

The Return of Chinese Dance

Socialist Continuity Post-Mao

With its suppression of early socialist dance projects in favor of the newer form of revolutionary ballet, the Cultural Revolution decade of 1966–76 nearly brought an end to Chinese dance, as both an artistic project and a historical memory. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, Chinese dance had been the dominant concert dance form in the PRC. Most new dance choreography created between 1949 and 1965 had been in the genre of Chinese dance, and Chinese dance was the dance style officially promoted domestically and abroad as an expression of China's socialist ideals and values. However, with the introduction of new cultural policies beginning in 1966, a decade of support for ballet and suppression of Chinese dance nearly wiped out memories of pre-Cultural Revolution activities in China's dance field. Although many Chinese dance institutions that had been forced to shut down in 1966 reopened in the early 1970s, by the beginning of 1976 they were still banned from performing most pre-Cultural Revolution Chinese dance repertoires, and ballet was still dominating the curriculum used to train new dancers. Dance films created before the Cultural Revolution were still censored from public view, meaning that most audiences had not seen pre-Cultural Revolution repertoires, either live or on screen, for at least a decade. For children and adolescents too young to remember the pre-Cultural Revolution period, revolutionary ballet had become the only kind of socialist dance they knew. For them, revolutionary ballet was socialist dance.

In the years immediately following the Cultural Revolution, a revival of Chinese dance occurred across the country: dancers who had spent years in rural labor camps or banned from work returned to their professional jobs; dance institutions that had been shut down or forced to focus on ballet during the Cultural

Revolution were restored and allowed to return to their pre-Cultural Revolution projects; and dance repertoires that had been banned during the previous decade started to be once again staged and shown. All of a sudden, stages that had been dominated for years by dancers on pointe performing pirouettes and arabesques were now being filled with a new cast of dancing bodies, performing regional folk and minority rhythms and historical images from China's past. For those who knew little about China's dance history in the pre-Cultural Revolution period, these changes looked like something new that departed from the Maoist tradition. In other words, they seemed to be part of what Geremie Barmé called "de-Maoification," or a general move away from socialist traditions begun in the late 1970s that resulted in the development of a new, post-Mao culture.¹ While the argument of de-Maoification certainly makes sense in some respects, it also leaves out a very important part of the picture. This is because, in the dance field, many of the developments that appeared "new" or "non-Maoist" to audiences of the late 1970s and early 1980s were in fact returns to pre-Cultural Revolution Maoist dance culture. As I argue in this chapter, the resurgence of local dance styles and historical themes that occurred in China during the late 1970s and early 1980s represented not a departure from, but a return to, core dance projects of the socialist period.

In the decade immediately following the Cultural Revolution, two phenomena emerged in China's dance field that constituted continuities with, rather than departures from, early socialist dance traditions. First, from the end of 1976 to the end of 1978, there was a general reassertion of pre-Cultural Revolution socialist dance culture, as dance repertoires developed in the years from 1949 to 1966 were revived, dancers who had been leaders in Chinese dance before the Cultural Revolution were returned to positions of influence, and institutional structures were returned to the conditions in which they had operated under socialist state leadership prior to 1966. Once these changes were in place, starting in 1978, a series of new large-scale creations in the genre of Chinese dance began to emerge, and several of these gained national attention in 1979 during a national theater festival held in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. While these dance dramas initiated a new period of dance creation in terms of their movement vocabularies and star performers, on the whole, they represented continuations of activities begun in the pre-Cultural Revolution period. A close look at the historical development of these works, including the artistic and institutional supports that made them possible, shows that they grew in important ways out of projects that had begun under Maoist state support. In this sense, while these new dance dramas indeed represented important departures from the dance activities of the Cultural Revolution, they were still very much connected to socialist dance and Maoist culture.

Two dance dramas featured in the 1979 festival would go on to have an especially lasting impact on post-Mao Chinese dance culture, with continuing relevance

through the 1980s and 1990s and into the twenty-first century. One was Yunnan Province Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Region Song and Dance Ensemble's *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* (Zhao shutun yu nanmunuonuo), also known as *The Peacock Princess* (Kongque gongzhu). The other was Gansu Provincial Song and Dance Ensemble's *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* (*Silu hua yu*). By bringing to fruition the results of long-term regional research projects, these works introduced new diversity to the Chinese dance stage, including, in the case of *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo*, new stories derived from local literary traditions and, in the case of *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, new movement vocabularies developed from Tang dynasty Buddhist historical artifacts. *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* was responsible for launching the career of Yunnanese Bai dancer Yang Liping (b. 1958), who went on to become one of the most famous and influential dancers in Chinese history. Yang's subsequent works "Spirit of the Peacock" (Que zhi ling, 1986), *Dynamic Yunnan* (*Yunnan yingxiang*, 2003), and *The Peacock* (Kongque, 2013) were all further developments upon Yang's breakout role as the Peacock Princess in *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo*. Similarly, *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* launched the popularity of a new dance style known as "Dunhuang dance" (*Dunhuang wu*), which is now one of the most popular styles of Chinese classical dance in practice today. Through subsequent works introduced in the 1980s, Dunhuang dance in particular, and the image of the Silk Road and Tang dynasty court dance more broadly, would, like Yang Liping's peacock dances, go on to be enduring themes in Chinese dance through the twenty-first century.

While the revival of Chinese dance that occurred in the first post-Mao decade brought back some aspects of Maoist dance culture, it did not place equal emphasis on all aspects of the socialist legacy. On the one hand, the new Chinese dance repertoires of the post-Mao era placed great importance on the Maoist principle of national form by continuing research into local dance heritage and by developing dance works that emphasized local imagery, sound, and movement vocabularies. In this sense, these works returned to the aesthetic practice of "self as subject" that had guided China's socialist dance field before the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, however, Maoist principles such as remolding and socialist intersectionality did not receive the same emphasis in this new era. Whereas heroic characters were once portrayed as peasants and working people, in the new post-Mao works these characters were just as often portrayed as princesses, kings, and merchants. The critical treatment once given to social justice issues relating to gender, ethnicity, race, and class now largely faded away, while conservative treatments of women, in particular, were resurgent in post-Mao dance narratives. By the end of the twentieth century, Chinese dance faced new challenges as dance styles imported from the United States and other Westernized, capitalist countries found increasing welcome among Chinese dancers and dance audiences. At the same time, emphasis on the market and privatization led to a widespread

commercialization of dance, through new industries from nightclub culture to tourism. Without the post-Mao return of Chinese dance, however, these developments would all have taken a different course.

REVIVING THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM: PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND REPERTOIRES

Mao Zedong, who had led the Chinese Communist Party since 1935, died on September 9, 1976, at the age of eighty-two. Approximately one month later, four leading figures in the Cultural Revolution, known as the Gang of Four, were arrested, and the process of evaluating the Cultural Revolution began. Over the next year and a half, the dance field would come to a consensus that the policies of the Cultural Revolution had distorted Maoist culture and that, in particular, it had been wrong to attack and suppress the dance activities of the pre-Cultural Revolution period.² Dancers condemned the Gang of Four, calling them “the chief criminals who strangled the arts revolution.”³ In their criticisms of the Cultural Revolution, dancers singled out Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, for especially harsh critique. Jiang had been a member of the Gang of Four; she took credit for the creation of revolutionary ballet and led the effort to suppress Chinese dance during the Cultural Revolution. Many dancers saw Jiang as personally responsible for their own negative treatment during the previous decade, as well as for the dismantling of dance forms, institutions, and repertoires they had spent decades creating. Thus, in late 1976, an article published in *Dance* magazine concluded that “Jiang Qing really knew nothing about the arts and got in the way of positive work,” and regarding her preference for ballet, it went on: “Jiang Qing spoke loudly about ‘worn-out western conventions’ but in fact worshipped foreign things. . . . She was a slave to the West who felt that even the moon would be better if it were foreign.”⁴ By the end of 1977, China’s dance leaders had reached the consensus that to correct the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution and move forward with China’s dance development, first there needed to be a revival of pre-1966 socialist dance work.

The first step in this revival was the return of experienced performers, choreographers, teachers, and researchers who had been sent to labor camps or otherwise barred from professional activities during the Cultural Revolution. This was a gradual process that occurred at different times for different people. After they were denounced and punished, some established dancers and choreographers were brought back selectively in the early 1970s to assist with the revision and creation of revolutionary ballets or to perform the roles of villains in revolutionary ballet productions. Others remained in labor camps, or in some cases jail, until several years after the Cultural Revolution ended. As a whole, however, 1976 did mark an important turning point. Most dance institutions that existed before 1966 were

officially “rehabilitated” (*huifu*) during the years between 1976 and 1978, making this the peak period for reinstatements of dancers to professional positions. By 1979 almost everyone who had been working professionally in the dance field prior to 1966 and who was still alive and still wished to be involved in dance activities had returned to their pre-Cultural Revolution place of residence and was working again in dance-related jobs. Typically, they returned to the same institutions they had worked in before, meaning that they now had to live and labor alongside some of the same people who had denounced and attacked them a decade earlier.

The reconstitution of China’s pre-1966 dance field that took place between 1976 and 1978 was grounded in the reestablishment of early Mao-era professional dance institutions. One of the first to be restored was *Wudao*, China’s national dance journal. The journal had stopped publication in May 1966 and was restored in early 1976, with its first new issue appearing in March.⁵ Another major institution, the Beijing Dance School, was restored in December 1977, after having been divided into two schools in 1964, closed down in June 1966, and then replaced during the early 1970s by ballet-focused programs within special Cultural Revolution-era art schools.⁶ China’s five national-level dance ensembles—the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble, the China Opera and Dance Drama Theater, the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, and the Central Opera and Dance Drama Theater—were also restored to their pre-Cultural Revolution organizational status and names by 1978.⁷ Like BDS, these ensembles had suspended operation in 1966 and had been replaced by ballet-focused institutions.⁸ Once the pre-Cultural Revolution institutions were restored, the temporary ones that had been set up during the Cultural Revolution were all formally disbanded.⁹ In addition to institutions based in Beijing, revivals took place all over China. For example, in 1976 military-affiliated performing arts ensembles in Nanjing, Jinan, Chengdu, Lanzhou, Guangzhou, Lhasa, and Kunming were restored to their pre-Cultural Revolution organizational status and names.¹⁰ At the end of 1977, the Guangdong branch of the China Dance Workers Association was officially revived and resumed operations.¹¹ In June 1978, the Shanghai Cultural Bureau announced that the Shanghai Dance School would be reopened.¹² By the end of 1978, local branches of the China Dance Workers Association in Shanxi, Yunnan, Liaoning, Xinjiang, Shandong, and Sichuan had also been restored.¹³

This gradual return to pre-Cultural Revolution conditions also applied to the top echelon of leaders in the dance field. These individuals, like other dance professionals, had been forced out of their jobs and disappeared from the public eye during the Cultural Revolution. Gradually, by the end of the 1970s, their names began to reemerge in the news, as they regained leadership status. The first major figure to reappear was Dai Ailian, whose last mention in a mainstream national newspaper had been in April 1966. Dai’s name resurfaced in October 1975, when she was among the arts representatives in attendance at an official National Day reception.¹⁴

Wu Xiaobang, whose last mention had been in October 1962, reappeared two years after Dai, in the roster of the 1977 National Day festivities.¹⁵ Qemberxanim, last mentioned in March 1963, reappeared in 1978, when she, Dai, and Wu all gave talks at a meeting to mark the revival of the China Dancers Association.¹⁶ By the time of the Fourth Literature and Arts Congress in October 1979, the dance chairpersons roster was filled with leading dance figures from the pre-Cultural Revolution era.¹⁷ New leadership appointments made during the 1979 congress were all leaders from the early socialist period. Qemberxanim earned the highest appointment as a vice chairperson of the China Literary Federation.¹⁸ The next highest position, as chairperson of the China Dancers Association, went to Wu Xiaobang, while the positions of vice chairs went to Dai Ailian, Chen Jinjing, Qemberxanim, Jia Zuoguang, Hu Guogang, Liang Lun, and Sheng Jie.¹⁹ Of these eight, six had been on the original standing committee of the China Dancers Association formed in the summer of 1949, while all held high positions in the dance leadership in the early 1950s.²⁰

The restoration of early socialist leadership teams also occurred at the level of individual dance institutions. A clear example of this is the case of BDS. The person appointed in August of 1977 to oversee the revival of the school was Chen Jinjing, the veteran of the New Yangge movement who had served as the school's vice principal from 1954 to 1964 and then served as principal of the China Dance School until 1966. Chen's first job when she returned was to clear wrongful accusations made during the Cultural Revolution. Then, Chen was tasked with returning all personnel, administration, and teaching activities to their pre-Cultural Revolution arrangements.²¹ By October of 1977, the school had terminated the ballet-focused curriculum instituted in the early 1970s and resumed the dual-track system practiced in 1957–66, in which students majored in either Chinese dance or ballet. The faculty was also restructured into two corresponding units, as it had been prior to the Cultural Revolution. Li Zhengyi (b. 1929), who had held leadership positions in the school's Chinese dance program throughout the pre-Cultural Revolution period, was appointed head of the Chinese dance unit. Zhang Xu (1932–1990), who had been codirector of the ballet program from 1957 to 1962, was appointed head of ballet.²²

Apart from the return of institutions and people, the period from 1976 to 1978 also saw a large-scale return of pre-1966 dance repertoires. The return of these repertoires served several purposes: first, they allowed younger audiences, many of whom had never seen these works because of their suppression during the Cultural Revolution, to become acquainted with Chinese dance; second, it allowed the older generation of dancers who had just returned from years away to refresh their old skills; and third, it allowed the younger generation of performers who had been recruited during the Cultural Revolution to see and learn the canonical works of the Chinese dance repertoire. The first socialist dance classic to greet new audiences

was the 1965 film based on the 1964 production *East Is Red*. On January 1, 1977, the film was rereleased and shown in movie theaters around China.²³ Although *East Is Red* had been one of the most widely acclaimed works of the Maoist period, the ten-year gap in its circulation led journals such as *Dance* to treat it like a new production, publishing lengthy introductions, scene summaries, and promotional photographs.²⁴ The penultimate scene of the film would have been especially striking to viewers in 1977. The performers in this scene include pre-1966 minority dance celebrities, such as Uyghur dancer Aytilla Qasim (Aytula, b. 1940), Korean dancer Cui Meishan (b. 1934), Dai dancer Dao Meilan (b. 1944), Miao dancer Jin Ou (b. 1934), Mongol dancer Modegema (b. 1942), and Tibetan dancer Oumijiacan (b. 1928). The dancers perform in front of a painted backdrop modeled after the Tian'anmen Gate. Using a variety of rhythms, movement vocabularies, and props developed for the representation of minority groups in the early socialist period, they perform short group dance segments representing seven different ethnicities: a Mongol portion using drink cups like castanets; a Uyghur portion using round hand drums; a Tibetan portion featuring long sleeves; a Dai portion using flower arches and elephant leg drums; a Li portion featuring straw hats; a Korean portion with hourglass drums; and a Miao reed pipe dance.²⁵ Many of these techniques and props had been banned in the Cultural Revolution years.²⁶ Thus, such a scene, despite being twelve years old, would have felt fresh to young viewers.

Live revivals were the most common method of restoring the Chinese dance repertoire. During the years 1977–78, many companies revived their best productions from the first golden age of Chinese dance drama in the late 1950s, most of which had not been performed for about fifteen years. The first of these revivals took place in Shanghai in mid-January 1977, when the Shanghai Opera Theater restaged its 1959 hit *Dagger Society*.²⁷ The second major work, performed in Beijing in August 1977, was Shenyang Military Political Department Song and Dance Ensemble's *Butterfly Loves Flower* (*Die lian hua*), also based on a work originally premiered in 1959.²⁸ By 1978 live revivals of *Five Red Clouds* (1959) and *Magic Lotus Lantern* (1957) were also being performed in Guangzhou and Beijing, respectively.²⁹ Many of these productions were performed by members of their original casts. For example, Zhao Qing, now age forty-two, once again performed the heroine Third Sacred Mother in *Magic Lotus Lantern* when it was staged for the 1978 National Day celebrations.³⁰ As with the *East Is Red* film, the revivals of these works generated opportunities for leading dancers from the pre-Cultural Revolution era to reenter the public eye. The staging of these performances also provided opportunities to reeducate audiences and the younger generation about the history of Chinese dance and its role in China's revolutionary arts tradition. Thus, articles appeared explaining the provenance of each production, its historical accolades, and how it came to be attacked during the Cultural Revolution.³¹

An important dance tour to the United States during this period demonstrates the extent to which the pre-1966 repertoire and its stars had been revived and made the focus of new performance in the immediate post-Mao years. In the summer of 1978, a group of thirty-five dancers, along with fifty-five Peking opera performers and at least forty musicians and singers, toured the United States under the name Performing Arts Company of the People's Republic of China.³² As the first major PRC performance group to tour the United States, this was an event of historic significance. Thus, it is interesting that most of the dancers and works chosen for the tour were from the pre-Cultural Revolution period. The star dancers featured in the tour included specialists in Chinese minority dance Aytilla Qasim, Cui Meishan, and Modegema and specialists in Chinese classical dance Chen Ailian (b. 1939), Sun Daizhang (b. 1937), and Zhao Qing (b. 1936). Apart from a few excerpts from *Red Detachment of Women* and *White-Haired Girl*, the dance works performed on the tour were mainly Chinese dance choreographies from the 1950s and early 1960s.³³ The average age of female soloists on the tour was thirty-nine, sixteen years beyond what was considered prime performance age for female dancers in China at the time.³⁴ This and the fact that the most recent work presented was excerpts from *White-Haired Girl*, already thirteen years old, suggests that the revival of pre-1966 artists and repertoires, rather than the foregrounding of new works, was the priority for this tour.³⁵

The first new dance films created in the post-Mao era clearly demonstrated the return of pre-Cultural Revolution dance forms. The first, released in 1978 by Changchun Film Studio, was *Butterfly Loves Flower*, based on the 1977 revival of the 1959 dance drama of the same name.³⁶ The second, released in 1979 by the Inner Mongolia Film Studio, was *Rainbow (Caihong)*, based on a collection of old and new works by the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Ensemble (Neimenggu gewutuan).³⁷ Thematically, both films levied attacks on aspects of the Cultural Revolution. *Butterfly Loves Flower* undermined Jiang Qing by celebrating Yang Kaihui, Mao Zedong's first wife.³⁸ Meanwhile, *Rainbow* emphasized the independence of Inner Mongolian nationality art, which had been suppressed during the height of the Cultural Revolution.³⁹ What is most striking about the two films, however, is their revival of the local movement conventions and vocabularies developed in the pre-Cultural Revolution era. Pointe work, the dominant feature of revolutionary ballet, is eliminated completely in both films. In *Butterfly Loves Flower*, group choreography returns almost completely to vocabularies based on folk and xiqu movement. While Yang Kaihui's character still uses a considerable amount of ballet leg work, such as arabesques, jumps, and kicks, her hand and arm movements incorporate more local elements than typical heroines in revolutionary ballets. The final scene of *Butterfly Loves Flower*, in which dancers perform in long gowns, with Tang-style hair ornaments and silk streamers, is reminiscent of 1950s-era Chinese classical dance repertoires such as Zhao Qing's dances in

the 1957 production *Magic Lotus Lantern*.⁴⁰ *Rainbow* is even more pronounced in its rejection of ballet vocabulary and return to pre-Cultural Revolution forms based on local-style movement. Several of the dances it features are direct revivals of Inner Mongolia-themed repertoires popular in the early socialist era, such as “Oroqen dance” (Elunchun wu), “Goose Dance” (Yan wu), and “Ordos Dance.”⁴¹ Solo dances are performed by artists who achieved peak popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s, such as Jia Zuoguang and Siqintariha. Meanwhile, new dances presented in the film, such as “Rainbow” (Caihong), advance earlier methods of adapting folk and minority movement.⁴²

By 1979 China’s dance field had basically been restored to its early 1960s conditions, in terms of people, institutions, and dance repertoires. The final step in the revival was to once again start the process of creating new large-scale Chinese dance productions. Following the same method used in the pre-Cultural Revolution period, the Ministry of Culture encouraged new creation by hosting a national festival. Following the model established for the ten-year anniversary festival in 1959, the ministry invited entries from ensembles across the country, which went through rounds of selection at the local and provincial levels. Works chosen for national presentation showed in Beijing starting on January 5, 1979, and continued until February 9, 1980. Seven full-length dance dramas appeared in this festival, two of which would have an especially lasting impact on the new era of Chinese dance creation: *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo*, which launched the career of Yang Liping, famous for her “Dai peacock dance”; and *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, which introduced Dunhuang dance and started a trend of dances set in the Tang dynasty.⁴³

YANG LIPING’S PEACOCK DANCE: REWORKING A MAO-ERA IMAGE

To comprehend the significance of the 1979 Beijing showing of Dai dance drama *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo*, it is necessary to first move ahead in time to 1986, when Yunnanese Bai dancer Yang Liping would captivate China with her solo “Spirit of the Peacock” (figure 22). Yang premiered “Spirit of the Peacock” at the 1986 Second All-China Dance Competition, where it won first-place awards in both performance and choreography and quickly became one of the most popular Chinese dance works of all time.⁴⁴ The dance begins with Yang twirling counterclockwise at center stage while holding the fringe of her floor-length white gown out at shoulder level, so that she appears enveloped in a swirling corkscrew (video 14). She crouches to the ground and then slowly stands up again, this time in the silhouette of a peacock. Her right hand holds the skirt behind in a crescent shape like the bird’s tail, while her left arm stretches up vertically to form its long, slender neck. She bends at the wrist, presses her thumb and index finger tightly



FIGURE 22. Yang Liping in "Spirit of the Peacock," 1997. Photographer: Ye Jin. Reproduced with permission from the private collection of Ye Jin.

together, and splay out her middle, ring, and pinky fingers like a fan. Twitching up, down, forward, and back, Yang's hand mimics the movements of a bird's head through precise, staccato actions. The peacock's beak opens and closes, its crown feathers contract and release one by one, and its neck bends and straightens in



VIDEO 14. Yang Liping in “Spirit of the Peacock,” October 2007. Used with permission from Yunnan Yang Liping Arts & Culture Co., Ltd.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.14>



fluid waves. Yang bends her elbow, making the peacock’s beak preen the top of her head. As the dance develops, Yang’s choreography shifts from direct imitation to more abstract representations. Seated on the ground with her back to the audience and upper body tipped forward, she lifts her arms into a horizontal position, undulating them in a waving line that invokes the surface of rippling water, or a bird’s flight. The dance reaches a climax when, between a series of spins, Yang grabs the ends of her skirt with both hands, stretches her head upward, and moves up and down in place while flapping both arms, creating semicircles of fabric on either side of her body. Then she circles back to the beginning, repeating the twirling sequence and ending in the peacock silhouette.⁴⁵

Today Yang Liping is one of China’s only dancers who has become a household name. She is a popular media celebrity and also a distinct voice in the dance world, with her own performance brand and aesthetic theory.⁴⁶ Yang’s fame has been built largely on the domestic and international success of her peacock dance renditions, which she further developed in two commercially successful large-scale productions: the 2003 *Dynamic Yunnan* and the 2013 *The Peacock*.⁴⁷ Yang’s “Spirit of the Peacock” has many layers of signification: it has become an emblem of Dai culture, a regional brand of Yunnan Province, and a symbol of Chinese culture among overseas Sinophone communities.⁴⁸ Although Yang has often positioned herself and her artistic approaches in opposition to established conventions of Chinese dance, her rise to fame and the peacock choreography at its core are both products of early Mao-era dance activities that first appeared in the 1950s and then experienced a revival in the late 1970s. Rather than being a new development attributable

to the de-Maoification of Chinese culture, Yang's "Spirit of the Peacock" and her career as a nationally and even internationally recognized dance artist since the 1980s are both direct outgrowths of China's socialist dance developments.

"Spirit of the Peacock" is a revision of choreography first created in Yunnan thirty years earlier by the Xishuangbanna Nationality Cultural Work Team (Xishuangbanna minzu gewutuan), as part of a dance-based dramatization of sections from the Dai epic *Zhao Shutun*. Titled *Zhao Shutun and Nanwuluola* and starring Dai dancer Dao Meilan as the Peacock Princess, it was documented first in 1956 in Yunnan and then in 1957 in Beijing, when it appeared in a national music and dance festival.⁴⁹ Between 1961 and 1963, the Xishuangbanna ensemble further developed this work into a five-act dance drama titled *Zhao Shutun*, initially starring Yu Wan-jiao as the Peacock Princess, which was suppressed from the mid-1960s under Cultural Revolution policies.⁵⁰ During the Chinese dance revival of the late 1970s, the Xishuangbanna ensemble began to recover the production, this time in seven acts with the title *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* and with a nineteen-year-old Yang Liping performing the role of the Peacock Princess.⁵¹ Yang performed the work first in 1978 at a provincial-level festival in Yunnan, then in Beijing during the 1979 national festival, and finally in 1980–81 on international tours to Hong Kong, Singapore, Burma, and Thailand.⁵² By 1982 Yang had been transferred to the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble in Beijing, where she launched her career as a soloist.⁵³

The Xishuangbanna dance drama productions were not the only precursors to "Spirit of the Peacock." In her 2008 dissertation on the evolution of the modern Dai peacock dance, Ting-Ting Chang shows how the work can be traced to three other nonnarrative predecessors: Mao Xiang's 1953 male-female "Peacock Duet" (Shuangren kongque); Jin Ming's 1956 female group dance "Peacock Dance" (Kongque wu); and Dao Meilan's 1978 female solo dance "Golden Peacock" (Jinse de kongque). Chang demonstrates how the modern peacock dance became a nationally recognized symbol of Dai culture in China during the mid-1950s, which was then suppressed during the Cultural Revolution and subsequently revived and further developed in the late 1970s and 1980s. According to Chang, the most crucial innovation in the peacock dance form occurred in 1953, when male Dai dancer Mao Xiang dispensed with the dance's traditional bamboo-frame tail and wing props and incorporated a woman dancer into a style previously performed only by men (figure 23).⁵⁴ Mao had introduced his version of the dance to choreographers in Beijing by 1954.⁵⁵ One of them, male Han choreographer Jin Ming (b. 1926), adapted it into his own version of the peacock dance at the same time that the Xishuangbanna ensemble was creating its first version of the Dai *Zhao Shutun* epic in Yunnan.

While the modern Dai peacock dance as a genre clearly has roots in the early nonnarrative socialist-era dance experiments Chang outlines, the specific image



FIGURE 23. Peacock dance performed with traditional bamboo-frame tail and wing props. Published in *Renmin huabao* 5, no. 3 (1954): 15. Photographer unknown. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

Yang portrays in her “Spirit of the Peacock” solo can also be seen as a reworking of a dance image developed in a different set of narrative dance works also from the early socialist period. Thus, Yang’s “Spirit of the Peacock” is a continuation not only of innovations by Mao Xiang and Jin Ming in 1953 and 1956, as Chang shows, but also of the “Peacock Princess” motif performed in the Xishuangbanna ensemble’s narrative dance dramas, as well as other new expressive forms adapted from the *Zhao Shutun* epic between 1956 and 1963. In other words, both the Dai peacock dance as a form of modern stage choreography and the character of the Peacock Princess that Yang portrays are continuations of Mao-era projects of Chinese dance creation.

The image of the Peacock Princess comes from the *Zhao Shutun* epic, the local Dai variant of an old story found in many Asian literary traditions, including Burmese, Chinese, Hmong, Indian, Laotian, Thai, Tibetan, and Yi.⁵⁶ In Thai literature, a tradition closely related to Dai, the story is known as “Suthon Chadok” or “Prince Suthon and Princess Manora” and is part of the *Pannasa Jataka* (fifty Jatak tales or *Panyasa Chadok*), a Pali text dating to around the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries.⁵⁷ Describing the story as performed in Thai dance dramas,

ethnomusicologist Terry Miller writes, “The term *manora*, usually shortened to *nora*, refers to a famous story of Indian origin. Manora, a heavenly bird-maiden, comes to the earthly plane and marries a human prince, Suthon (in Sanskrit, Sudhana). They become separated, and Suthon seeks to travel to her realm to regain her. *Nora* is often described as dance-drama, but the emphasis is on dance rather than on drama. The main characters are dancers, considered to be heavenly bird-like creatures (*kinnara*), and the costume includes wings and a tail. . . .”⁵⁸

In Xishuangbanna Dai communities during the mid-twentieth century, the *Zhao Shutun* story was performed orally in the form of long poems by singing experts known as *zhangha* (in Mandarin, *zanha*) or *moha*, who performed these works on important occasions such as new house ceremonies, weddings, and monk promotions.⁵⁹ In Maoist China, interest in the Dai *Zhao Shutun* epic blossomed in 1956–57, when Chinese-language print versions started to appear in major publications, both in new forms composed by Han writers such as Bai Hua (b. 1929) and in edited translations from handwritten Dai scripts and oral transmission.⁶⁰ Between 1956 and 1963, Chinese artists adapted the story not only into dance drama productions but also into a watercolor graphic storybook (*lianhuanhua*) in 1957; a Peking opera based on a script by Guo Moruo in 1957; an illustrated children’s book published in English, French, and German in 1961; a Yunnan flower lantern drama (*huadengxi*) in 1963; and a color stop-motion puppet animation film in 1963.⁶¹

Two scenes from the *Zhao Shutun* stories of the 1950s and early 1960s represent possible sources of inspiration for the image presented in Yang Liping’s 1986 “Spirit of the Peacock” solo: both begin with an immortal peacock lady who entrances a human audience, and both end with her flying off to her mystical homeland in the sky, where she escapes the dangers of the human realm. While the general structure of the two scenes is similar, their narrative contexts, tones, and meanings are different, providing a complex set of intertexts for Yang’s 1986 solo dance. Thus, the literary, aesthetic, and religious content of the *Zhao Shutun* epic imbues Yang’s dance with a complexity and depth it would not have had without the foundation of these early Mao-era adaptations.

The first scene from the *Zhao Shutun* stories echoed in “Spirit of the Peacock” is the one in which Prince Zhao first sees and becomes enchanted by the Peacock Princess. While there are many versions of this scene, the most common in the adaptations of the 1950s and early 1960s depicts the human prince Zhao Shutun hunting in the forest and suddenly seeing a lake where the seven daughters of the Peacock King are bathing, playing, or dancing. When the young women become aware of the prince’s presence, they fly away. A Chinese translation published in 1956 recounts:

A hunter runs out from the bamboo forest
Riding a horse and carrying a bow and arrow

He is following a golden deer
 From the forest he chases it to the lakeside
 The young hunter ah
 His eyes like two bright pearls

 Sink into the center of the lake
 The setting sun casts his shadow on the lake
 Alarming the seven ladies
 Like sparrows seeing a hawk
 They drape on their feathers and fly into the distance
 The lake returns to stillness
 The birds also return to the forest
 Only the hunter ah
 Continues to gaze at the clear sky.⁶²

The story is then told again from the prince's view, when he describes his experience to a monk in a nearby temple:

I do not know whether I am in a dream
 Or really living in the human world
 I saw in the lake seven ladies
 Like lotus flowers giving off a delicate fragrance
 They wore golden belts on their bodies
 On their necks pearls glistened luminously
 But they have already flown to the heavens
 I do not know whether they came from the sky or . . .
 Like rainbows they made my eyes dizzy
 Like eagles [they] snatched away my heart.⁶³

Unfortunately, none of the Xishuangbanna ensemble's early dance adaptations of the *Zhao Shutun* story are recorded on film. However, we know that the 1956 version included an extended scene much like this one: it depicted the prince hunting, seven princesses dancing next to a lake, the princesses flying away using peacock-feather gowns, and the princesses bathing in the lake while being watched by the prince.⁶⁴ According to a review, the partner dance between Prince Zhao and Nanmunuonuo (here Nanwuluola) used the existing "peacock dance" familiar in Dai areas, and in the scene by the lake, Nanmunuonuo looked in the reflection to fix her hair.⁶⁵ Still photographs from 1957 show Nanmunuonuo wearing a long, flared white skirt with peacock feather designs at the bottom and a gauze cape and collar decorated with large spots (figure 24).⁶⁶

Puppet choreographies in the 1963 stop-motion animation film adaptation offer the best documentation of early Mao-era dance interpretations of this scene (video 15).⁶⁷ Just before the lakeside scene in the film, we see Zhao with his bow and



FIGURE 24. Dao Meilan and ensemble in *Zhao Shutun and Nanwuluola*. Published in *Wudao congkan*, no. 1 (May 1957): front matter. Photographer unknown. Image obtained from the University of Michigan Asia Library Chinese Dance Collection.

arrow on horseback chasing a deer through the forest. Then the deer disappears, and Zhao peeks through some foliage to find a lake radiating with beams of colored light in the shape of a peacock tail. Suddenly, a single female figure appears twirling and floating atop the surface of the lake. She is dressed in a strapless white gown like the one Yang wears in “Spirit of the Peacock,” but she also carries a long white sash from which she sprinkles flower petals that turn into water lilies.⁶⁸ Stepping on land, she puts on her white peacock gown, which has a similar design to the costume shown in the 1957 photographs of the Xishuangbanna ensemble’s dance production.⁶⁹ Her sisters refer to her as Nan Muluna. Dressed in her white peacock gown, she spins in place with her arms spread out at shoulder level, as special effects make her appear to transform from a human to a peacock and back to a human. After observing herself and fixing her hair in the lake’s reflection, she continues dancing at the water’s edge, turning and lifting her hands above her head, and finally strikes a pose much like Yang’s famous peacock silhouette: her left hand is poised above her head, right hand down, with one leg kicking back and lifting her skirt. At this point, Nan is joined by her six sisters, although she continues to perform solo movements while they execute a synchronized routine, much like Jin Ming’s 1956 *Peacock Dance*.⁷⁰ The Peacock Princess choreography here is similar to “Spirit of the Peacock”: it includes spinning continuously with one hand raised, transforming into a peacock while jumping in the air, and flapping the arms out at the sides like wings.

Apart from the lakeside dance, the second segment of the *Zhao Shutun* stories that finds resonance in Yang’s “Spirit of the Peacock” is the scene in which



VIDEO 15. Excerpt of *Peacock Princess*. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1963.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.15>



Nanmunuonuo is about to be executed and performs one final dance in the human realm before flying back to the peacock kingdom. In most versions of the story, this scene is a moment of tragic tension, because viewers, like the humans in the story, do not know Nanmunuonuo will be able to escape. A commenter on the 1978 dance drama suggested that this scene is a “small climax” within the overall story.⁷¹ In Mao-era adaptations, this part of the plot had special ideological significance because it illustrated how religion can be manipulated by those in power for political gain. In the 1956 *Frontier Literature* translation, after Zhao has gone off to war, Zhao’s father has a strange dream. Worried that this dream may be a bad omen, the king invites the help of ritual specialists, known as Mogula, to interpret it. They declare it a terrible omen with only one solution:

Only by killing Nanchuona [Nanmunuonuo]
Using her blood as a sacrifice to the common people’s gods
Is it possible to eliminate the people’s calamity
And cause you to be reborn.⁷²

At dawn, the designated hour of the Peacock Princess’s execution, she pleads to be given her peacock gown so that she can “dance one last time”:⁷³

The queen timidly brings out the peacock gown
Nanchuona takes it and puts it on
She thanks the queen
And softly begins to dance
Lifting her head, she looks out in all directions

The common people are gathered all around
 She looks at every face
 But cannot find Zhao Shutun
 She says farewell to the people
 Then flies toward the housetops
 As her feet leave the ground
 Her tears sprinkle like rain.⁷⁴

This scene did not appear in the Xishuangbanna ensemble's 1956 dance production, which enacted only the part of the *Zhao Shutun* story in which the prince and princess meet and fall in love. However, the scene most likely did appear in the longer five-act version the ensemble developed between 1961 and 1963,⁷⁵ and it played a prominent role in the 1978 version. A critic reviewing *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* when it was performed in Beijing in 1979 described the scene as follows: "Before the peacock princess is executed, she tearfully requests her peacock gown so that she can dance her last peacock dance for the people of Mengbanjia. Just as the crowds are being entranced by her beautiful and moving dance, the peacock princess opens her two wings and flies toward Mengdongban—the land of the peacocks."⁷⁶

As with the dancing in the lakeside meeting scene, the best indication of what early Maoist dance interpretations of the dancing in the execution scene may have looked like comes from the 1963 stop-motion animation film. It is also in these scenes that we find connections to Yang's "Spirit of the Peacock."

In the film, Nan Muluna performs her final dance on a raised wooden pyre that doubles as a stage. Dressed in the same white dress she wore by the lakeside, she performs a long solo dance that includes several movements found in Yang's later dance: a pose standing on one foot with one arm raised and the other lowered and her foot kicking up behind, a standing spin with her arms out to the sides at shoulder height, a crouched position with upper body bent forward and arms raised to horizontal, and a twirl holding the fringe of her skirt. Although the dance also shares some arm movements and body positions with Jin Ming's 1956 *Peacock Dance*, the footwork and hip and torso actions are different. Notably, the film choreography lacks the up and down bouncing rhythm and S curve hip and torso opposition of Jin Ming's choreography, movement that is widely considered defining of Dai dance. Like Yang's "Spirit of the Peacock," the film replaces the percussive musicality with a melodic one and changes the focus of movement from leg and hip articulations to arm actions, static poses, and twirling spins.

The Xishuangbanna ensemble's 1978 dance drama *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* provided the link between embodied Mao-era imaginings of the Peacock Princess and its continued reinterpretation in Yang's repertoires of the 1980s and beyond. In his review of *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* when it appeared at the national theater festival in Beijing in 1979, Jia Zuoguang offered the following

description of the movements Yang performed: “The bending and extension of her arms and the contrast between stillness and movement all give people a very refreshing and new feeling. In terms of artistic method, the choreographers employed a virtual approach in their characterization of Nanmunuonuo. They used several typical peacock movements and poses—such as raising up the right hand while grabbing the skirt with the left hand, keeping the upper body still while tip-toeing across the stage in dainty steps—showing the audience that she is a peacock.”⁷⁷

This performance clearly built on Mao-era choreographic conventions documented in the 1963 film, such as the focus on hand and arm movement, the use of rhythmic variation and departure from downward-focused foot and hip actions, and the pose with one arm raised and the other lifting the hem of the skirt. The costuming in the 1978 production also inherited conventions from Mao-era imagery. A portrait of Yang in her Nanmunuonuo costume published in May of 1979 showed her draped in a light-colored gauze cape with a collar decorated with spots, much like those worn by Dao Meilan in 1956 and 1957.⁷⁸ While building on the past, Yang’s 1978 performance also provided a basis for future work. Participants in a 1979 symposium on *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo* lauded Yang’s beautiful body lines and her unusually expressive hands and arms, two features that would go on to form the foundation of Yang’s peacock dance style.⁷⁹ In Yang’s 1979 portrait, we also see the germination of her distinctive “peacock head” hand movements in “Spirit of the Peacock”: Yang’s left hand is raised over her head, with the wrist bent, index finger and thumb pinched together, and other three fingers extended.

Watching Yang Liping perform “Spirit of the Peacock” is like seeing a master magician at work; with each flick of her wrist or elbow, she conjures up a new landscape of images. While they seem spontaneous, these images in fact rely on careful choreographic strategies, which Yang has in part cultivated herself and in part inherited from previous artists. With her choreographic interplay between performing woman and performing peacock, Yang evokes the essential magic of the Peacock Princess in the *Zhao Shutun* story: her ability to shape-shift from human to bird while retaining the best characteristics of both. Yang performs large portions of her choreography in “Spirit of the Peacock” with her back to the audience, allowing viewers to indulge in sights of her exposed upper back, shoulders, and arms. With her arms spread out horizontally and fluttering in rippling actions, her torso remaining at a constant level, and her lower body concealed from view by her shimmering gown, viewers familiar with the *Zhao Shutun* story might project themselves into the role of Prince Zhao Shutun gazing enchanted at the immortal peacock ladies bathing in the forest lake. Later in the dance, when Yang spins and simulates a bird leaping into flight, the viewer may project themselves into Nanmunuonuo’s character, imagining her escape from the execution pyre. Similarly,

one might imagine the onlookers in the story, struck by the miraculous sight of a woman in flight. While Yang's performances are stunning without these added layers of interpretation, they help to explain the lasting appeal of her peacock dances, not just in China but across Asia. Early Mao-era experiments and their revivals were essential in making Yang's performances and their layered intertextuality possible. At the same time, Yang's reinterpretation of them gave the *Zhao Shutun* story a new range of embodiments aesthetically attuned to the tastes of a new generation.

STAGING DUNHUANG: *FLOWERS AND RAIN ON THE SILK ROAD*

Apart from Xishuangbanna's *Zhao Shutun and Nanmunuonuo*, the other new choreography that stunned audiences in the 1979 festival was Gansu's *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*. *Flowers* was a six-act large-scale dance drama that premiered in Lanzhou in the early summer of 1979.⁸⁰ It was then staged at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on October 1 (National Day), 1979, where it became one of the most popular items in the entire national festival program, winning "first place" in all categories.⁸¹ Between 1979 and 1982, the Gansu ensemble performed *Flowers* live more than five hundred times, in cities across China as well as in Hong Kong, North Korea, France, and Italy.⁸² During this time, another ensemble also toured *Flowers* to the United States and Canada.⁸³ In 1982 Xi'an Film Studio adapted *Flowers* into a color film, which began showing in theaters in early 1983.⁸⁴ In 2008 the Gansu Provincial Song and Dance Theater (Gansu sheng gewu juyuan) developed an updated version of *Flowers*, which was performed at the National Center for the Performing Arts (Guojia dajuyuan) in Beijing in August of 2009 for the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC.⁸⁵ By that time, *Flowers* had been performed live over sixteen hundred times for more than three million people in twenty countries and territories across the world.⁸⁶

As one of the most innovative dance productions in Chinese dance history, *Flowers* represented a major development for both the content and form of national dance drama. In his 1979 review, Wu Xiaobang pronounced that "The performance of *Flowers* . . . has opened a new path for Chinese dance drama themes and has carried out brave experiments with dance drama art, producing innovation and breakthroughs."⁸⁷ The work's most important contribution was its bringing together of three thematic and visual elements that would all become extremely common features of Chinese dance choreography from this point onward: the visual imagery of Dunhuang art, the theme of intercultural interaction on the Silk Road, and the historical setting of the Tang dynasty.⁸⁸ Dunhuang art refers to the Buddhist paintings and statues found in a cave-temple complex called the Mogao caves, located in the desert near the modern city of Dunhuang in north-west China (figure 25). As Ning Qiang summarizes: "The Dunhuang caves consist



FIGURE 25. A reconstruction of Mogao Cave 45 at the Dunhuang Museum in Dunhuang, China, 2016. Photographer: Dan Lundberg.

of 492 grottoes carved in a gravel conglomerate cliff that are full of wall paintings and painted sculptures and an additional 230 caves at the northern end of the same cliff. The 45,000 square meters of paintings and 2,400 sculptures remaining in the caves span a period of a thousand years, from the fifth to the fourteenth century C.E., and visually represent with vivid detail the culture and society of medieval China.⁸⁹ The complex imagery in Dunhuang art includes extensive representations of anthropomorphic figures in motion, including numerous scenes of staged performance.⁹⁰ As Lanlan Kuang has observed, music and dance performance based on this imagery—what is now known as *Dunhuang bihua yuewu*—is one of the most common mediums through which Chinese national identity is projected in spaces of global cultural exchange in the twenty-first century.⁹¹ *Flowers* was the first widely successful large-scale example of *Dunhuang bihua yuewu*, making it an important starting point for this influential genre of contemporary Chinese performance art. As discussed further below, Dunhuang art shapes all aspects of the thematic content and aesthetic execution of *Flowers*, from its plot and characters to its set and costume design to its movement vocabularies.

The Silk Road and the Tang dynasty are in some ways extensions of the Dunhuang theme. The Silk Road refers to a vast network of trade routes, which were

also pathways of intense cultural and political exchange that from before the first millennium connected various Chinese dynasties to historical civilizations in what are today known as Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Dunhuang was historically one of the most important sites along these routes, and its collections reflect the diverse cultural influences that flowed along them, making Dunhuang what Valerie Hansen calls “a time capsule of the Silk Road.”⁹² Because Dunhuang was for the most part under Chinese rule from 111 BCE onward, it can be regarded as a specifically Chinese part of both Silk Road history and Chinese history.⁹³ Also, because Dunhuang faded as a major site of Silk Road exchange after the year 1000, its collections peak during the period known as the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), which is widely regarded as a high point in the development of Chinese arts and literature—especially in poetry, music, and Buddhist visual arts—and in China’s embrace of foreign culture.⁹⁴ Chang’an (Xi’an), the Tang capital, grew into the largest city in the world at the time and attracted diverse people from across Asia.⁹⁵ By setting its story on the Tang dynasty Silk Road, *Flowers* both maximized the multicultural imagery of Dunhuang art and expressed a period in Chinese history that, for many, was associated both with cultural pride and a spirit of openness to the world.

Flowers presented a fictional story that allowed for the incorporation of key people and places associated with Dunhuang, the Silk Road, and the Tang dynasty. The prelude takes place in the desert, identified in the program notes as “During the Tang Dynasty, on the Silk Road.”⁹⁶ Against a backdrop of camel caravans and windstorms, Chinese painter Shen Bizhang and his daughter, Ying Niang, save the life of a Persian trader, Inus, who has fainted in the desert. After Inus departs, a gang of bandits abducts Ying Niang. Act 1 takes place many years later in the bustling Dunhuang market, where Shen sees Ying working as an indentured performer with a troupe of traveling entertainers. Inus, who happens to be conducting business in the market, frees Ying from the troupe by paying the troupe head. Scene 2 is set inside the Mogao caves, where Shen is employed as a painter. Ying dances for her father, inspiring him to paint the “reverse-played *pipa*” (*fantan pipa*), a famous scene from the Dunhuang paintings in which a dancer plays the *pipa* (a lute-like musical instrument) behind her head while standing on one leg. The corrupt market head schemes to employ Ying as a court entertainer, so Shen sends her with Inus to Persia. When the market head finds out, he chains Shen inside the cave as punishment. Scene 3 takes place in Inus’s palace-like residence in Persia, where Ying learns Persian dances and teaches Chinese crafts to the women in Inus’s home. Then Inus is called to appear at the Tang court, and Ying goes with him. Meanwhile, scene 4 moves back to the Mogao caves, showing the captive Shen dreaming of his daughter. A Tang governor comes to the cave to burn incense, sees the beautiful paintings, and frees Shen. Scene 5 takes place on the Silk Road, where Inus’s caravan is robbed by a strongman sent by the market head.



VIDEO 16. Excerpt of He Yanyun and ensemble in *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, 1980. Unofficial stage recording. Used with permission from He Yanyun.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.16>



Shen lights a warning beacon but is killed. Scene 6 takes place at the international diplomatic council where Inus serves as a delegate. Ying performs at the council and exposes the market head, avenging her father and bringing peace to the Silk Road. The epilogue shows the ten-mile roadside pavilion, where guests and hosts say goodbye to one another and vow long-lasting friendship.

Imagery derived from Dunhuang art features prominently in *Flowers*. The opening scene is a darkened stage on which spotlights follow two women suspended from the ceiling, appearing to be flying while dancing with long silk scarves. Contemporary critics recognized these figures as *apsaras* (*feitian*), a type of celestial being commonly depicted in Buddhist and Hindu art.⁹⁷ They are ubiquitous in Dunhuang; experts sight *apsaras* in 270 of the 492 Mogao caves, with a total of 4,500 individual depictions.⁹⁸ Dunhuang imagery also appears in Ying Niang's choreography. As Zhao Xian argued, Ying's ten solo dances together present an entirely new movement system: "Dunhuang dance."⁹⁹ In scene 1, when Ying performs with the band of itinerant entertainers, the body lines used in her choreography match the postures of dancing figures in Dunhuang. Like the Dunhuang figures, she maintains Indic *tribhanga* (*san dao wan*), or tri-bent pose, throughout, characterized by flexed ankles and feet, bent knees, and angled hip and elbow lines (video 16). Her iconic "reverse-played pipa" stance appears first in this scene and

then is repeated in scenes 2, 3, and 4, forming the production's most recognizable dance motif.¹⁰⁰ In scene 6, Ying dances solo atop a circular podium, also a common feature of Dunhuang dance imagery, and in scene 4 she is accompanied by groups of dancers playing musical instruments such as vertical flutes, long-necked lutes, pan pipes, and *konghou* (ancient harp), echoing similar scenes in Dunhuang paintings.¹⁰¹ Apart from the dancers' movement vocabularies and props, the stage sets and dancers' interactions with them also bring Dunhuang imagery on stage. In scenes 2 and 4, the stage is made up to look like a realistic replica of a Dunhuang grotto, with life-sized statues and a four-sided backdrop covered in enlarged, full-color replicas of Dunhuang wall paintings. In scene 2, Shen's act of painting recalls the process by which the caves were constructed. In scene 4, the Tang governor's visit to pray and give offerings reenacts the religious functions these spaces would have had. A common refrain by critics was that *Flowers* had "brought the Dunhuang murals to life."

Significant research went into the creation of *Flowers*. As described by Liu Shaoxiong (1933–2015), who headed the choreography team, the process began by making a site visit to the Dunhuang grottoes, where they viewed the paintings, listened to researchers explain the imagery, and learned about the site's history.¹⁰² Next, they created some exploratory works and tested various plot structures until they created a story that was both well-suited to dance drama and consistent with historical evidence.¹⁰³ To create the Dunhuang dance vocabularies, Liu and two young performers copied over one hundred sketches of Dunhuang dance poses, which were provided to them by researchers at the Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute. Then they spent time studying the images and developing dance movements from them. Beyond learning to perform each static posture, they also analyzed the images to determine whether they represented fast or slow actions, what the implied directions of movement were, and possible links between poses. Many of the portraits in the Dunhuang paintings were meant to represent heavenly, rather than earthly, beings. However, Liu and the others reasoned that all of the movements were likely modeled on dances performed by human performers, so it would be acceptable to use them interchangeably in the choreography.¹⁰⁴

Because their goal was artistic creation, not exact historical revival, the choreographers then went to work innovating on the movements they had derived from the Dunhuang images. For example, they incorporated familiar actions from Chinese classical dance, such as *yuanchang* (circling the stage in brisk heel-toe walks) and *fanshen* (barrel turns), and they introduced acrobatic elements from ballet, such as lifts and adapted *fouetté* turns. Finally, they sought outside experts to help with the foreign dance choreography, such as the dance sequences for Inus and the other Persian characters and other styles for the twenty-seven-country gathering in scene 6.¹⁰⁵ Ye Ning, an expert in Chinese classical dance and veteran in the Chinese dance field, commended the balance Liu and his team had struck between

research and innovation. She wrote, “The creation of *Flowers* is both difficult and precious: difficult in its bringing to life of the still postures from the paintings and using them to portray characters; precious in its breaking the old conventions of dance language and composition to innovate.”¹⁰⁶

As the first large-scale dance drama to be set in the Tang dynasty, to take up the Silk Road as its theme, and to realize a complete dance vocabulary based on movements derived from Dunhuang art, *Flowers* brought many important innovations to the Chinese dance stage. However, these innovations, like those of Yang Liping’s peacock dances, had pre-Cultural Revolution precedents. The link between Dunhuang and the modern Chinese dance movement began as early as 1945, when early Chinese dance pioneer Dai Ailian traveled to Chengdu on her way to conduct field research on Tibetan dance and ended up staying for several months with Zhang Daqian, at the time one of China’s foremost experts on Dunhuang painting. Zhang’s relationship to Dunhuang is legendary in the history of Chinese art. As Michael Sullivan and Franklin D. Murphy write, “no artist did more to put this treasure-house of ancient Buddhist wall painting ‘on the map’ than Zhang Daqian.”¹⁰⁷ Between 1941 and 1943, Zhang had spent two and a half years working in the Mogao caves, “listing, cataloguing describing, and making exact copies of the most important frescoes . . . [and] produced 276 full-size copies on silk and paper.”¹⁰⁸ These works were exhibited and had such a significant impact that China’s minister of education set up the National Dunhuang Art Research Institute in 1943. The first director of this new institute, Chang Shuhong (1904–1994) would later serve as an official advisor on *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*.¹⁰⁹ Around 1942 in Chongqing, Dai Ailian’s husband, Ye Qianyu, was one of the artists inspired by seeing Zhang’s paintings exhibited. In 1943 Ye worked briefly as a war correspondent in India, where he saw performances by Indian dancers that furthered his interest in Zhang’s Dunhuang-based paintings.¹¹⁰ In 1944 Ye wrote to Zhang and asked if he could visit and study with him in his home in Chengdu. Zhang agreed, and Ye ended up working with him from late 1944 through the summer of 1945.¹¹¹ When Dai arrived in Chengdu in June of 1945, she also stayed with Zhang for about three months, during which time she recalls “appreciating many of his paintings.”¹¹²

Dai’s early theorization of Chinese dance as essentially inclusive of non-Han dance styles may have been shaped by her experiences interacting with Zhang and seeing his copies of Dunhuang wall murals. In 1946, when Dai presented her *Frontier Music and Dance Plenary* in Chongqing, she presented an argument in her accompanying lecture that suggested many of the dance styles practiced in China’s Tibetan areas and in countries near China, such as Japan, retained cultural legacies from the influences of the Tang dynasty. “At around the end of the Tang,” Dai wrote, “dance went from a period of greatness to one of gradual decline.”¹¹³ She went on to argue that the reason similarities could be found between some



FIGURE 26. “Apsaras.” Published in *Zhongguo minjian wudao tupian xuanji* (Shanghai: Renmin yishu chubanshe, 1957), n.p. Photographer unknown. Image obtained from the University of Michigan Asia Library Chinese Dance Collection.

dances practiced among Tibetan communities in western China and among some dancers in Japan is that both communities had preserved dance styles that were once practiced in the Tang dynasty. Dai’s suggestion that these be considered legacies of “Han influence” is problematic in historical perspective. Nevertheless, her theorization of Chinese dance history shows that she saw the dances of the Tang dynasty—likely represented in part by those depicted in Zhang’s Dunhuang paintings—as an imagined source for the dance practices she was collecting and using to devise a new form of modern Chinese dance. In 1954 Dai created a duet called “Apsaras” (*Feitian*), the first work of modern Chinese dance choreography based on imagery from the Dunhuang paintings (figure 26).¹¹⁴ A repertoire piece of the Central Song and Dance ensemble, the dance featured two women performing with long silk streamers, with dance movements designed to imitate flight.¹¹⁵ Photographs of “Apsaras” continued to appear in Chinese mainstream media until 1963, suggesting that the work enjoyed a long period of popularity during the pre-Cultural Revolution period.¹¹⁶

Exhibitions and research on Dunhuang art and Tang dynasty dance were common in early socialist China and also impacted the field of dance research, laying a foundation for the creation of *Flowers* decades later. In 1951 the Central Ministry of Culture and the Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute hosted a major exhibition of Dunhuang art in Beijing, with nine hundred facsimiles of Dunhuang

murals, models of the Mogao caves, and replicas of Dunhuang statues.¹¹⁷ After the show, there were plans to publish a book and to create a film based on the content that would be shown all over China.¹¹⁸ Two other exhibitions were held in Beijing in 1954 and 1955, the latter including a replica of an entire grotto, based on Mogao cave number 285, known for its depictions of *apsaras* playing musical instruments.¹¹⁹ Around the time of these exhibitions, China's dance researchers also began to show interest in Dunhuang art and Tang dynasty dance history. In 1951, an image of *apsaras* from the Dunhuang paintings appeared on the cover of *Dance News*.¹²⁰ In 1954 *Dance Research Materials* republished a long and substantive article by Yin Falu (1915–2002), a professor in the Chinese Department at Peking University, that explained what Dunhuang art reveals about Tang dynasty music and dance.¹²¹ Two of Yin's key points would later be emphasized in *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, namely, that Dunhuang art is a product of the labor of working people and that Dunhuang art reflects intercultural exchange between Central Plains Chinese culture and the cultures of Central, West, and South Asia. In 1956 all three of China's major dance publications—*Dance News*, *Dance Study Materials*, and *Dance Series*—included content dealing with Dunhuang and Tang dynasty dance.¹²² One of the images printed in these publications was of the Dunhuang “reverse-played pipa” dance pose.¹²³ In 1958 *Dance* published a review of a small museum of Chinese dance history that had been set up by the China Dance Research Association, which displayed replicas of Tang dynasty dance statues, dance scenes from Dunhuang paintings, and a section of dance notation found in the Dunhuang manuscript collection.¹²⁴ In 1959–60, articles on Tang dynasty dance continued to appear in *Dance*, highlighting intercultural interaction, citing Dunhuang dance documents, and arguing for the importance of historical research for new creation.¹²⁵

The idea that Chinese dance choreography should take inspiration from historical sources such as the Dunhuang murals and other Tang Dynasty artifacts was a topic of discussion for China's dance researchers in the early socialist era. Wu Xiaobang and Ye Ning, who both praised *Flowers* in 1979, had each published essays calling for greater attention to historical dance materials back in the mid-1950s. As head of the Dance Art Research Association, Wu Xiaobang wrote in 1956 that two international dance ensembles that had toured China in 1955—one a Japanese kabuki troupe and the other a performance ensemble from India—convinced him and others at the association that the Chinese dance field should focus more attention on historical materials.¹²⁶ Similarly, Ye Ning, who had served as founding head of BDS's Classical Dance Research Group, wrote in 1956 arguing that the sources for Chinese classical dance movement vocabulary should go beyond xiqu and include dance styles from all of China's historical periods.¹²⁷ Because xiqu emerged only around the twelfth century, Ye was referring specifically to the need to study earlier dance traditions, such as those of the Tang. “From

the perspective of the development of China's dance art tradition, dance in xiqu is only one period of dance's overall history. So, we should study both xiqu dance and the dance tradition from before xiqu," Ye wrote.¹²⁸ The impact of these views can be seen in the choreography of *Magic Lotus Lantern*, the large-scale Chinese classical dance drama that premiered in 1957 (see chapter 3). *Magic Lotus Lantern* opens with a scene inside a temple on Mount Hua in northwest China, in which dancers imitate statues of heavenly beings that come to life.¹²⁹ The lead character, Third Sacred Mother, performed several solo dances in which she danced with long silk streamers, much like the dancing figures depicted in Dunhuang paintings. Moreover, she used *mudras*, or hand gestures derived from Buddhist art, in some of her choreography. In an interview published in 1958 about her creative process for this role, the dancer Zhao Qing stated that because *Magic Lotus Lantern* is a Tang dynasty legend, she had studied historical materials mainly from the Tang dynasty, including Dunhuang paintings, to conduct research and develop the movements used in her choreography.¹³⁰

Links between *Flowers* and early Chinese dance activities can also be traced through the lives of key artists who participated in the production. Liu Shaoxiong, one of *Flowers*' lead choreographers, began performing with the Gansu Cultural Work Troupe in 1949, when he was just sixteen. During the 1950s, Liu performed many well-known works of Chinese dance, and in 1954, he was sent to study at the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, where Dai Ailian was at the time creating "Apsaras." After working for several more years as a performer of Chinese dance in Gansu, Liu returned to Beijing in 1958 to participate in the choreography course led by Soviet instructor Petr Gusev at BDS. As a student in this course, Liu participated in the creation of *Lady of the Sea* (*Yu meiren*, 1959), an experimental dance drama that blended multiple dance forms. After graduating in 1960, Liu returned to Gansu and began working professionally as a choreographer.¹³¹ Another dancer involved in *Flowers* who personally links the earlier and later periods of Chinese dance history is Chai Huaimin, the dancer who played the role of Chinese painter Shen Bizhang. Chai had entered the Gansu ensemble in 1956 and had been one of the company's leading male performers in the early 1960s.¹³² He Yanyun (b. 1956), the much younger female dancer who played the role of Ying Niang, entered the Gansu ensemble in 1970, during the Cultural Revolution, and thus had limited experience with Chinese dance works of the early period. However, the first major role that He performed was Sister Ying from *Ode to Yimeng*, the revolutionary ballet containing the largest amount of Chinese classical dance movement.¹³³ To perform this role, He would have had to master not just ballet movement vocabularies but also many Chinese dance movements and performance conventions developed in the pre-Cultural Revolution period.

CONCLUSION: CHINESE DANCE IN A NEW ERA

The revival of Chinese dance that occurred during the immediate post-Mao years brought with it a new surge in Chinese dance creation that continued into the 1980s. After the success of the two 1979 hit dance dramas *Zhao Shutun* and *Nan-munuonuo* and *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, a flood of new national dance dramas appeared that similarly highlighted ethnic minority literature, Buddhist imagery, and stories set in the Tang dynasty or similar historical settings.¹³⁴ The first of these, which was also part of the national festival and premiered in early 1980, was *Princess Wencheng* (*Wencheng gongzhu*), a joint production of China Opera and Dance Drama Theater and the Beijing Dance Academy, which chronicled a seventh-century marriage between a Tang princess and a Tibetan king.¹³⁵ Like its predecessors, *Wencheng* featured new dance languages developed from research on Tang dynasty artifacts, as well as new variations on existing dance styles developed in the pre-Cultural Revolution period.¹³⁶ Another example of this trend was the Chengdu Song and Dance Ensemble's Tibetan-themed *Woman of Benevolent Actions* (*Zhuowa sangmu*, 1980), which was made into a film released by Emei Film Studio in 1984.¹³⁷ Like its predecessors, the 1982 films based on *Zhao Shutun* and *Flowers*, *Woman of Benevolent Actions* blends imagery from local religion and folk performance into Chinese dance choreography set in ornate architectural settings and magical outdoor spaces.¹³⁸ Sun Ying's national dance drama *Dancers of the Tongque Stage*, premiered in 1985 by the China Opera and Dance Drama Theater, moved further back in time, with a fictional story of court dancers set in the beginning of the Wei-Jin period (220–440 CE).¹³⁹ Like *Flowers*, this work introduced a new Chinese classical dance vocabulary inspired by historical artifacts, what became known as “Han-Tang Chinese classical dance” (*Han-Tang Zhongguo gudianwu*).¹⁴⁰

While the revival of Chinese dance represented important continuities between this period and the pre-Cultural Revolution socialist era, there were also important divergences. With some exceptions, a shift occurred in the thematic focus of national dance drama, especially the class backgrounds of the leading characters. Whereas the socialist-era art system encouraged stories focused on the struggles and achievements of the disenfranchised, in the post-Mao period, more and more works tended to focus on leading characters who came from royal or otherwise privileged backgrounds. The Persian merchant Inus in *Flowers* is one example of a hero who would have been implausible during the socialist era, when foreign merchants were almost universally depicted as villains.¹⁴¹ The stories and settings had also changed. In place of communities fighting for collective social transformation, plots now focused more on individuals seeking love or personal happiness. In place of villages and rebellions, audiences were more likely to see palaces and weddings. The range of possibilities for female characters that had opened up during the early period of national dance drama also narrowed. Reflecting a

retrenchment of conservative gender norms across many fields in China at the time, dance drama heroines now often lost their status as subjects with agency and were turned back into objects to be desired, protected, or exchanged by men.

During the 1980s, Chinese dance increasingly came into competition with other dance styles, especially those newly imported from the United States that emphasized individual expression, such as modern dance, disco, and street dance. The post-Mao introduction of American modern dance began with visits by Asian American dancers Ruby Shang and Wang Xiaolan, which took place in 1980 and 1983.¹⁴² These activities were followed by the experimental modern dance program launched by Guangdong-based dance educator Yang Meiqi in the late 1980s, which had support of the American Dance Festival and the US-based Asian Cultural Council. This led in 1992 to the founding of the Guangzhou Modern Dance Company.¹⁴³ Also in the 1980s, China experienced a national wave of disco dancing, followed soon after by *piliwu*, an early form of Chinese hip-hop that gained nationwide popularity by the late 1980s.¹⁴⁴

Because of their association with a new, individual-focused experience of post-Mao modernity, these dance movements forced Chinese dance practitioners to reassess their mission and identity. When Chinese dance was first developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was conceived of as something essentially new, which could give expression to China's modern national identity and embody the contemporary experiences and values of a constantly changing, revolutionary society. In the postrevolutionary period, how would Chinese dance maintain this sense of contemporaneity while choreographic trends seemed to be moving it toward increasingly more distant historical content? How would Chinese dance continue its socialist foundation while adapting to new social values and forms of artistic expression? These are some of the questions that motivated the legacies and innovations of Chinese dance at the start of the new millennium.