

Inheriting the Socialist Legacy

Chinese Dance in the Twenty-First Century

In 2014 Xinjiang-born Uyghur dancer Gulmira Mamat (a.k.a. Gulimina, b. 1986) won first place on Zhejiang Satellite TV's popular Chinese television dance show *So You Think You Can Dance—China*, season 2 (*Zhongguo hao wudao*).¹ In the season finale, she secured her title by performing a Tajik-style choreography, traditionally one of the less commonly taught minority dance forms in professional dance schools in contemporary Xinjiang (figure 27). As the lights come on, a bird's call sounds, and Gulmira sits kneeling, still, with her eyes closed. She holds her elbows out to either side, parallel to the floor, with her hands palm-down, fingertip-to-fingertip in front of her chest.² She wears a round beaded hat with a red veil down the back, her hair in two long braids. Her dress is bright red with geometrical patterns embroidered along the chest, cuffs, and belt. As a flute plays, her hands begin to shudder, and she raises them slowly above her head, then opens her eyes, smiling. Still kneeling, she performs a series of staccato hand gestures that frame her head and chest, then dips into a deep backbend. A male dancer joins her on stage in a matching costume and circles around her, appearing to play a flute. Flirtatiously, they slide from side to side, looking sideways at one another and bobbing their shoulders in unison. Gulmira pretends to play a drumbeat on the male dancer's back, and they shift around one another to form complementary poses.

There is much in Gulmira's dancing that recalls the style of her predecessor, Uyghur dancer Qemberxanim, who began performing modern nationality dances in Xinjiang more than seventy years earlier. The emphasis on face-framing hand and arm movements, the backbends from a kneeling position, the rhythmic use of the upper body, the combination of running footwork and turns, and the charismatic smile and use of the eyes all recall the documentary footage taken during



FIGURE 27. Gulmira Mamat in Tajik-style dance from *So You Think You Can Dance—China*, season 2, 2013. Photographer unknown. Reproduced with permission from the private collection of Gulmira Mamat.

Qemberxanim's 1947–48 tour. Indeed, Gulmira directly inherits Qemberxanim's dance legacy. Gulmira graduated from and now teaches at the Xinjiang Art Academy Dance Department (Xinjiang yishu xueyuan wudao xi), a program founded by Qemberxanim in the 1950s, when she also served as the school's dean.³ Today, two busts of Qemberxanim sit on the academy's campus, and a dedicated Qemberxanim Image Showroom displays a photographic exhibit about her life, including pictures of her with her early cohort of students, many of whom went on to teach at the academy.⁴ According to Dilaram Mahamatimin (b. 1961), whose mother was an early student of Qemberxanim's and who is now a retired dance teacher at the academy herself, the dance program still teaches many routines originally choreographed by Qemberxanim, and they treat Qemberxanim's style as a model for correct technique.⁵ Since Gulmira studied at the academy from age twelve onward, her entire professional dance education comes from this institution and, with it, the foundation of movement practices that Qemberxanim developed and transmitted through her students and their students.⁶

For Gulmira, inheriting the socialist dance legacy of Qemberxanim is not only a matter of preserving and passing on the dance vocabularies and performance styles that Qemberxanim developed but also of continuing to advance Xinjiang dance through individual innovation, in the way that Qemberxanim herself did.

As a young dancer in the early 1940s, one of the ways that Qemberxanim earned her fame was by introducing new interpretations to the existing Xinjiang dance styles she performed. At the time, simply performing in public as a woman was a major innovation, since it challenged Central Asian Muslim mores about the appropriate display of women's bodies in public, bringing women into a professional sphere previously dominated by men.⁷ "Plate Dance" (Panzi wu), a solo that used plates and chopsticks for props as discussed in chapter 2, was generated through a combination of what Qemberxanim learned from studying with folk artists and what she added based on her own artistic sensibilities. According to Qemberxanim's biographer Amina, after Qemberxanim learned the technique from a local folk performer, she added creative innovations that "increased the dance's rhythmic feeling and its technical dexterity."⁸ Qemberxanim also adapted dance styles from contemporary Uzbekistan to recreate dances documented in the historical records but no longer practiced in Xinjiang.⁹

In 2015 Gulmira, also an active choreographer, staged her own evening-length production of Xinjiang dances that similarly introduced her own stylistic adaptations and innovations. The performance, self-titled *Gulmira*, was held at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing, as part of an event called "Twelve Days of Dance" that presents the work of young choreographers from across China.¹⁰ As stated in the program, the event comprised three parts: the first devoted to "presenting traditional national dances"; the second to "blending traditional nationality dance elements with modern choreographic methods . . . to reflect Gulmira's own growth and transmutations"; and the third showing "the forward development of all of Xinjiang's nationality dances according to the footsteps of the times."¹¹ Performed by Gulmira, her students, and colleagues from Xinjiang and other parts of China, the evening showcased Gulmira's high-energy, percussive style of Xinjiang dance, which emphasizes fast pacing, driving rhythms, extreme back flexibility and fluidity, and staccato isolations of the chest, head, and hands.¹² In her self-choreographed Uzbek-style solo "Dance Is Life" (Xin dong wu dong), Gulmira bounds across the stage in a purple and yellow pant costume, yellow feathers blowing in her hat as she performs lightning-fast chain turns, shakes and snaps her hands in the air above her head, and slides across the floor on her knees. In her Uyghur-style solo "Girl in Bells," by the influential Ürümqi-based Uyghur choreographer Jasur Tursun, she performs a deconstructed rendition of Uyghur dance integrated with LED graphics (video 17). On the whole, Gulmira's movement is larger, faster, crisper, and more bombastic than Qemberxanim's, adapted to the pacing of contemporary television performance and live viewing audiences. At the same time, it retains many of the performance conventions and movement vocabularies established through the works of Qemberxanim and other leading Xinjiang-based dancers during the socialist period. Although her execution and choreography are new, Gulmira builds on an established modern tradition of movement techniques, styles, and vocabularies passed down through the



VIDEO 17. Gulmira Mamat in “Girl in Bells,” 2015. Performed at the Xinjiang Television Studio in Ürümqi. Used with permission from Gulmira Mamat.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
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decades from dancers who came before her. Going forward, Gulmira's innovations now also become part of this modern regional dance form.

The methods by which dancers inherit China's socialist dance legacies in the twenty-first century are as diverse as the institutions, ensembles, and individuals engaged in the work of teaching, creating, and performing Chinese dance. Rather than attempt a comprehensive account of Chinese dance in contemporary China—a project that itself could fill several books—in this chapter, I examine three case studies, each of which illuminates a different aspect of the diverse processes of inheriting socialist dance in China today. First, I consider the pedagogical dimension of socialist dance inheritance, taking as an example the Chinese dance programs at the Beijing Dance Academy. Analyzing BDA's 2004 production *Dances of the Great Land* (*Dadi zhi wu*) and my own experiences studying at BDA in 2008–9, I consider the school's ongoing commitment to research as both a socialist legacy and a way of fostering innovation in Chinese dance in the twenty-first century. Next, I consider two types of contemporary Chinese dance choreography that reflect current directions in Chinese dance. First, I examine the 2008 dance drama *Maritime Silk Road* (*Bihai silu*), directed by celebrity choreographer Chen Weiya (b. 1956) and produced by Guangxi-based Beihai Song and Dance Drama Theater, as an example of the large entertainment-driven productions that present Chinese dance for nonspecialist audiences. Second, I examine a series of works premiered between 2002 and 2014 by Beijing-based choreographer Zhang Yunfeng (b. 1972), as an example of more experimental choreography aimed largely at others in the

professional dance community. In all three cases, I argue that the inheritance of socialist dance is a dynamic and self-conscious process in twenty-first-century China, in which practitioners continue to renew and redefine Chinese dance as an ongoing, always unfinished, work in progress.

THE BEIJING DANCE ACADEMY: LINKING RESEARCH AND THE CLASSROOM

In 2004 the Beijing Dance Academy (BDA, formerly the Beijing Dance School) celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Taking this opportunity to reflect on its past and future, BDA hosted a series of international and domestic symposia on dance education, and it staged a total of eleven evening-length productions, all designed to take stock of and expand upon the current work of its various departments and programs.¹³ *Dances of the Great Land*, an evening-length gala put on by BDA's Department of Chinese National Folk Dance (Minzu minjian wudao xi), was one of these productions.¹⁴ *Dances* opened with a surging sea of red, as over a hundred BDA students took the stage performing the iconic "twisting yangge" now associated with the early decades of China's communist revolution, as discussed in chapter 1.¹⁵ Parading in interlocking patterns of rows and circles, the dancers step across the stage bobbing their heads and shaking their hips, while drawing circles in the air with long red scarves tied around their waists. Adapted from the 1991 award-winning competition choreography "A Twisting Yangge Performer" (Yi ge niu yangge de ren), this piece honors the lives of folk artists such as traditional yangge experts while also being a tribute to the communist New Yangge movement of the 1940s, which marks the beginning of the dance tradition carried on in the department (figure 28).¹⁶ This introduction is followed by fifteen works representing six different nationalities—five Han, four Korean, two Tibetan, two Dai, one Mongol, and one Uyghur. The dances are extremely diverse in tone, scale, content, and movement vocabularies. This diversity reflects the department's historical and contemporary mission, which is to study, research, and innovate with the wide-ranging dance forms of China's different geographic regions and ethnic communities.

As suggested by its opening yangge dance sequence, *Dances of the Great Land* traces its roots to China's wartime and early socialist-era dance projects. The program notes, for example, specifically cite Dai Ailian's 1946 lecture "The First Step in Creating Chinese Dance," Dai's "Ba'an xianzi" Tibetan-style early Frontier Dance choreography, and the Han folk dance Anhui Huagudeng Curriculum developed in 1953 by Sheng Jie and Peng Song, declaring them as predecessors to the choreography presented in *Dances of the Great Land* and the other research and teaching projects put forward as part of BDA's 2004 half-centenary celebrations.¹⁷ The structure and composition of *Dances* also furthers this comparison.



FIGURE 28. Opening scene of *Dances of the Great Land*, 2004. Photographer: Ye Jin. Reproduced with permission from the private collection of Ye Jin.

With its compilation of short dances in diverse Han and minority styles, *Dances* recalls the programs of early Frontier Dance productions such as the 1946 *Frontier Music and Dance Plenary* and the shows at the 1949 All-China Literature and Arts Worker Representative Congress, as well as student graduation performances held at BDS in the 1950s. The selection of specific dance styles featured in the production also indicates connections to these early projects: of the six nationalities represented in *Dances*, five (Han, Korean, Tibetan, Mongol, and Uyghur) also played important roles in early Frontier Dance and the BDS curriculum.¹⁸ This connection to early Chinese dance history was brought to life during the show in 2004, when Dai Ailian herself attended as a guest of honor. Eighty-eight years old at the time, Dai stood, beaming, at the center of the postshow photograph, where she was surrounded by several generations of teachers and students carrying on her artistic vision.¹⁹ This was the realization of the proposal Dai had made back in 1946, for a team of dancers dedicated to researching and adapting folk dances from every corner of China for the modern stage. Her vision had not only come to fruition but was still vibrant nearly six decades later.

Reflecting the principles of China's early socialist dance movement, national forms and remolding remain central commitments evident in the choreography in *Dances of the Great Land* and the conservatory program of which it is a product. All fifteen works derive their basic movement vocabularies and dance rhythms

from research and innovation into local performance. The work that follows the opening yangge sequence is a Tibetan-themed group dance, “The People Closest to the Sun” (Li taiyang zui jin de ren), choreographed by Tsering Tashi (Cairang Zhaxi) and Guo Lei (b. 1962). Performed by fourteen male dancers, it adapts a type of large round drum strapped to the dancers’ backs and played with curved drumsticks described in Tibetan scripture.²⁰ The drum is used in religious performances at Gongkar Chö Monastery, near Lhasa.²¹ To the deep vibrations of Tibetan horns, the dancers bend forward in wide stances and extend their arms and drumsticks out to the side. Then, in unison, they cross their arms over their chests and hit both sides of the drums behind them, creating a loud crash. The dancers rise up to step, lifting their knees high and jumping in place, and then throw their arms up and crouch down, crossing their arms again to beat the drums. As they turn and walk to the back of the stage, their stance is wide and their bodies sway from side to side, as their arms swing out in alternation with each step.²² While this drumming technique is relatively new to the concert stage, the choreographers apply movement principles and vocabularies from established forms of Tibetan drum dance to create a new style inspired by local sources. This dance is followed by a Han-style female solo titled “Phoenix Picking Peonies” (Feng cai mudan), choreographed and performed by Yang Ying using the movement vocabulary of Shandong Jiaozhou yangge. Maneuvering a large pink fan with a spinning tassel on one end, Yang takes rapid fluttering steps and twists and compresses her torso to create curving lines, while she pulls the fan through the air, painting silky arcs around her body. A high-pitched *suona* (Chinese clarinet) and gong and drum percussion carry the tune, contributing to what the choreographer calls the work’s “earthy flavor.”²³ Although the movement vocabularies are familiar, Yang finds new expressive potential by transforming key movements and breaking down conventional connections between steps, yet maintaining the overall movement style.²⁴

By definition, Chinese national folk dance focuses on dance forms associated with communities considered nonelite by traditional Chinese standards. The Han portion of the subgenre is dominated by dances originally derived from peasant performance or sources otherwise considered vulgar or low class, while the ethnic minority portion is associated with ethnic and religious groups that have often been marginalized or disenfranchised due to their minority status. Thus, although the works presented in *Dances* are performed by professional dance students at an elite educational institution, the dance styles they perform have popular, rather than refined, aesthetic associations.²⁵ In terms of thematic content, many of the works in *Dances* also portray nonelite characters. A good example of this is the duet “Spouses” (Laoban), a comic dance sketch by Xin Miaomiao that portrays an elderly couple. The humble background of the characters is conveyed through their costuming and the use of slapstick humor, a common feature of low-status characters in Chinese folk theater. The old wife, whose hearty smile is made up to

appear as if she were missing a few teeth, chases her husband around their home with a fan; then, when she is not looking, the husband grabs it and taps her on the buttocks, laughing. The choreography employs recognizable actions from Shandong-style yangge dance, including arm swings, clapping, bouncing walks, kicks, and head wobbles. Pop culture references are also thrown in for comedic effect, such as the wife's "air guitar" on her fan and the husband's "batusi," a V-shaped finger gesture over the eyes originally from the 1960s *Batman* television show.²⁶ A very different approach to nonelite characters appears in "Fan Bone" (Shan gu), a Korean-themed female solo choreographed by Zhang Xiaomei. In crisp, sweeping actions set to a rapid drum beat, the dancer opens and closes a large paper fan, then jumps, twirls, and runs, while staring at the audience with a wayward smile. According to Zhang, this work takes inspiration from the Korean folk dance "Dance of the Prodigal Nobleman" (Korean *Hallyangmu*, Chinese *Xianlang wu*) but uses it to portray an old folk performer who is slightly drunk and lamenting the hypocrisy of the world.²⁷ Like the opening yangge sequence, this dance foregrounds the folk artist, considered the authentic subject of many of the dance styles taught and studied in the department.

Dances of the Great Land, like BDA as a whole, inherits from early socialist choreographers the idea that Chinese dance, although derived from research into folkloric, traditional, or historical performance forms, is a modern concert dance genre that exists independently from these forms. During the late 1990s, Chinese dance scholars began to articulate this distinction in the field of Chinese national folk dance by using the opposing terms "academic-style folk dance" (*xueyuan pai minjian wu*) and "original-environment folk dance" (*yuanshengtai minjian wu*). The former refers to Chinese concert dance choreography such as that presented in *Dances of the Great Land*, while the latter indicates folk dances performed by non-conservatory-trained individuals in other contexts such as public squares, temples, harvest celebrations, and weddings.²⁸ In the years leading up to 2004, the three BDA faculty members who conceptualized and directed *Dances*—Pan Zhitao (b. 1944), Ming Wenjun (b. 1963), and Zhao Tiechun (b. 1963)—all contributed to theorizing the relationship between conservatory-style folk dance and original-environment folk dance in twenty-first-century China.²⁹ In an essay published in 2003, Zhao described the work he and his colleagues were doing as "distilling the 'folk' onto the 'stage.'"³⁰ Zhao also portrayed the conservatory classroom as a "bridge" that connects the "source," or folk dance in its authentic environment, to the "flow," or folk dance as staged performance.³¹ In order for the classroom to serve this purpose meaningfully, Zhao argued, it must be like a person reaching simultaneously in two directions: "stretching one hand toward tradition to seek the soul (respecting historical traditions) and one hand toward modernity to seek ideas (developing and innovating)."³² *Dances of the Great Land* presents the results of this approach.³³

In my experiences studying at BDA in 2008–9, I observed faculty and students alike putting Zhao's metaphor into action. Research was emphasized in all areas of Chinese dance taught at BDA, not only in Chinese national folk dance but also in Chinese classical dance. This research took place in many ways. Some focused on moving outside the classroom to seek out and study performance practices beyond the sphere of concert dance. Others focused on bringing outside forms into the classroom, where the forms became the basis for new choreographic creation. In both cases, faculty and students ultimately used the classroom as a space to devise new movement possibilities through which forms from outside the concert dance sphere could inspire new vocabularies or techniques for stage performance.

One way that faculty at BDA conduct research is by bringing techniques used in traditional and folk performance into conservatory spaces. This occurred, for example, in my Han nationality folk dance (*Hanzu minjian wu*) course in the spring of 2009, when my professor, Jia Meina (b. 1942), introduced stilts (*gaoqiao*) into our class. The style of yangge we were learning in this course was a form popular in the Northeast, around Harbin and Heilongjiang, in which folk performers twirl handkerchiefs or fans in their hands while dancing on stilts. Typically, in conservatory dance settings, students learn to use the fans and handkerchiefs and to imitate the types of movements performed by folk artists while walking on stilts, but the stilts themselves are omitted. Because this course was at the graduate level, Jia decided that it was important for students to experience actual stilt-walking, which she framed as a form of embodied research into folk practice. The stilts were about one and a half feet tall, made of wood, with small platforms on the top for placing the feet and long red ribbons that tied around one's ankles to secure the stilts in place. It was telling to see how the introduction of this simple folk element turned a class of highly skilled dancers into bumbling novices. We soon realized that dancing on stilts was out of the question; if we could manage to get into a standing position, let go of the barre, and take a few hesitant steps, this would be a major accomplishment for the ninety-minute class. I remember everyone lined against the walls of the studio, groping at the walls and barres for support as we struggled just to get from the ground into a standing position. Although the stilts were by no means tall by folk standards, it was a frightening experience to stand on them, much more so than I would have anticipated without having tried it myself. While this was only a short exercise, walking on the stilts helped the other students and me to better grasp the movement dynamics of the dance we were learning—the circling hands, the swaying hips, the wobbling head actions. We could see how many of these actions derived from the physicality demanded by walking on stilts. Of those among my classmates who would go on to become national folk dance instructors and choreographers in conservatory settings, many would pursue this research further by going to study with folk artists, observing stilt performances in the field, and studying historical films, photographs, and other documentation.³⁴

Several of my professors at BDA were engaged in research projects that brought them into regular contact with performers in other disciplines, and they used this research to develop new movement vocabularies that they then introduced into the conservatory dance classroom. Shao Weiqiu (b. 1967), the professor who taught my Chinese classical dance studio courses in water sleeve discussed in the introduction, began conducting research on water sleeve movement and pedagogy in the early 1990s.³⁵ When I took her courses in 2008–9, she was conducting a long-term research project on the use of sleeves in different regional xiqu forms, supported by funding from BDA and the Beijing municipal government. As part of her research, Shao visited xiqu ensembles in different parts of China, learning and documenting the different ways sleeves were used by xiqu performers.³⁶ In 2004 Shao had authored the authoritative print-format conservatory curriculum that informed the teaching of sleeve dance movement in professional dance classrooms across China, and when I studied with her, she was beginning to write a new one.³⁷ In 2011 Shao received a national grant from the Ministry of Culture that allowed her to develop this research into an updated curriculum, which she published in DVD format two years later.³⁸ Another professor I had who was involved in similar long-term research was Zhang Jun (b. 1963), who taught my Chinese classical dance studio courses in sword dance. Like Shao, Zhang had been researching Chinese classical dance pedagogy since the 1990s.³⁹ Zhang's research dealt with the sword sequences used in Chinese martial arts and *taijiquan* (tai chi), for which he spent his mornings regularly in parks studying with local master practitioners. Between 2007 and 2011, Zhang held the first place title in the middle-age bracket of "Chen-style Taijiquan" and "Chen-style Taiji Sword" in the Beijing Martial Arts Taijiquan, Sword, and Pushing Hands Competition, a demonstration of his intensive investment of time and serious study.⁴⁰ In 2004 and 2012, Zhang published two conservatory curricula on Chinese classical dance sword dance, which resulted from the accumulation of this research and his classroom teaching experience.⁴¹ Both Shao and Zhang regularly incorporated xiqu and martial arts knowledge into their classroom teaching, from their theorization of the aesthetic principles of sleeve and sword movement to their use of traditional terminology and explanation of movement sources and their compositional design and physical execution of dance movements. Following Zhao's metaphor of the bridge, Shao and Zhang served as conduits between the conservatory classroom and the xiqu and martial arts arenas. They made their classrooms into artistic laboratories for embodied research that transcended, but at the same time informed, their work in Chinese dance.

The type of research I experienced and observed at BDA is typical of many other dance institutions in China. Through site visits across the country, I have observed similar faculty-led dance research projects going on in most major professional dance conservatories. Chinese dance professors are constantly developing new

dance vocabularies, whether based on newly discovered archeological artifacts, ethnographic studies, or inspiration from films, literature, and other cultural courses. A program is ongoing to support the creation of new basic training curricula in areas with large minority populations, so that these schools can replace ballet or Chinese classical dance basic training with new technique courses more grounded in local aesthetics. Many of these research projects also extend through transnational artistic networks. In Inner Mongolia, for example, I observed conservatory dance professors introducing new Mongol dance classes developed after studying abroad or conducting research in the country of Mongolia. Similarly, in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, I interviewed conservatory dance professors who had developed new courses based on research in North and South Korea. While I was studying at BDA, a teacher from Japan taught the ceremonial dance “Prince of Lanling” (Lanling wang) to a group of faculty and graduate students, as part of their research into Chinese court dance traditions. The Chinese dance professionals I have observed and worked with in China describe research, teaching, and choreography as interrelated. From the classroom level, they all fuel new innovation.

MARITIME SILK ROAD: DANCE DRAMA IN THE ERA OF “ONE BELT, ONE ROAD”

For students who graduate from professional dance conservatories such as BDA, one of the most common career trajectories, apart from teaching and research, is becoming a professional performer in a national, regional, or local song and dance ensemble. In these ensembles, a type of dance they are almost certain to perform in is the large-scale dance drama. As was the case in the late 1950s, narrative dance drama continues to be the most prevalent form of large-scale new choreography produced in the Chinese dance field today. One reason for the high status of dance dramas is the amount of funding they command in China’s contemporary performing arts economy: in 2017, the China National Arts Fund (Guojia yishu jijin) set a maximum budget of 4 million RMB (approximately \$635,000) for a single new large-scale dance drama production, the same amount allocated for large-scale operas and musicals.⁴² Thus, the creation of a new dance drama is a major undertaking for a Chinese dance ensemble, which occupies large teams of artists and can in some cases become the signature work of a company that continues to be performed for years or even decades. As a type of choreography first developed during the Mao era, as discussed in chapter 3, the large-scale Chinese dance drama is a socialist legacy. In this section, I examine how this choreographic form has evolved and lives on in the twenty-first century.

The curtain rises to reveal a brightly lit stage buzzing with the activity of about thirty dancers, all of whom seem to be very busy. Dressed in vibrant hues of red,

yellow, blue, and purple, they run, prance, and tiptoe across the stage, rolling wine barrels, suspending lanterns, and shaking out pieces of red fabric. It is act 1, the wedding scene, in *Maritime Silk Road*, a dance drama premiered in 2008 by the Beihai Song and Dance Drama Theater (Beihai gewu juyuan) in Guangxi, in southern China. At the back of the stage stands a wooden ship the size of a small house. Its masts rise up through the ceiling like pillars, and ropes stretch down on diagonals, like a circus tent. Suddenly, a spotlight lands on a woman dressed in red at the center of the stage. Peering out beneath her red bridal veil, she greets the audience with a short solo. Tipping her head from side to side, she sweeps both hands with her hips twice to the side in unison, then steps with a heel and corkscrews around, one hand draped over her shoulder. Just as she finishes her turn, a man comes leaping toward her across the stage. Dressed in all white, with a large red flower tied across his chest, he takes a short bow. The bride is rushed away by her friends, while the groom is at center stage, commencing a series of turns on one leg—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . . he ends with a confident stance and holds up one fist triumphantly. The audience bursts into applause. Even more people join the stage, and a long celebration ensues. Finally, the couple is left alone. Under a full moon rising behind the ship's silhouette, they perform a duet of sensuous embraces that slide, seemingly without effort, into stunning lines and acrobatic lifts. In one move, the wife hugs the man's waist, after which he squats back onto his heels, and she lifts her feet off the ground, balancing her body in a horizontal hover. Then she tips her legs up into a vertical inversion, her hips poised on his knees. A swirl of cascading turns ensues. The wife lands on a rope swing and pendulums high above the stage while the groom flips and turns below. The couple ends gazing into the distance together from atop the ship's mast.

I saw *Maritime Silk Road* in August of 2013 when it was performed in Beijing, its second tour of the capital in two years.⁴³ Like *Gulmira* in 2015, this show took place at the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA), China's most prestigious performance venue, which opened in 2007. The building has a distinctive architectural design—a glass and titanium ellipsoid surrounded by an artificial lake—making it a modern cultural landmark of the capital. Chinese dance features prominently in NCPA's programming, alongside other forms of concert dance, as well as theater, singing, and orchestra. On the same night as *Maritime*, another local dance company was also performing there: TAO Dance Theater (Tao shenti juchang), at the time China's most internationally acclaimed modern/contemporary dance ensemble.⁴⁴ While TAO performed in the 500-seat downstairs Multi-functional Theater, *Maritime* was staged in the 2,400-seat upstairs Opera Hall, the same space used for operas and ballets. Several other large-scale domestic dance productions were scheduled there over the coming weeks: a Miao-themed music and dance drama, *Niangx Eb Sangb*; a ballet production featuring *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *The Firebird*; and *Confucius*, a Chinese classical dance national

dance drama employing large amounts of Han-Tang vocabulary.⁴⁵ While TAO's show drew many obviously non-Chinese audience members and had a bilingual (Chinese and English) program, *Maritime* had a Chinese-only program and an audience that appeared almost entirely Chinese.

The story told in *Maritime Silk Road* is based on an actual historical sea voyage launched in the year 111 BCE that began in Hepu, part of Beihai, where the ensemble that produced the show is based. According to archaeological and textual records, the Chinese emperor Han Wudi deployed a fleet of ships to transport gold and silk from the ancient harbor of Dalang (in modern-day Hepu) to a kingdom on the Indian Ocean island now known as Sri Lanka.⁴⁶ This trip is significant because it is the first known government-orchestrated long-distance ship voyage in Chinese history, making it widely believed to be the starting point for China's formal participation in the international sea trade now known as the maritime Silk Road.⁴⁷ The fictional narrative unfolds around the story of a boatman, Dapu, who gets sent on the voyage and has to leave his wife, Ahban, on the day after their wedding, hence the scene described above. While Dapu is on his journey, a storm strikes, and he ends up saving the life of Meilisha, a princess from the kingdom on Sri Lanka. Although the princess expresses a romantic interest in Dapu, he remains faithful to Ahban. The princess is moved by Dapu's loyalty, and she asks her father to provide a ship so that Dapu can return home. In a tragic twist, Dapu returns home to find that Ahban has been waiting steadfastly for him, but because she insisted on standing lookout on the seashore, her body turned to stone. With great effort, Dapu is able to bring her back to life, and the story ends with the couple's happy reunion. A coda of red ship sails and boat workers suggests an explosion of trade on the maritime Silk Road.

Like most large-scale dance dramas staged by government-affiliated song and dance ensembles in twenty-first century China, *Maritime* is a high-budget production with a large and star-studded creative team and ample use of stage technology and special effects. A team of twenty-two creatives, including ten choreographers, worked on various aspects of the design and story, and a cast of sixty-seven dancers performed in the production. The director, Chen Weiya, and writer, Feng Shuangbai (b. 1954), are both highly influential figures in China's dance field: Chen was codirector of choreography for Beijing's Olympic Opening Ceremonies, and Feng was director of the Dance Research Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts. The guest soloists, Liu Fuyang (b. 1985) and Sun Xiaojuan, who danced the roles of Dapu and Ahban, are also highly sought after: both are graduates of top Chinese dance conservatory programs, and both previously worked in national-level dance ensembles and often get hired as guest soloists in dance dramas by regional ensembles.⁴⁸ In 2011 Liu also gained mainstream popularity when he appeared on *So You Think You Can Dance—China*, season 1 (Wulin zhengba) and became a top contestant.⁴⁹ Stage technology and

special effects appear in the use of digitally animated projections, which appear on a translucent screen that allows them to interact with onstage action. One such projection is used to simulate an ocean map and show the trajectory of the ship's voyage along Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean. Another is used during the thunderstorm scene, when Meilisha falls off her ship deck and Dapu dives down to rescue her. Creating a film-like effect, the projection makes the stage appear to be temporarily submerged underwater. Using a rope suspension system, Meilisha and Dapu appear to swim in the ocean and then make their way back to the surface. According to Chen, the scene invariably earns applause from audiences.⁵⁰

Following China's socialist national dance drama tradition, *Maritime* boasts a creative process that emphasizes research and focuses on the exploration of local and regional themes. One way this commitment appears in *Maritime* is through the production's plot. The story weaves together three types of material: textual documentation of Han Wudi's sea mission; archaeological evidence of the building of ships in Dalang harbor; and a local folk story. The story describes a rock formation called "seeking husband cliff" (*wang fu yan*), in which a fisherman's wife, named Ahban, turns to stone from standing on the cliff edge after her husband is lost at sea.⁵¹ The production's stage properties and soundscape also emphasize research and local sources. Hepu County contains approximately ten thousand underground tombs, most of which date to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE); it is one of the largest and best preserved collections of early tombs in China, and about one thousand of them have been excavated since the 1950s.⁵² To reflect the local material culture of Dalang harbor and the maritime Silk Road of 111 BCE, *Maritime*'s designers based the props used in the production on items discovered in these tombs that are stored in the Hepu Museum. To introduce a local aesthetic to the musical score, the composer used the single-stringed zither *duxian qin*, a folk instrument specific to the Guangxi region. Apart from their value as research, these aspects of the creative process also had a commercial incentive: they helped make *Maritime* a successful regional branding tool for the Beihai area. Fixed local performances were incorporated into the Beihai tourism scheme, helping to brand "maritime silk road history" as a selling point for the city, and a Guangxi-based real estate company became a corporate sponsor for the production.⁵³

The political implications of *Maritime*'s story also give it important continuities with China's socialist dance drama tradition. From its emergence in the late 1950s, national dance drama has consistently been used as an educational medium to disseminate government supported political ideals. Taking leading early works discussed in chapter 3 as examples, *Magic Lotus Lantern* promoted the idea of marriage choice and equality of the sexes, *Five Red Clouds* advocated the historical view that minority groups contributed to China's communist revolution, and *Dagger Society* advanced the idea that China's peasant revolution was an anti-imperialist

cause. Similarly, in the post-Mao works discussed in chapter 5, *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* promoted the introduction of a market economy and international trade. In *Maritime*, the story helps promote China's expanded maritime presence in Asia, explored specifically here through China's relationship with Sri Lanka. When *Maritime* was created in 2008, the Chinese government had just launched a major infrastructure development project in Sri Lanka for the Hambantota container port shipping facility, which was set to increase China's trade capacity in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁴ In 2009 the CCP Publicity Department endorsed *Maritime* by making it one of six song and dance drama productions awarded a Best Works Award (Wu ge yi gongcheng) for the period of 2007–9.⁵⁵ In 2011 *Maritime* went on tour abroad to Malaysia and Sri Lanka, coinciding with the launching of another Sri Lankan-based, Chinese-funded port project in Colombo.⁵⁶ The content of *Maritime* very clearly supports a positive view of these Sri Lankan infrastructure projects. Two of the five acts in *Maritime* are set in the kingdom on Sri Lanka, focusing first on the warm welcome Dapu and his team receive from the local king and then on the friendship that develops between Dapu and Meilisha. The theme of mutual aid comes out clearly when Dapu rescues Meilisha and then is repaid by the king's provision of boats for Dapu to return home. Thus, the narrative presents the message that China's expanded sea presence promotes mutual benefit and political alliances.

Beyond the specific relationship between China and Sri Lanka, *Maritime* also supported the ideas behind Chinese head of state Xi Jinping's foreign policy and economic initiative, One Belt, One Road (Yi dai yi lu), introduced formally in 2013 as a main project of the Xi administration. Through its focus on the origins of China's participation in the maritime Silk Road, *Maritime* historicizes, through cultural and artistic expression, the "Road" portion of Xi's initiative, which proposes to revive the ancient sea routes by building a "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" of economic integration linking Southeast, South, and North Asia.⁵⁷ *Maritime* enjoyed continued success during the years 2012–13, when this new initiative was first entering Chinese official discourse, with tours in Beijing and South Korea.⁵⁸ By 2013 it had been performed more than two hundred times.⁵⁹ *Maritime* was the first in a series of large-scale dance dramas to take up the theme of the maritime Silk Road, a topic that became prominent in China's government discourse starting around the CCP's Eighteenth National Congress in 2012.⁶⁰ *Maritime*'s first trip to Beijing in 2012 was part of the official festival activities held in honor of the Congress, and its second trip to Beijing, in 2013, coincided with the launch of One Belt, One Road.⁶¹ The success of *Maritime* has led to new projects that continue its model, such as the Fujian Province Song and Dance Theater's 2014 dance drama *Dream of the Maritime Silk Road* (*Sihai meng xun*). In 2015 *Dream* toured UN and EU headquarters in New York, Paris, and Brussels, and in 2016, it launched a tour of Association of Southeast Asian Nations members Malaysia, Singapore, and

Indonesia.⁶² Chinese media reports explicitly called the tours cultural promotion for One Belt, One Road.

Maritime's use of dance form to express intercultural interaction and friendship also builds upon established legacies in China's socialist dance tradition. One way it does this is by using movement form as an expression of cultural identity. In the scene when Dapu and his crew arrive in the kingdom in Sri Lanka, cultural identity is expressed through the movement vocabularies performed by the local characters, which clearly differ from those danced by Chinese characters in the earlier wedding and sailing scenes. With their lower bodies, the Chinese characters perform more positions with their legs straight or somewhat bent and their knees and toes pointing forward, whereas the Sri Lankan characters have more positions with their knees deeply bent and their knees and toes turned out. With their upper bodies, the Chinese characters perform corkscrew turns and arm movements across the body with palms facing down, diagonally out, or in toward the body. The Sri Lankan characters, by contrast, use planar turns and arm movements on either side of the body with their palms facing upward. By having the characters perform these contrasting movement vocabularies, the choreographers follow a socialist tradition in which dance movement is linked to cultural identity and marks differences between ethnic, racial, or cultural groups. This practice is used, for example, in *Dagger Society* to distinguish between the Chinese and Western characters. Such differentiation is also practiced between the Chinese and Persian characters in *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*. Building on another socialist tradition, *Maritime* also stages dance exchange as a metaphor for intercultural friendship. In the duet between Dapu and Meilisha, the dancers teach one another their respective dance movements. For example, Dapu stands behind Meilisha, placing his hands out to the side, turning his palms up, and lifting one foot with his knees turned out, legs bent, and ankles flexed. In this scene, Meilisha is clearly the teacher and Dapu the student, and at the end Dapu thanks her for teaching him her dance. This act of learning the dances of other countries as a sign of friendship was the core principle of China's dance-as-diplomacy efforts during the 1950s and early 1960s. This practice was institutionalized in the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, a national troupe the Chinese government established in 1962 specifically to carry out this type of artistic exchange.⁶³

The technical term used most frequently to describe *Maritime's* choreographic mode is "historical dance drama" (*lishi wuju*), a category first widely used to describe the 1959 national dance drama *Dagger Society*. Although the movement vocabulary used in *Maritime* is more eclectic than that in *Dagger Society*, it nevertheless inherits many aspects of the socialist legacy of national dance drama that *Dagger Society* represents in terms of its choreographic practices, intended audience, and social positioning. Like national dance dramas before it, *Maritime* exhibits a theatrical approach to dance choreography, which emphasizes qualities

that appeal to popular audiences, such as linear storytelling, complex and realistic sets, high energy and virtuosic dancing, and sentimental characters. Chinese dance critic Mu Yu categorizes *Maritime* and works like it as “mainstream dance drama” (*zhuliu wuju*)—works that follow performance conventions familiar to Chinese audiences and that have attained a hegemonic status in China’s dance field.⁶⁴ There is no clear equivalent to the Chinese mainstream dance drama in the United States or Western Europe, since it constitutes a category of popular large-scale art dance that has yet to emerge, for the most part, in those places. In its overall tone and target audience, the Chinese mainstream dance drama is less like ballet, contemporary dance, or the opera and more like a Broadway musical. While certainly only accessible to those in middle-class or higher income brackets, mainstream dance drama appeals to a broader target audience in China than most other dance genres. It is designed to be accessible, entertaining, and, in some cases, educational. It is perhaps in this sense that *Maritime* most closely resembles its early socialist predecessors. It is a form of mass-oriented art, aimed at being innovative and creative while moving the common viewer.

CHINESE AVANT-GARDE: ZHANG YUNFENG’S EXPERIMENTAL CLASSICISM

If *Maritime Silk Road* is created for the mainstream viewer and designed to entertain and persuade, then the choreography of Zhang Yunfeng is created for the specialist viewer and designed to tantalize and question. Zhang, who teaches Chinese dance choreography at BDA and also works as an independent choreographer with his own jointly operated Beijing-based independent studio, is one of the leading voices in twenty-first-century Chinese classical dance. As discussed in chapter 2, Chinese classical dance is a subgenre of Chinese dance that was first formulated during the early 1950s through collaborations between leading xiqu actors such as Mei Lanfang and Bai Yunsheng and a world-renowned Korean dancer, Choe Seung-hui. During the latter half of the 1950s and early 1960s, Chinese classical dance was instituted as a basic training system for students learning Chinese dance (modeled after ballet in the Soviet system), and it was also the first widely used movement vocabulary for national dance drama, modeled in works such as *Magic Lotus Lantern* (1957) and *Dagger Society* (1959). Although suppressed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Chinese classical dance was revived in the post-Mao period and expanded with the introduction of new non-xiqu-based movement vocabularies, such as Dunhuang and Han-Tang. In the twenty-first century, Chinese classical dance remains a central focus of Chinese dance pedagogy and choreography. The China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (Zhongguo geju wujuyuan), China’s top professional dance ensemble for national dance drama, primarily creates work using Chinese classical dance vocabulary.

Lead roles in national dance dramas also typically go to dancers trained in Chinese classical dance. When national dance dramas are selected to tour abroad, they are often also classical-style national dance dramas.

Zhang belongs to a cohort of young choreographers who are reimagining the content and form of Chinese classical dance for the twenty-first century. Zhang first began to influence the Chinese classical dance scene in the early 2000s, when he was still an undergraduate student. Originally from Fujian Province in south-east China, Zhang was “discovered” in 1996 by a well-known dance critic, Yu Ping (b. 1954), when two of Zhang’s works won second place awards in Fujian’s provincial-level dance competition. In 1997 Zhang moved to Beijing to pursue a BA in choreography at BDA, and in 1999, when he was just a sophomore, his self-choreographed, self-performed solo “Wind’s Chant” (Feng yin) won second place at the Beijing dance competition.⁶⁵ Zhang’s career took off in the early 2000s, when he earned a series of wins at national competitions for solo choreography set on fellow BDA students: first, in 2000 and 2001, “Begonia” (Qiu Haitang, 2000) and “Wind’s Chant” (Feng yin), both performed by Wu Weifeng (b. 1980), took first place in the Peach and Plum Cup and the All-China Dance Competition, respectively; then, in 2002, “Chess King” (Qi wang), performed by Hu Yan (b. 1980), and “Rouge” (Yanzhi kou), performed by Liu Yan (b. 1982), were awarded outstanding creation awards in the Lotus Cup.⁶⁶ Competition solos are by definition small in scale: they feature only one dancer and last around six to eight minutes each. Moreover, as works created for competitions typically attended only by other professional dancers, they often are not well-known to mainstream audiences. Nevertheless, these works have a profound impact on the Chinese dance field, often becoming the subject of intense debates and inspiring new choreographic directions.

In his early award-winning competition solos, Zhang established a distinctive approach to Chinese classical dance choreography that would constitute a signature personal style and a new direction for the field as whole. Zhang’s approach was defined by two types of experimentation: formal experimentation by exploring new possibilities for Chinese classical dance movement and thematic experimentation by replacing representations of historical figures with representations of historical self-reflexivity as a modern condition. The second contribution was especially important, because it widened the scope of potential content for Chinese classical dance choreography. Specifically, it made the modern and contemporary Chinese literary canon a legitimate source of intertexts for Chinese classical dance creation, especially when such works contained self-conscious reflection on the relationship between the modern world and China’s premodern past. Since the post-Cultural Revolution revival of Chinese dance in the late 1970s, new Chinese classical dance dramas had mainly taken up three themes: adaptations of classical literature, portrayals of premodern historical figures, or modern revolutionary narratives.⁶⁷



VIDEO 18. Liu Yan in “Rouge,” 2002. Used with permission from Zhang Yunfeng.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.18>



While adaptations of modern Chinese literature, such as writings by Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Cao Yu, entered the repertoires of some Chinese ballet companies in the early 1980s, they were rare in Chinese classical dance productions through the end of the 1990s.⁶⁸ In 2002 Chinese dance critic Jin Hao reported that many of his colleagues felt that when creating Chinese classical dance choreography, “themes should be limited to ancient history and poetry of the Tang and Song Dynasties.”⁶⁹ Zhang’s competition works clearly challenged this perspective: “Begonia,” “Chess King,” and “Rouge” were all based on works of Chinese literature written in the twentieth century.⁷⁰ Through his interpretations of modern and contemporary literature in the format of Chinese classical dance, Zhang moved beyond representing the past and instead took up self-conscious reflection on modern relationships to the past as his central theme. I first look at how Zhang develops this theme in “Rouge.” Then I examine two recent larger-scale productions.

“Rouge” opens with a dark stage filled with red smoke and the theme music from Wong Kar-wai’s 2000 film *In the Mood for Love*, set in 1960s Hong Kong (video 18).⁷¹ Before the dance has begun, the music sets in motion a web of associations: melancholia, romance, unfulfilled desire, nostalgia. Suddenly, a woman dashes onto the stage. She is dressed in a wine-red body-hugging *qipao* with high slits on both sides, her hair in a 1930s wave, and she is carrying a small handbag. She runs in zigzags, looking from side to side expectantly and flapping her free hand, as if searching for something through the smoke. Then she pauses and begins to walk backward, seemingly arrested by a memory. She reaches her hand out slowly behind her, and her eyes fix on a point beyond the audience. Then her tone shifts, and she is suddenly an elegant lady, head held high, aware of her own beauty. She reaches her hand up behind her head and into the air and glances upward,



FIGURE 29. Liu Yan in “Rouge,” 2002. Photographer: Ye Jin.
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miming a flirtatious laugh. Beginning with a playful sequence of spins and tiptoeing steps, she then moves into a series of passionate and ecstatic poses, arms reaching out from her chest, head thrown back, legs stretching out into space. Two and a half minutes into the work, a spotlight lands on the dancer, and her movement stops. The sensuous string melodies are replaced with a jarring single piano chord. Standing in place, she executes a controlled leg lift—front, to side, to vertical, and then back. With a kick, she reaches both hands up and nearly touches her foot behind her head, in a “reverse kick golden crown” (*daoti zijinguan*), an acrobatic movement from Chinese classical dance (figure 29). Another piano chord sends a jolt through her body. She bends forward suddenly, then tries to run, but seems

to have no energy. Blue light casts an ominous glow on the stage. After a few more piano jolts, melody returns to the music, but it now has an eerie tone, like a tape player with low batteries. Matching the sound of the music, Liu moves into a series of grotesque positions. She lowers into a deep backbend, her head inverted toward the audience, her torso bobbing up and down while her arms grasp, tentacle-like, at her neck. In a floor sequence, she hyperextends her legs, bends back, and again strokes her throat. Finally, the tension breaks with the introduction of a third and final musical transition, to a crackling old-timey version of “Deep Sigh/Burying the Heart” (Changtan/Zang xin), a song used in the 1991 Stanley Kwan film *Center Stage* (*Ruan Lingyu*), about the tragic life of 1930s Shanghai film actress Ruan Lingyu.⁷² Liu runs toward the audience and slowly moves one hand to her mouth, eyes bright, as if she has finally found what she is looking for. She reaches downward, her brow twisted with longing, emotion seeming to pour from her chest. But then she turns and unceremoniously walks upstage, her shoulders slightly hunched, deflated. She makes a final turn and runs again to the front of the stage, as if soaking in one last bit of the glow that remains there. She snatches an imaginary something from the air and pulls it into her chest, a smile of pleasure briefly returning to her face. Then, standing in place facing the audience, she tilts her head back until it disappears from view. Still standing, one hand still on her chest, the other outstretched with the handbag dangling on her elbow, she resembles a decapitated mannequin. She reaches her right hand up to where her head would be and flutters it momentarily in space. Then, the arm falls and bounces in the air, appearing lifeless. Still frozen in her headless pose, the music and lights fade, and the dance is over.⁷³

The character in this dance is based on Ruhua (sometimes translated “Fleur”), the protagonist of the 1986 novella *Rouge* by Hong Kong writer Li Bihua (a.k.a. Lillian Lee, b. 1959), made into a film in 1987 by Stanley Kwan.⁷⁴ As depicted in the film, the story has two timelines: one is set in 1934, when Ruhua is a prostitute who commits double suicide with her lover, Shi'er Shao, after the two find out they cannot be together; and one in 1987, when Ruhua's ghost returns in search of her lover, whom she believes did not die. As Rey Chow has demonstrated, the story is essentially nostalgic, on two levels: Ruhua's nostalgia for her own past romance, and her 1987 observers' nostalgia for a past in which love like Ruhua's was real. Chow writes, “*Rouge* is, in this regard, not only the story of a ghost talking nostalgically about a past romance, but is itself a romance with Ruhua, a romance that is nostalgic for superhuman lovers like her.”⁷⁵ In the end, Ruhua does locate her lover, who turns out to be a disappointment: having squandered his family's fortune long ago, he is an irresponsible father and an opium addict, who works as an extra on a Hong Kong film set. In the film, Ruhua approaches Shi'er Shao on set, where actors dressed in historical costumes are flying around performing a martial arts romance. A pitiful sight, Shi'er Shao crouches in a dark corner amidst trash while

taking a hit of opium. The scene highlights contrasts: his elderly appearance with the youthful image of Ruhua; his drug dependence with the magical flight of the martial arts actors.⁷⁶ Reading Kwan's film *Rouge* in the context of Hong Kong's 1997 handover from the United Kingdom to the PRC, David Eng has argued that this ending conveys a disappointment not only with Ruhua/Fleur's personal search but also with the larger idea of an imagined Chinese cultural past that her love with Shi'er Shao represents. Eng writes, "If the initial images of *Rouge* originally work by impelling our nostalgic desire for a colorful, passionate, and 'traditional' past, Fleur's final reunion with Chen [Shi'er Shao]—with the image of an inadequate, senile, and decrepit old man—challenges not only our desire for this lost past, but the very purity of these Chinese cultural 'roots' and 'origins.'"⁷⁷ The story ends with Ruhua giving her locket of rouge—a souvenir of their past love—back to Shi'er Shao and telling him she will no longer wait for him. The locket, after which the story is named, thus represents the past love that no longer exists, what Chow calls "a corpse of love."⁷⁸ Finally, Ruhua walks through a mist-filled doorway, turns back with a faint smile, and disappears.

There are clearly several layers of meaning operating in Zhang's seven-minute dance work "Rouge." The multiply intertextual soundscape, the use of a Hong Kong theme on the five-year anniversary of the handover, and the portrayal of a 1930s prostitute as a potential embodiment of Chinese tradition are among many elements that beg to be considered. Here, I will focus on how Zhang interprets the character of Ruhua through interventions in Chinese classical dance movement to articulate a self-conscious and fraught relationship to the past. From the moment Ruhua appears on stage, it is obvious that the character being portrayed is not like the premodern, mythical, or revolutionary women typically portrayed in Chinese classical dance works. Her sleeveless red *qipao*, the slits that expose her bare legs, and her handbag all mark her as part of China's early twentieth-century urban commercial culture. As Chinese dance critic Jin Qiu has noted, her way of walking is intentionally inelegant within the context of Chinese classical dance conventions.⁷⁹ She runs on her tiptoes and bounces up and down, rather than using the standard level, heel-toe walk, and her arms wave wildly without following any established form. Rather than portraying a character who embodies tradition—such as earlier female classical dance competition solos "Zhao Jun Crosses the Frontier" (Zhao Jun chusai, 1985) and "Mulan Returns" (Mulan gui, 1987), both of which are based on heroines from Chinese classical literature—"Rouge" presents a modern character tormented by romanticized attachments to the past. This relationship is in part expressed through the selective use of conventional classical dance movements. Rather than providing a coherent vocabulary, such movements enter the choreography like sudden flashes and then disappear again—a turn here, a spiral there, a kick there. The overall emotional state being portrayed, as Jin Hao points out, is one of "eagerly hoping, with anxious expectancy" and "mournful

feelings of a tragic love affinity.”⁸⁰ But what is she hoping for, what is the object of her love, and why is it tragic? The most concentrated use of Chinese classical dance vocabulary appears during the middle portion of the choreography, when the lighting grows dark and the menacing piano chords bring convulsive thrusts to her body. These movements are often made grotesque, such as in the dangling backbend, the hyperextended leg lines, and the balance poses that last just a bit too long for comfort. In the abstracted context of the dance setting, the object of Ruhua’s romantic longing becomes muted, and what appears to torment her is not a specific love affair or a person but, rather, a generalized sense of a memory that cannot be retrieved. Throughout the dance, she repeats a movement of reaching out expectantly into space, as if trying to grab something that is not there. The last time she does this, she seems to actually have grasped whatever it is and brought it to her body. Just as she does this, however, her eyes roll back and she moves into the mannequin pose, as if the moment of retrieving the longed-after memory is also the moment of death. If Ruhua represents the past, nostalgia for the past, or an anxious longing to recover the past, then the final image gives a dark assessment of such a quest. It ends with the character presented as a headless corpse—a body still standing but without a spirit and without life.

Zhang’s later works continue to develop this theme of self-conscious reflection on the role of the past in the present. In 2013 Zhang staged a major full-length production titled *Fat Tang Thin Song* (*Fei Tang shou Song*), which he co-created with another leading Chinese classical dance choreographer, Zhao Xiaogang. *Fat Tang Thin Song* was staged publicly on May 18–19 at Tianqiao Theater, an important dance venue in Beijing.⁸¹ The work was an independent production by Beijing Idle Dancers Studio (Beijing xian wuren gongzuoshi), the Beijing-based choreography platform established jointly by Zhao and Zhang in 2009.⁸² The cast of the production included many of the most famous Chinese classical dance performers in the country, the majority of whom Zhang and Zhao had collaborated with previously in competition choreography and other projects.⁸³ Influential senior figures in the dance field also served as artistic advisors.⁸⁴ The work attracted significant attention from Chinese dance professionals, students, and critics, and, afterward, a symposium on it was held at the PLA Art Academy in Beijing that included many of China’s leading choreographers and dance scholars.⁸⁵ While both praise and critique emerged in the symposium, overall Chinese dance experts celebrated *Fat Tang Thin Song* for its serious and thoughtful approach to art and its willingness to experiment.

Fat Tang Thin Song is a ninety-minute work divided into twelve segments performed by a total of over fifty dancers.⁸⁶ While it is large in scale, however, it does not follow the model of conventional Chinese dance drama. For example, it has no unifying plot, and stage sets are minimal and impressionistic, rather than elaborate and realistic (figure 30).⁸⁷ In promotional materials, *Fat Tang Thin Song*’s format was designated not as “dance drama” (*wuju*) but as “dance theater”



FIGURE 30. Zhang Yunfeng and ensemble in *Fat Tang Thin Song*, 2013. Photographer: Ye Jin. Reproduced with permission from the private collection of Ye Jin.

(*wudao juchang*), after the German *Tanztheater*, a form associated with late twentieth-century choreographer Pina Bausch (1940–2009).⁸⁸ Thematically, the work is designed as a reflection on two periods in Chinese history: the Tang (618–907) and the Song (960–1279). Specifically, it takes the poetry of these periods as a point of departure. The program notes, themselves written in a poetic fashion, begin as follows: “Pacing between the lines of Tang *shi* and Song *ci*/now thinking, now dancing unrestrained . . .”⁸⁹ The terms “fat” and “thin” in the work’s title suggest two opposing sensibilities, which the choreographers associate with these two historical periods and their poetry—the Tang as bold and exuberant and the Song as restrained and meticulous. Embodiments of historical figures appear throughout: imperial consort Yang Guifei and her lover, the emperor Tang Xuanzong; the poets Li Bai, Du Fu, and Su Dongpo; the monk Xuanzang; the poets Li Qingzhao and Bai Juyi; and the empress Wu Zetian. Additional figures come from Dunhuang art, a particular interest of Zhao, who is from Lanzhou and trained with Gao Jinrong (b. 1935), a leading exponent of Dunhuang dance. While these figures are all common in Chinese classical dance choreography, Zhang and Zhao intentionally portray them in unconventional ways. A duet between Li Bai and Du Fu, for example, imagines their contrasting personalities in a teacher-student relationship, rather than a more conventional depiction of them composing poetry over wine; a solo portraying Wu Zetian explores her human qualities, rather than making her grand and elusive.⁹⁰ Wu Weifeng, a leading Chinese classical dancer who portrayed the character of Li Bai, said that the choreography was unlike any dance he had performed before.⁹¹ Tian Yi, a Fudan University graduate and dance enthusiast who



VIDEO 19. Excerpt of Zhang Yunfeng and ensemble in *Fat Tang Thin Song*, 2013. Performed at Tianqiao Theater in Beijing. Used with permission from Zhang Yunfeng and Zhao Xiaogang.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.19>



saw *Fat Tang Thin Song*, said the portrayals differed from conceptions of these historical figures she had learned in school.⁹² When explaining Zhao and Zhang's approach to the representation of historical characters, Zhao emphasizes their desire not to represent the past directly but to make it relatable as a contemporary experience. He uses the phrase "*jie shi huan hun*," meaning "to reincarnate in another's body," to describe this approach: "We might find that the historical figure resembles our neighbor, or she possesses a type of anxiety that a contemporary person also feels."⁹³ The choreographers' goal, therefore, is to shorten, rather than lengthen, the distance between contemporary audiences and the past by allowing viewers to project themselves into historical scenes and empathize with grand personages, seeing them as everyday people.

To help produce this sense of closeness, Zhang and Zhao insert a modern figure into the choreography, who mediates between the audience and the historical images. The character is an older man, with graying hair and mustache, dressed in a type of floor-length black robe associated with early twentieth-century scholars. Zhang, who dances the role of this character, says he is inspired by the artist Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), who, as discussed in chapter 5, spent about two years working inside the Dunhuang caves and created the first widely influential copies of their images.⁹⁴ Zhang's character is woven through *Fat Tang Thin Song*, at times interacting with the historical figures, at times watching or being watched by them, and at times seeming to conjure them as dreams in his mind. The opening scene begins with Zhang standing under a spotlight with his back to the audience, seemingly alone (video 19). As he crouches, however, his movement reveals another dancer standing immediately upstage: a woman dressed in a rose-colored gown and tall hair ornament, like a palace dancer in a Tang painting. At first, his movements seem to bring her to life. When he moves an arm, she mirrors him in her

own vocabulary. Then he stands behind her, operating her arm like a marionette. However, the relationship between them soon unravels. He reaches a hand toward her, and at the moment his fingers touch her back, she launches into a rapid spin around the stage, the layers of her gown flowing out like a top. Was it his push that started her motion, or was she eluding him? He remains on stage as she dances but does not look at her. Are they even aware of the other's presence? As Zhang walks slowly from left to right, other figures appear on stage, all moving in the opposite direction, at different speeds: a many-handed bodhisattva with red and white haloes, a buxom (drag) queen in voluminous trailing robes and glistening jewels in her hair, a thin pilgrim hunched over in rags. When the queen steps on stage, Zhang falls backward to the floor, as if blown over by a strong wind. Reclining on the ground, he continues to stare out in a dreamlike state. Is he in the Dunhuang caves, seeing the painted images swirl around him? The other figures seem oblivious to Zhang and he to them. Just as he is about to walk offstage, though, the queen glances back in his direction, then continues her procession. The title of this segment is "The High Tang Is a State of Mind." Whose state of mind? This is the scene's—perhaps the entire work's—query.

On July 7, 2014, Zhang premiered another group work that dealt with the self-conscious framing of modern relationships to the past. Titled *Rite of Spring* (*Chun zhi ji*) and premiered by the Beijing Dance Academy Youth Ensemble (Beijing wudao xueyuan qingnian wutuan), it engages one of the most frequently adapted pieces in European modern dance history: Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*Rite of Spring*), first staged by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris in 1913. The story in *Le Sacre du Printemps* is based on an imagined "pagan" ritual, in which a virgin female is forced to dance herself to death as a sacrifice to the gods. The work drew on an aesthetic of primitivism popular in European modernist circles in the early twentieth century, and in place of the turned-out, elevated, and ethereal ballet vocabularies, it used a turned-in, stomping, and earthbound aesthetic.⁹⁵ The work's shocking rejection of ballet movement led it to be celebrated as a freeing act that helped initiate modern dance in the West.⁹⁶ According to one account, "*Sacre* was nothing less than a watershed: by pushing his vocabulary beyond the limitations imposed by four centuries of academic tradition and by enlarging the possibilities of what could be shown onstage, Nijinsky paved the way for virtually all the modern-dance developments of the twentieth century."⁹⁷ In his *Rite*, Zhang maintains both the sacrifice and the rejection of movement convention that defined Nijinsky's version. However, in Zhang's reinterpretation, the choreographer challenges the way they are typically understood. Rather than seeing them as liberating, he uses them to reflect on the destructive impulse of the modernist drive, especially what it does to modern relationships with cultural heritage.

Of all of Zhang's works to date, *Rite of Spring* is the furthest from Chinese dance in terms of its performance aesthetics and movement vocabulary. Qualities

typically highlighted in Chinese dance—such as circling and spiraling trajectories, wringing and curving of the torso and limbs, and an emphasis on restraint and nuance—are absent in the work. Instead, the dancers move in straight lines and planes, their bodies remaining erect and their limbs outstretched, with an incessant explosiveness that offers little subtlety. As with Nijinsky's *Sacre*, this choice is jarring given that the company on which Zhang's *Rite* was first staged—the Beijing Dance Academy Youth Ensemble—comprises almost entirely award-winning performers of Chinese dance. In Zhang's version, the sacrificial virgin is replaced by a vase of blue and white porcelain (*qinghua ci*)—once a coveted good from China in the global economy and now a common symbol of cultural heritage in China. In the dance, the vase is carried by a whiskered old man, who tosses it to the other dancers, none of whom wants to hold onto it. Like a hot potato, the vase bounces from one hand to another, until, at the end of the piece, it smashes to the floor, breaking into an explosion of blue and white shards.⁹⁸

Zhang's use of a movement vocabulary that rejects the conventions of Chinese dance, combined with his depiction of the blue and white vase as the sacrifice, all suggest that this is a piece reflecting on the destruction of China's cultural heritage. But who is portrayed as the agent of this destruction, and what is Zhang's message about it? Apart from the man holding the vase, the other dancers are all wearing a uniform costume—a form-fitting turtleneck leotard with long fringe on the bottom and exposed legs. The costumes are black for the male dancers and red for the women. The women wear short black wigs that resemble a bob, while the men's heads are covered in tight black fabric. The tight costumes, short hair, and exposed legs all give the dancers in black and red a modernist look within the context of Chinese dance aesthetics, especially in contrast to the old man, who is dressed in a Qing-style *tangzhuang* and knobbed skullcap. A number of scenes suggest that the people in black and red not only neglect the man and his vase but also actively attack them: in one sequence, they trample the man as he lies on the floor hugging the vase; in another, they crowd in around him until he has to hold the vase up in the air to avoid its being pushed out of his hands. In this scene, the dancers enhance their menacing appearance by pulling their turtlenecks up over their mouths and noses and flapping both hands with fingers splayed out next to their cheeks, looking like fangs. When asked about his inspiration for the work, Zhang pointed to the social movements of twentieth-century Chinese history: "Really, starting with the May Fourth era, every social movement has been one of destruction and then rebuilding, destruction and then rebuilding . . . We have always been in this kind of social environment, experiencing a kind of crisis. I think this kind of crisis is very terrifying."⁹⁹ If we take Zhang at his word, the piece is not necessarily about the destruction of cultural heritage itself but about the social environment that precipitates a sense of crisis linked to reflection on the past. Once again, Zhang turns the audience's attention away from the past itself

and toward a self-conscious concern with the past and with what this concern produces in the modern era.

Zhang's concern with the role of the past in modern experience harks back to a long history of artistic creation in China that deals with these themes. Since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese artists and intellectuals have grappled with the dual problem of how to overcome the limitations of traditional culture to create a modern society while inheriting cultural foundations that support collective identities and build meaningful links to the past. This challenge has been at the heart of Chinese dance, an art form whose fundamental concern has been making local performance culture span the divide between past and present to speak meaningfully to the future. In Zhang's work, as in the work of many contemporary choreographers of Chinese dance, engagement with local material comes through in multiple ways. We find it in modern literary and film references, engagement with historical knowledge and the classical literary tradition, and uses of material culture such as costumes and props, in addition, of course, to diverse movement forms. What makes these works, and Chinese dance as a whole, cohere as a genre today is this use of local culture as a starting point for generating new art and new ideas. Chinese dance is not defined by how much it preserves traditional performance practices in some imagined original or protected form. Rather, it is defined by its engagement with a dynamic constellation of sources and references that, while constantly shifting, is believed to be centered in China. As this constellation changes, Chinese dance changes as well.

CONCLUSION: RED LEGACIES

In their edited collection *Red Legacies in China*, Jie Li and Enhua Zhang consider the cultural dimensions of what Li calls "remainders and reminders of the Communist Revolution in the post-Mao era."¹⁰⁰ In postsocialist China, it has become increasingly important to understand and evaluate the legacies of socialism, especially as direct knowledge of those periods fades with the generations who lived through and remember them. As Li points out, the continued impact of red legacies in China today needs to be understood not only through examination of experiences and memories rooted in direct experience but also through constructed histories and "what is transmittable across generations."¹⁰¹ One potential loss in this process of transmission is the knowledge of what cultural practices are red legacies. Chinese dance is one such cultural practice whose identity as a red legacy is easily forgotten because so much about it does not seem to fit with stereotypical ideas about Maoist culture dominant today. Its decentralized historical origins; its focus on local aesthetics and historical and folk forms; its concern with the expression of local, regional, and ethnic diversity; and its intersectional approach to political representation all make Chinese dance seem inconsistent with the family

resemblances typically assumed to obtain for China's socialist culture. Perhaps the most significant factor that generates this feeling is the suppression of Chinese dance during the Cultural Revolution, a time that for many has become equivalent to the Maoist era. Due to this imagined equivalence, assigning the label "red" to anything not consistent with Cultural Revolution culture produces cognitive and affective dissonance. Such dissonance, I believe, is nevertheless necessary to gain a deeper understanding of China's socialist-era culture. Recognizing the redness of Chinese dance is not only about setting right the historical record; it also means dismantling monolithic conceptions of Chinese socialist culture and admitting the aesthetic and political multiplicities that coexist within this legacy.

The fact that Chinese dance is a red legacy that continues to thrive in China today makes it all the more important for considering the nature and ongoing impacts of the socialist era in contemporary China. What has allowed Chinese dance to transcend its historical moment of origin and remain embedded in the fabric of artistic practice in the postsocialist era, when so many other aspects of the Maoist world have either gone out of popularity or reemerged but only within the explicit frame of "red culture"? Chinese dance is a red legacy that has made a successful transition into the post-Mao period and has managed to retain some of its socialist values while still being accepted by artists and audiences alike as a meaningful and enjoyable medium for aesthetic expression. What can this status tell us about other red legacies that remain active in Chinese culture but are not typically recognized as such? Why have some legacies been resilient and adaptive, while others remain fixed as symbols of a past time?

In the case of Chinese dance, one feature that has contributed to the resilience of this form is its emphasis on constant renewal and change. From the genre's beginnings, practitioners of Chinese dance have insisted that research and innovation are essential processes in the construction of a national dance form, and they have treated this project as always ongoing and unfinished. During the socialist era, these values became regular components of dance work, consolidated through the institutional habits of Chinese dance schools, research institutes, and performance ensembles. With the revival of these bodies in the immediate post-Mao period, these practices were carried forward into postsocialist dance work, where they provided a framework for the continuous infusion of new form and content, giving the genre the flexibility to transform and remain relevant with the times. As long as there is funding for these programs and dancers continue to learn the values and skills necessary to research and innovate, Chinese dance will go on transforming and will maintain its dynamism for decades to come.