Chinese story cycle widely staged in xiqu performance, *Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother* (*Pi shan jiu mu*).⁸⁶ In addition to Li Shaochun, another Peking opera artist who contributed to the choreography was Li Jinhong, who helped develop the main character’s sword dance scenes.⁸⁷ An early review of *Magic Lotus Lantern* published in *Literary Gazette* highlighted its effective adaptation of xiqu material to blend old and new, which audiences apparently found extremely moving. The author wrote, “The content of dance drama *Magic Lotus Lantern* is already familiar to everyone, but its expressive form really is new. During the first dress rehearsal many comrades were moved and some even cried. . . . The choreographers did a good job using the rich dance vocabulary of our country’s classical dance and folk dance, and they also daringly absorbed the USSR’s advanced methods of dance drama creation. They used [Chinese] classical dance as the foundation to create the *Magic Lotus Lantern* dance drama.”⁸⁸ Four stage photographs from *Magic Lotus Lantern* published in the inaugural issue of *Dance* in early 1958 further confirm the strong influence of xiqu performance on this work. Costumes and props visibly correspond to xiqu’s civil/martial (*wen/wu*) system, as well as to identifiable xiqu role types, such as the virtuous female, the young scholar, and the martial male. As in *Stealing Immortal Herbs*, the dancers’ body positions and gestures are also



VIDEO 7. Excerpt of Zhao Qing and ensemble in *Magic Lotus Lantern*. Shanghai Tianma Film Studio, 1959.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.7>



clearly derived from xiqu movement, as visible in their body carriage, footwork, positions of the arms and hands in relation to the body and head, and ways of manipulating traditional stage props such as swords and daggers.⁸⁹ Fortunately, a film was made of this production in 1959, which confirms the centrality of xiqu-based Chinese classical dance as its primary movement vocabulary (video 7).⁹⁰

Reflecting broader trends in China's xiqu reform movement during the 1950s, *Magic Lotus Lantern* adapted a traditional story to highlight a revolutionary theme.⁹¹ Here, the central theme is freedom of marriage choice, a key concern of revolutionary activists and theater makers in China since the early twentieth century, when traditional ideas about arranged marriage and gender roles were being targeted for reform.⁹² Comprising three acts and seven scenes, the story focuses on the character of Third Sacred Mother (San Shengmu), a female immortal who breaks the rules of the heavenly domain by falling in love with a human, Liu Yanchang. The story begins in Third's magical mountain temple, where she meets Liu Yanchang, a young scholar, and the two fall in love. Third leaves the temple to join the human realm, and one year later she gives birth to a baby boy, Chen Xiang. Knowing that she has broken immortal law, Third uses a magic lotus lantern imbued with special powers to protect her family from possible retribution. However, Third's elder brother Er Lang Shen, whose job is to uphold the rules of the immortal realm, is intent on punishing her transgression and ending the unlawful union. During the party celebrating



FIGURE 16. Zhao Qing and ensemble in *Magic Lotus Lantern*. Published in *Renmin huabao* 13, no. 5 (1962): 27. Photographer: Wang Fuzun. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

Chen Xiang's birth, Er sends his servant, a shape-shifting dog, to steal the lantern, leaving Third and her family without protection. Together with his armed guards, Er Lang Shen attacks the family compound, seizes Third, and locks her in a mountain cave. Moved by what has occurred, an old immortal named Master Pili takes Chen Xiang under his care and trains him in martial arts so that he can one day save his mother. Using his newfound skills, together with Pili's magic, Chen eventually defeats Er Lang Shen and frees Third. In the end, the family is reunited, and Third is able to live out her days happily in the company of her loyal lover and her son.⁹³ In an early review of the production, dance critic Long Yinpei (b. 1932) commended the scriptwriters for their streamlining of the story, writing, "The creators refined and concentrated the plot of the original 'Magic Lotus Lantern' story, taking out Liu's earning of the Number One Scholar title and his marrying of Wang Guiying, Chen Xiang and Qiu'er's beating to death of the Qin official to protect the Second Hall, and other storylines."⁹⁴ According to Long, this allowed Third Sacred Mother to emerge as "a typical image of a female within the feudal society raising a flag of resistance against the feudal Confucian ethical code."⁹⁵ Another critic echoed this interpretation of Third Sacred Mother as a powerful figure of rebellion, writing "Third Sacred Mother from beginning to end never yields, . . . [and she] who attacks and resists the theocratic order achieves the final victory."⁹⁶ In this way, critics imbued Third Sacred Mother with the symbolic power of a revolutionary heroine, like the newly empowered peasant women in New Yangge dramas and the reshaped female leads in works in recently adapted xiqu dramas (figure 16).

As depicted in the 1959 color film, *Magic Lotus Lantern's* choreography gives full expression to this thematic focus on Third Sacred Mother and her depiction as both a typical character from xiqu performance and an embodiment of modern social rebellion. During the scene of Er Lang Shen's attack at Chen Xiang's birthday celebration, the following choreography unfolds: In the home of Third and Liu, a lively party features group dances with feathered fans, acrobatics, and "big head babies."⁹⁷ The couple dances a romantic duet in the courtyard in which Liu performs a typical xiqu-style young scholar character, while Third dances a typical xiqu-style virtuous lady, but with expanded dance movements and a pair of elongated silk streamers with which she paints flowing designs in the air around her body. Suddenly, the festivities halt when disaster strikes: the couple's protective talisman, the magic lotus lantern, has gone missing. Third knows that by uniting with a human she has crossed the "feudal orthodoxy" of the immortal realm.⁹⁸ She runs into the bedroom to prepare for a standoff with Er Lang Shen. Discarding her party skirt and silk streamers, Third emerges from the bedroom wearing pantaloons and carrying a pair of swords. She is just in time to find her brother and his armed guards entering the main hall of their home; the guests from the party have disappeared. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, Third jumps forward to fight off the invaders, while Liu hangs behind cradling their infant son in his arms. A battle ensues, in which Third defends her family by spinning, kicking, and clashing swords in typical xiqu-style combat against her brother, his four large male guards, the magic lantern, and the dog assistant. Although outnumbered, magically disadvantaged, and of slighter physical build than her opponents, Third holds her own in the fight. At one point, she shows tremendous strength by pushing off two large guards simultaneously with only the strength of her arms. Finally, Third turns herself over after Er Lang Shen threatens to kill her infant son Chen Xiang. Third is then captured and carted off, her husband and child remaining behind. The fight too much for him, Liu faints, holding a silk scarf by which to remember his valiant lover.

Like other national dance dramas that would come after it, *Magic Lotus Lantern* leveraged years of investment in Chinese dance institutions, choreographic experimentation, and dancer training to produce a new form of large-scale narrative work that could explore socialist themes in a new artistic medium. Zhao Qing (b. 1936), the dancer who played the role of Third Sacred Mother in *Magic Lotus Lantern*, is herself one example of the accumulated investment and how it made such new productions possible. The daughter of one of China's most famous twentieth-century film actors, Zhao Dan (1915–1980), Zhao Qing grew up in Shanghai, where she had initially gained an interest in dance through exposure to foreign ballet films and classes offered by expatriate Russian dance teachers who emigrated to Shanghai after the Russian Revolution of 1917. After the founding of the PRC, Zhao Qing, like most other young dancers in China, turned her attention to Chinese dance. In 1951, at the age of fifteen, Zhao entered the CAD Dance Ensemble, where she

was among the first generation of students trained in xiqu-style Chinese classical dance by Kunqu masters Ma Xianglin, Han Shichang, and Hou Yongkui. During this time, Zhao also learned some Anhui-style Han folk dance from a flower drum lamp (*huagudeng*) master who later helped develop the Han folk dance curriculum at the Beijing Dance School, Feng Guopei. In 1953 Zhao joined the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, where she was one of the original performers in Dai Ailian's "Lotus Dance," which she performed abroad that year on a tour to North Korea. In 1954 Zhao tested into the inaugural cohort of students at the Beijing Dance School, where she learned Chinese classical dance, ballet, Chinese folk and ethnic dance, and European character dance. In 1955 Zhao represented China at the 1955 WFYS in Warsaw, performing "Ordos Dance." The following year she was part of the China Art Ensemble that visited Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, where she performed a new Chinese classical dance solo, "Long Silk Dance" (Changchou wu), as well as other WFYS prizewinners like "Picking Tea and Butterflies."⁹⁹ During her time at the Beijing Dance School, Zhao had performed a leading role in a Spanish character dance choreography that she adored.¹⁰⁰ Although she had initially been interested in pursuing this style further, conversations she had with a famous Peking opera actor during her trip to Latin America convinced her that it was more important to contribute to Chinese dance.¹⁰¹

After Zhao was cast as Third Sacred Mother, she prepared for the role by seeking further training. To deepen her knowledge of xiqu movement, she worked with Peking opera actors Yu Lianquan and Li Jinhong. She also consulted Buddhist art imagery with the assistance of Dunhuang scholar Chang Shuhong.¹⁰² As depicted in the 1959 film, Zhao's main movement vocabulary is characterized by soft, curving torso lines, codified hand gestures, small, rapid stepping actions, and manipulation of silk streamers and double swords, all of which clearly demonstrate her years of training in xiqu-based Chinese classical dance. Her performance of some Han folk dance choreography in scenes such as Chen Xiang's birthday celebration also shows her training in Han folk dance. The emergence of works like *Magic Lotus Lantern* depended on the accumulated effort of many individuals like Zhao Qing, who developed their crafts over time through years of study, practice, and professional experience. To create a national dance drama required the contribution of a large team of people, including choreographers, composers, stage designers, costume designers, scriptwriters, critics, administrators, stagehands, set and costume fabricators, rehearsal directors, and others. All of this labor in turn required resources and support. In the case of China's national dance drama, the resources and support came from a new nationwide infrastructure for Chinese dance that had been carefully constructed and sustained over many years through the work of artists funded by the PRC state. In other words, the new artistic medium of national dance drama was a product of many factors, including, importantly, socialist state investment in Chinese dance.

CHOREOGRAPHING REVOLUTION: NATIONAL DANCE DRAMA IN THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

The Great Leap Forward was a mass campaign launched in 1958 that impacted every segment of Chinese society, including professional dancers. With the slogan “Go all out, aim high, and build socialism with greater, faster, and more economical results,” the campaign called on people in all fields to contribute their utmost to the nation’s advancement, with the goal of harnessing the energy of collective labor and continuous revolution to meet or surpass existing production levels, including those of fully industrialized nations such as England and the United States.¹⁰³ The campaign is best known in scholarship published outside China for having led to one of the largest famines of the twentieth century and for planting questions about the direction of China’s socialist economy and political leadership.¹⁰⁴ The campaign’s impact in the cultural fields has only recently begun to receive significant attention within the English-language scholarship, with recent studies of architecture and museums, popular literature, and film all showing important new developments during the Great Leap Forward years.¹⁰⁵ As Krista Van Fleit Hang writes, “While the failures of the Great Leap Forward are severe and must be acknowledged, they should not prevent us from taking the period as a serious object of study, and trying to determine how the tragedies could happen, as well as honestly confronting its successes.”¹⁰⁶ In the field of dance, one clear success of the Great Leap Forward was the tremendous output of newly created large-scale dance dramas. China’s national dance journal, *Wudao*, founded in 1958, reported on more than twenty such works premiered by various ensembles across the country between 1958 and 1960, which would have been created at least in part during the Great Leap Forward campaign.¹⁰⁷ In terms of dance aesthetics, these productions ranged extensively in style, from xiqu-based Chinese classical dance works similar to *Magic Lotus Lantern*, to works that blended Chinese dance vocabularies with military dance and New Dance aesthetics, to works composed mainly on the basis of Han folk and ethnic minority dance movement. Thematically, these productions also showed great variety, spanning modern historical events and stories drawn from popular legends and folk literature. Thus, whereas scholars in Chinese studies have called on us to see the early and mid-1960s as underexamined periods of creativity in Chinese film and drama, respectively, I contend that the years 1958–1960 mark an especially vibrant era for Chinese dance that deserves further attention.¹⁰⁸

Rather than attempting a comprehensive account of Great Leap Forward-era dance drama creation, I will briefly examine two important works that provide insight into some broader accomplishments of the period: *Five Red Clouds* (*Wu duo hongyun*), by the Guangzhou Military Soldier Song and Dance Ensemble (Guangzhou budui zhanshi gewutuan), and *Dagger Society* (*Xiaodao hui*), by the Shanghai Experimental Opera Theater (Shanghai shiyan gejuyuan).¹⁰⁹ Both *Five Red Clouds* and *Dagger Society* premiered in the summer of 1959, the former in

June as part of the Second PLA All-Military Performance Festival in Beijing (after a series of preliminary showings in Guangdong and Hunan earlier that summer) and the latter in August as part of a series of performances staged in Shanghai in honor of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC.¹¹⁰ Both were large-scale productions that, like *Magic Lotus Lantern*, were made into feature-length color films that closely resemble the stage versions and greatly broadened their circulation and impact.¹¹¹ The PLA August First Film Studio released its film of *Five Red Clouds* in January 1960, and Tianma Film Studio released its film of *Dagger Society* around the fall of 1961.¹¹² Apart from *Magic Lotus Lantern*, these are the only known surviving films of large-scale dance dramas created in China during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Thus, they serve as invaluable artifacts of PRC dance drama creation before the Cultural Revolution.¹¹³

Both *Five Red Clouds* and *Dagger Society* were direct products of Great Leap Forward cultural policy. In October 1958 a report appeared in the *People's Daily* calling for new artistic creation, using the campaign's language of "launching satellites."¹¹⁴ In terms of artistic form, it sought new works that were innovative and possessed four specific qualities: national forms, high levels of technical expression, combinations of realism and romanticism, and popular appeal. Thematically, it encouraged artists to explore a range of topics from socialist history to the adaptations of existing stories. Artists were instructed that works should be as collaborative as possible, bridging expertise across fields and between professionals and amateurs. Finally, the report outlined a plan for broad participation and competition. "We call upon the communes, counties, provinces, and each art troupe and art school of every area in the country to actively [contribute]. . . . Selections should be made at each level."¹¹⁵ According to the report, the best new productions would be selected through this process and would appear in national exhibitions and performance festivals the following year to celebrate the PRC's ten-year anniversary. *Five Red Clouds* and *Dagger Society*, both of which came from ensembles based outside Beijing, were among the many new works created across the country in response to this call for new creation.¹¹⁶ To illustrate this, a review of the Second PLA All-Military Performance Festival in which *Five Red Clouds* premiered indicated that it was just one of nineteen newly created dance dramas presented at the event, and this was a partial list counting only works dealing with modern themes.¹¹⁷

The sheer volume of new works created during this time makes it undoubtedly the most productive era for new Chinese dance choreography in the entire socialist period. Writing in *Wudao* in 1959, Wu Xiaobang called the achievements of national dance drama in just the previous year an "unprecedented major development" that had transformed the artistic scene in China's dance field.¹¹⁸ What is most interesting about the productions of this period, however, is not their quantity but the new ways they used Chinese dance to create complex characters and stories,

which in turn offered new embodiments of Chinese socialist thought and ideology. Like *Magic Lotus Lantern*, *Five Red Clouds* and *Dagger Society* both featured strong female protagonists, following in a pattern of revolutionary drama and film that dates to the early twentieth century and also continued in many works of the later Cultural Revolution era.¹¹⁹ In their treatment of sex and gender and their ways of addressing these themes in relation to intersectional understandings of class, ethnicity, and race, however, these works presented more radical visions of social critique and transformation than the later works.¹²⁰ In this way, these works represent the Great Leap Forward as a time of ideological contestation and experimentation that found expression in the new choreographic form of national dance drama.

Five Red Clouds is a four-act, seven-scene ethnic minority-themed national dance drama set on the island of Hainan in 1943–44, during the latter period of the War of Resistance against Japan.¹²¹ It portrays the struggle of a Li community that is being abused by KMT/Nationalist soldiers stationed on the island, who are abducting Li villagers and forcing them to carry out hard labor against their will. The main character of the story is a Li woman named Ke Ying, whose husband is one of the villagers who has been abducted by the KMT soldiers, leaving her alone to care for their newborn child. After Ke Ying protests the soldiers' actions and is then captured and subsequently set free by her escaped husband and others in her community, the soldiers retaliate by murdering Ke's child and her husband in cold blood. In this melodramatic scene, the Nationalist general seizes the baby from Ke Ying's arms and throws the infant into a burning house, then knocks Ke Ying unconscious. Just as her husband discovers her body and checks to see if she is still alive, he stands up to be immediately shot by a Nationalist soldier. Before her husband dies, Ke Ying wakes up in time to hear him praise the nearby CCP-affiliated battalion who helped him escape from the Nationalists, and he leaves Ke Ying with a symbol of the group, a white piece of fabric printed with a red star. Enraged by the murders of Ke Ying's family, the community bands together to collectively attack the Nationalist camp and free their other abducted friends. Although this raid is initially successful, the soldiers return during the night and again kill many members of the Li community, pushing them to a crisis state. Remembering her husband's story, Ke Ying sets off with the star-printed fabric to seek help from the nearby CCP troops. Meanwhile, the battle continues, until the Nationalist soldiers capture a group of the most resistant Li villagers and chain them together at the center of a large bonfire, suggesting the soldiers are about to burn the Li villagers to death. Just as the Nationalist soldiers are gleefully dancing around the bonfire holding burning stakes, a crash of exploding gunpowder suddenly sounds the arrival of the CCP troops, led by Ke Ying. In the battle that ensues, the Nationalists are defeated, and Ke Ying single-handedly gets revenge on the general who murdered her baby, by chasing him with her upheld dagger and then driving him off the edge of a mountain cliff. The story ends with the Li villagers and the CCP

troops celebrating together amidst red flags, as five red clouds rise into the sky, representing a local prophecy of better days to come.

Because this production was created by a military ensemble, rather than an ensemble that specialized in minority performance, the dancers were primarily of Han ethnicity, likely including Wang Shan (b. 1935), who performed the role of Ke Ying.¹²² Nevertheless, as in the case of the 1960 touring ensemble discussed earlier in this chapter, the choreography in this work employed movement forms that had initially been developed and promoted by minority artists. As depicted in the 1960 film recording of *Five Red Clouds*, the dance sequence that introduces Wang's character—a slow lilting cross-body step in which the dancer rises and rotates her body in line with the stepping foot as she transfers her weight—is identical to that performed by female dancers in the introductory sequence of “Third Day of the Third Month” (San yue san), a Li-themed small-scale group dance featured in the 1959 film *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* that was originally created by a minority-dominated ensemble. Other elements of the choreography in this piece that appear in *Five Red Clouds* include pendulum-like swinging arm actions, syncopated three-count walks, and perpendicular kicks with hips facing to the side while the arms swing back.¹²³ “Third Day of the Third Month” was originally premiered in 1956 by the Hainan Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble (*Hainan minzu gewutuan*), which included Li dancers.¹²⁴ This work achieved national influence in 1957, when the Hainan group presented it at the national music and dance festival in Beijing, where it was singled out for praise by Long Yinpei and Hu Guogang, two influential senior figures in the Chinese dance and military dance fields, respectively.¹²⁵ Wang Shan, who began her dance career in 1950 at the Central South Military District Political Department Cultural Work Troupe in Wuhan and then transferred to the Guangzhou Military Soldier Song and Dance Ensemble in 1953, had performed “Third Day of the Third Month” with the Guangzhou ensemble. Although Wang was likely not an ethnic minority, she held a marginal regional status because she had received her training in 1951–53 at the Central South Military Art School (Zhongnan budui yishu xueyuan) in Wuhan, rather than in the capital like Zhao Qing and Shu Qiao, who performed the leads in *Magic Lotus Lantern* and *Dagger Society*.¹²⁶ The institutions in which Wang studied and worked had put on two early three-act dance dramas based on the Korean War, *Mother Calls* (*Muqin zai zhaohuan*, 1951) and *Flag* (*Qi*, 1954).¹²⁷ This meant that she and other members of the *Five Red Clouds* cast had significantly more experience with dance drama performance than the Hainan group, which may explain why they pursued this theme. As later national dance drama productions of the early 1960s show, it was more common for national dance dramas on minority themes to be created and performed by minority-dominated ensembles.¹²⁸

In their creative process for *Five Red Clouds*, the team's scriptwriters and choreographers went to significant lengths to engage the local knowledge of

Li communities in Hainan who were being represented in the production. The imagery of the five red clouds reportedly came from a Li folk story: “Legend says that at dusk, on Five Finger Mountain there often appeared in the emptiness five red clouds. If the clouds fell to the ground, Li people would be able to get out of their bitter fate and achieve happiness.”¹²⁹ According to the creative team, the story they developed for *Five Red Clouds* combined this folk image with historical accounts of a Li rebellion that circulated in Hainan in the late 1940s, which had previously been organized into a music and dance script under the name “The Story of the Red Flag” (Hongqi de gushi).¹³⁰ The creative team interviewed local minority leaders and CCP soldiers and researched historical materials about the Li rebellions, which provided additional details for the story. As with *Magic Lotus Lantern*, they produced a storyline that foregrounded a female protagonist. Additionally, they ensured that the resulting plot struck an ideologically prescribed balance between depicting the Li people as agents of revolution while also insisting that they could not have achieved liberation without the help of the CCP.¹³¹ Apart from reading about Li culture and customs, the group presented early versions of the script to the Hainan Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble for discussion, and they also visited Li and Miao communities in areas of Hainan depicted in the story, sought assistance from Li and Miao folk artists, and studied at a Li performance festival.¹³²

The intersectional outlook of *Five Red Clouds* is expressed narratively and choreographically in a scene that begins about sixteen minutes into the film version, when Ke Ying first visits the Nationalist camp and the audience sees what is going on there. The episode begins when Ke Ying and her community are dancing in celebration of Gong Hu’s recent return after having been captured by the Nationalists and then set free by the CCP. When a group of Nationalist soldiers approaches the village in search of Gong, everyone else is able to hide, but Ke Ying gets delayed tending to her baby. After a scuffle between Ke and the Nationalist general, a male relative of Ke’s is taken hostage after he tries to protect Ke and her child. Then, as Ke and the others decide what to do, the shot cuts to the Nationalist camp. Although it is now the dead of night, armed soldiers are standing guard vigilantly as Li villagers march in a file, their feet shackled like a chain gang, shuffling along, their heads bent down, lugging heavy rocks and wood beams. When a grey bearded man collapses from exhaustion, he is whipped and forced to continue. Next, the view moves to a group of ten Li women arranged in a circle around a vat filled with rice kernels. In unison, each woman holds a large wooden pole in her hands and thrusts the pole vertically into the vat, crushing the rice to remove its husks. Titled “Rice Husking Dance” (Chong mi wu), this scene references other rice-husking ethnic minority group dances of the period, such as the Wa-themed “Mortar and Pestle” (Chong jiu) dance featured in the 1963 film *Colored Butterflies Fluttering About*. However, whereas the women in “Mortar



VIDEO 8. Excerpt of Wang Shan and ensemble in *Five Red Clouds*.
August First Film Studio, 1960.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.8>



and Pestle” bounce with lightness and appear to be having fun in their work, the women in “Rice Husking Dance” perform their actions laboriously and heavily, as if exhausted and in pain. Between actions, the women in “Rice Husking Dance” hunch over their poles, wipe sweat from their foreheads, and place their hands on their sore lower backs. Sighs of fatigue are audible between strokes, and each step appears a struggle. If their pace slows, guards aim rifles in their direction, forcing them to speed up again (video 8). When Ke’s relative is marched in and locked in a nearby cage, the rice-huskers stop their work and try to help him, only to be blocked by the guards. Seconds later, Ke Ying appears and passionately pleads for his release but too is thrown into the cage. After the cage is again locked, the Nationalist general flips over a sign on its door, revealing the words “Exhibition Object: Li.” The word “Li” is written with three added strokes meaning “dog,” turning it into a derogatory ethnic slur that further compounds the already humiliating message of the sign (Figure 17).¹³³ As dawn breaks, the rice huskers perform the “Prisoner’s Cage Dance” (qiulong wu). Outside the cage, they stretch their arms up toward the sky, as if pleading for help from a higher power. Meanwhile, a chorus in the musical score recites:

Auspicious colored clouds, ya

Which day will you fall down

And glow upon the bitter Li family.¹³⁴



FIGURE 17. Wang Shan and ensemble in *Five Red Clouds*. Published in *Wu duo hong yun: si mu qi chang wuju* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1963), back matter. Photographer unknown. Image provided by Zha Anbin, from the private collection of Zha Lie.

This scene introduces several important themes that lend broader meaning to the production as a whole. First, the role of motherhood in Ke Ying's characterization is part of a broader engagement with issues of sex and gender that go beyond those in dance works on revolutionary themes created in later periods, such as during the Cultural Revolution. Here, rather than eliminating reproduction and its attendant links to sexuality, family, and romance, the plot and choreography highlight these experiences as factors that contribute to Ke Ying's capacities as a revolutionary heroine.¹³⁵ As later scenes show, the plot of *Five Red Clouds* presents Ke Ying's gendered subjectivity as a resource, rather than a liability, to her potential for revolutionary action. For example, they show how her ability to work cooperatively with other women helps her effectiveness in battle, how her presence of mind in the midst of personal tragedy allows her to detect a Nationalist attack in time to warn the village, how her awareness of others during battle allows her to take over the war drum when the male village leader Ah Die is injured, and how trust in her husband allows her to remember his story and go out in search of the CCP troops and ultimately save her community. In each of these later scenes, the choreography emphasizes a union between Ke Ying's sex and gender identity and her revolutionary agency, by employing conventionally gendered movement vocabulary and stage aesthetics to show Ke Ying solving social problems, defeating the enemy in battle, and being a leader. Ke Ying remains clothed in stereotypically feminine, minority-marked costume throughout the production, producing striking images such as the one on the cover of this book, in which a character clearly marked as minority and female is also empowered and celebrated for resisting oppression, even depicted armed with a weapon while backed by an entire community of like-minded supporters. Numerous other clues throughout the narrative hint at a sustained criticism of patriarchy and a promotion of positive female representation. For example, the male village elder Ah Die initially excludes women from war rituals but is forced through the story to acknowledge their contributions, symbolized in the end when he exchanges his tattered old banner for a new red flag. Although Ke Ying initially shows some naiveté when she tries to negotiate with the Nationalist general for her friend's release, and the death of her husband and son make her a definite victim, ultimately, it is she who saves herself by actively seeking out the CCP soldiers, rather than passively being saved by them like heroines in later productions.

Apart from sex and gender, the treatment of ethnicity in the above scene also signals the broader importance of this issue as a key theme dealt with innovatively in *Five Red Clouds*. By pairing the depiction of forced labor with the image of the cage and the derogatory "Exhibition Object: Li" sign, this scene explicitly treats class oppression and the prejudice of Han toward ethnic minorities as intersecting problems faced by ethnic minority communities in Chinese society. Describing this scene in the context of the larger themes of the work, the *Five Red Clouds*

creative team wrote, “The Nationalists discriminate against ethnic minorities. This is ethnic contradiction; it is also class contradiction.”¹³⁶ Within this scene, the “Rice Husking Dance” effectively embodies this intersection between ethnicity and class choreographically, by translating it into kinesthetic expression. Up to this scene, the Li women in *Five Red Clouds* perform mainly dances similar in register to the cheerful, upbeat ethnic minority and Han folk dances typically circulated in China during this time. Through its marked contrast with these standard depictions, “Rice Husking Dance” gives the Li women a multidimensional quality—rather than exotic beauties or idealized rural subjects possessing boundless energy and cheer, they become relatable, realistic women who sweat, get exhausted, feel pain, and worry about their friends. Later in the scene, when these same women perform the “Prisoner’s Cage Dance” to a chorus invoking the red cloud imagery, their embodied expressions of yearning for a better life seem to arise from a believable subjectivity that interweaves gender, ethnicity, and class experiences. Ultimately, the overall storyline of *Five Red Clouds* follows a conventional PRC narrative of class struggle and the CCP saving the day. Yet, like other national dance dramas of this period, there is more in the details of the narrative and in the use of Chinese dance choreography that makes it worthy of greater critical attention.¹³⁷

Like *Five Red Clouds*, *Dagger Society* also tells a story inspired by local revolutionary history. Set in Shanghai in the fall of 1853, *Dagger Society* is a seven-scene national dance drama based on a historical uprising led by the Dagger Society against a local Qing official and his Western imperialist supporters.¹³⁸ The central protagonist is Zhou Xiuying, a female leader of the Dagger Society rebellion who works alongside two male leaders, the elder Liu Lichuan and the younger Pan Qixiang, the former Zhou’s superior and the latter her love interest (figure 18). The story begins on the dock of the Huangpu River in Shanghai, where an altercation takes place between Pan Qixiang and a Qing guard, after the guard has used violence against the local poor while extracting exorbitant land taxes. When Pan is captured, Liu and Zhou launch an armed revolt by the Dagger Society in which they free Pan and seize the local Qing official.¹³⁹ Despite the success of this initial venture, however, the Qing official escapes and launches a counterattack supported by Western imperialist troops, aided by a British consul, a French military general, and a foreign priest.¹⁴⁰ A protracted battle ensues that lasts for many months. With help from the local masses, the Dagger Society is able to hold the old city, but their stronghold is severely bombed and food supplies are eventually cut off. As the Dagger Society’s situation grows dire, Liu sends Pan on a mission to seek help from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, a larger anti-Qing rebel group based in a nearby city.¹⁴¹ However, Pan dies on route before fulfilling his mission. In the climactic final battle scene, Liu Lichuan is shot in action by the leader of the Western troops right after he has killed the Qing official.¹⁴² Then, Zhou kills the Western troop leader and regroups the remaining members of her militia to plan



FIGURE 18. Shu Qiao and ensemble in *Dagger Society*. Published in *Renmin huabao* 11, no. 16 (1960): 24. Photographer: Wu Yinbo. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

their next steps. The story ends with Zhou raising the flag to lead a diminished but resolute Dagger Society forward into battle, a symbol of the endurance and ultimate victory of the revolutionary fight a century later.

In terms of aesthetic form, *Dagger Society* was, like *Magic Lotus Lantern*, grounded in a movement vocabulary based on xiqu-style Chinese classical dance. Like the CEOT that produced *Magic Lotus Lantern*, the Shanghai Experimental Opera Theater (SEOT) had employed Kunqu actors to train its dancers since the early 1950s.¹⁴³ At its year-end performance in 1953, the predecessor to SEOT had presented “Sword Dance” (*Jian wu*), one of the first well-known Chinese dance group works composed entirely in a xiqu-inspired Chinese classical dance style.¹⁴⁴ Shu Qiao, who performed the role of Zhou Xiuying in *Dagger Society*, had both starred in and helped choreograph “Sword Dance,” performing it on tour in India, Indonesia, and Burma in 1954 and at the 1957 WFDY Festival in Moscow, where it won a prize.¹⁴⁵ When the national dance publication *Wudao* was established, the cover of its inaugural issue featured a photograph of Shu in a pose from this dance.¹⁴⁶ Apart from xiqu movement vocabulary, *Dagger Society* also used xiqu-inspired costumes, props, and story-telling devices, and, like *Magic Lotus Lantern*,

it supplemented this with group dances derived from Han folk performance, in this case also including local traditions of martial arts, mainly from the Jiangnan cultural region near Shanghai.¹⁴⁷ *Dagger Society's* musical score highlighted Chinese instruments, with the *suona* (Chinese clarinet) featured as the main theme for the Dagger Society, the bamboo flute used in a long dream sequence in which Zhou imagines Pan on his journey, and the pipa played in important strategy scenes, such as when Liu sends Pan to seek help from the Taipings. According to one critic, the effect was so good that it convinced some critics who had previously doubted that Chinese music could make for good dance drama scores.¹⁴⁸ As depicted in the 1961 film, the majority of dancing in *Dagger Society* is performed by the Chinese characters (including the Qing guards and officials), who all perform Chinese dance movement styles. The Western characters, by contrast, perform movements and gestures based mainly on Western-style spoken drama (*huaju*), which are supplemented by two short group dances that employ European-style sword fighting and ballroom dance.¹⁴⁹

Like the creative team for *Five Red Clouds*, the makers of *Dagger Society* conducted extensive research and engaged local knowledge of the people represented, while they also took artistic liberties to develop a story that suited their intended ideological message, here, that the origins of the Chinese communist revolution lie in a longer history of commoner-led rebellions against “the double oppression of imperialism and the feudal court.”¹⁵⁰ The historical basis for the production was a collection of primary source documents related to the Shanghai Dagger Society revolt of 1853, which the *Dagger Society* creation team studied in their process of developing the work.¹⁵¹ According to *Dagger Society's* lead director, Zhang Tuo, the creative team also visited relics and listened to local folk stories about the rebellion, one of which reportedly contained a ballad about a female rebel named Zhou Xiuying.¹⁵² In the final story, the characters Liu Lichuan and Pan Qixiang were loosely based on historical figures documented in the textual sources, while Zhou Xiuying was based on the character from the folk ballad.¹⁵³ According to Zhang, the creative team decided to make Zhou the main character because they were inspired by the fact that local people were still singing about her.¹⁵⁴ While the story was set in the past, critics predictably linked it to a longer revolutionary narrative of fighting “imperialist invasion” and “reactionary regimes.”¹⁵⁵ One also drew a parallel to the Cold War, comparing the conflict depicted in *Dagger Society* to “the Chinese people’s current struggle against American imperialism.”¹⁵⁶ Overall, although the *Dagger Society* story ended on a tragic note, making it different from many other stories of the socialist era, it was interpreted as part of a longer revolutionary prehistory of the mass rebellions that gave rise to the PRC.

Whereas the intersectional dimension of *Five Red Clouds* emerges through the treatment of sex and gender, ethnicity, and class, especially as presented in the group dance scenes by minority women characters, in *Dagger Society* it appears



VIDEO 9. Excerpt of Shu Qiao and ensemble in *Dagger Society*. Shanghai Tianma Film Studio, 1961.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.9>



in the interweaving of a feminist agenda into a story about racial and economic hierarchies, through the characterization of Zhou Xiuying as an antifeudal, anti-imperialist heroine. Interconnected racial and economic hierarchies are expressed in *Dagger Society* through numerous depictions of imbalanced power relationships between Western and Chinese characters. In one scene, for example, the American, British, and French characters coerce the Qing official into signing an unfavorable customs agreement in exchange for their military aid, while in another, the American character happily reviews an account book showing how much money he is making in China while he is simultaneously overseeing the transportation of opium imports, which are shown being carried on the backs of Chinese laborers.¹⁵⁷ Racial difference is accentuated in these scenes through visual performance effects, which include not only the use of racially designated movement, as discussed above, but also distinctions in costume and the use of elaborate wigs, makeup, and facial prosthetics designed to make the Chinese performers playing the foreign roles appear Caucasian (video 9).¹⁵⁸ Within this racial and economic hierarchy, moreover, is also embedded a gender hierarchy. While male and female characters appear among both the Chinese and Western groups, the Western figures and their local representatives who are shown to exert economic power and threat of violence over the Chinese characters are all men (women are present but play secondary roles), while the Chinese characters subordinated by

these actions include both men and women. This distinction is especially apparent during the numerous battle scenes, in which the Dagger Society troops include large numbers of women fighters, while the Western and Qing troops are all male.

Amid this spectrum of interlinked power hierarchies, Zhou Xiuying's character stands out as a striking feminist expression. Heroines in the later revolutionary ballets propagated during the Cultural Revolution were often portrayed either as victims in need of male saviors or as heroes whose revolutionary acts were limited to realms conventionally gendered as feminine. In *Dagger Society*, however, Zhou Xiuying's portrayal follows neither of these later patterns. Rather, from start to finish, she appears consistently as a powerful, competent leader who equals or surpasses her male counterparts in all arenas. In the 1961 film, Zhou supplies weapons to the Dagger Society militia, and she also personally trains the fighters and contributes critical strategic knowledge during meetings with the opposing parties. Moreover, throughout the production, Zhou's levelheaded and steadfast character is contrasted with the hotheaded personality of Pan, who repeatedly causes problems with his uncalculated outbursts. The fact that Zhou is the one who finally defeats the Western military commander and survives the multiple battles to lead the Dagger Society onward at the end of the production also implies that it is revolutionary women like she who ensure the revolutionary movement continues to the next generation. Zhou, whom contemporary critics described using the classical trope of the "woman hero" (*jinguo yingxiong*), performs all these tasks while dressed in stereotypically feminine clothing and dancing in ways coded as feminine within traditional Chinese stage conventions.¹⁵⁹ Her interactions with Pan present her as a sexualized being with a romantic life beyond the revolutionary arena. While certainly conforming to the heteronormative ideas about sexuality and gender difference pervasive in Chinese society at the time, this portrayal is significant within the broader history of Chinese socialist heroines because it means that Zhou does not fall into the mode of "genderless revolutionaries" decried by some later critics of Maoist gender politics.¹⁶⁰ Generated in a historical moment of contested and shifting gender politics during the Great Leap Forward era, Zhou's character represented a vision of female leadership in which femininity was compatible with revolutionary leadership.¹⁶¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Dagger Society* was one of relatively few leading early national dance dramas that included a well-known female dancer among its top choreographers. In both *Magic Lotus Lantern* and *Five Red Clouds*, Zhao Qing and Wang Shan had performed as leading ladies under teams of male directors. However, in *Dagger Society*, Shu Qiao was recognized officially as both a leading performer and one of the work's head choreographers.¹⁶² Shu was responsible for the group choreography in the "Bow Dance" scene, in which Zhou trains the female and male members of the Dagger Society militia; the scene went on to become a highly popular dance piece independent from *Dagger Society*, winning

an award at the last WFYS that Chinese dance delegations attended in Helsinki, Finland, in 1962.¹⁶³ From her early choreographic work on “Sword Dance” to the much larger production of *Dagger Society*, Shu helped create a new interpretation of the “martial maiden,” a character type once common in Peking opera, where it had been developed and performed primarily by male actors who performed female roles. According to Joshua Goldstein, the martial maiden was defined by “a chivalrous martial spirit and demeanor [,] . . . turning the traditionally gentle and demure *qingyi* [virtuous female] into characters marked by their fortitude, vigor, and martial prowess.”¹⁶⁴ Earlier martial maiden characters had often performed in narrative contexts in which they were disguised as men, following the style of heroic female literary characters such as the cross-dressing warrior Hua Mulan.¹⁶⁵ By contrast, Shu Qiao developed a mode of martial maiden performance for Chinese dance in which the female character enters new social spaces and roles while still being recognized as a woman. Because of the popularity of Shu’s new choreography, her dances expanded the spectrum of *xiqu* movement styles taught to women students in Chinese classical dance courses, and this in turn expanded the possibilities for feminine-gendered movement within the new and still developing style of Chinese classical dance.

CONCLUSION: NATIONAL DANCE DRAMA ON STAGE AT HOME AND ABROAD

The latter half of the 1950s and early 1960s was a vibrant period of expansion for Chinese dance in the PRC. Following the establishment of a shared artistic vision for Chinese dance and the founding of national and regional dance ensembles and dance conservatories to carry out this vision during the first half of the 1950s, the latter half of the decade saw the rapid creation and widespread circulation of new Chinese dance choreography around the country and the world. In 1957 reports on a national music and dance festival held that year counted sixty professional ensembles in attendance, suggesting the existence of a nationwide network for Chinese dance performance.¹⁶⁶ In 1958 *Wudao* was established as China’s first publicly circulating national dance periodical, creating a venue for dancers across the country to share news and learn about the latest developments in Chinese dance education, choreography, history, and theory.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, a new type of Chinese dance creation, national dance drama, came into existence during these years, engendering a massive wave of new large-scale choreography quite different from any Chinese dance that had come before. The emergence of this new form made it possible for the movement vocabularies of Chinese dance to be employed to tell complex revolutionary narratives, often with results that were innovative and interesting both artistically and ideologically.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was not only short-form Chinese dance choreography like “Lotus Dance” that was being staged in national celebrations and used to represent China to foreign audiences; the new large-scale national dance dramas such as *Magic Lotus Lantern*, *Five Red Clouds*, and *Dagger Society* were also filling this role, both as live stage productions and as newly created dance drama films. In the fall of 1959, in honor of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, both *Five Red Clouds* and *Magic Lotus Lantern* were staged in whole or in part as live performances in the capital as part of the official National Day celebrations.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, *Magic Lotus Lantern*, which Shanghai Tianma Film Studio had just released as China’s first color dance drama film, was part of the national film exhibition, and it also started to be shown widely in cultural events welcoming foreign delegations visiting China.¹⁶⁹ In 1959 the New Siberia Song and Dance Theater performed *Magic Lotus Lantern*, marking the first time a national dance drama created by Chinese choreographers had been staged by a foreign company.¹⁷⁰ In 1960 both *Five Red Clouds* and *Dagger Society* entered the repertoire of CEOT, indicating their recognition as part of a national repertoire and allowing them to gain increased visibility both at home and abroad.¹⁷¹ In 1961 CEOT toured *Dagger Society* and *Magic Lotus Lantern*, along with the company’s newest xiqu-style national dance drama, *Thunder Peak Pagoda* (*Leifeng ta*, 1960), to the Soviet Union and Poland.¹⁷² And the influence of these Great Leap Forward-era national dance dramas continued into the early 1960s. For example, in 1963 the film version of *Five Red Clouds* was shown abroad to celebrate China’s National Day.¹⁷³ That same year, the Japanese dance artist Hanayanagi Tokubee (1908–1968), along with his wife and several students, visited CEOT to learn *Magic Lotus Lantern* and then, according to CEOT records, staged the production in Japan later that year.¹⁷⁴ Zhang Tuo reports that in 1964 a Japanese ballet company also performed *Dagger Society* in Japan.¹⁷⁵ While new national dance dramas continued to be created during the early 1960s, however, none of the works of that period achieved the same level of national and international circulation as those of the Great Leap Forward. Like so many other new artistic works of the early 1960s, their lives on stage and screen were to be cut short by a new campaign with a new artistic agenda, the Cultural Revolution.