

From Trinidad to Beijing

Dai Ailian and the Beginnings of Chinese Dance

Dong d-dong, dong d-dong. A gong sounds as the camera fixes on an empty stage set with an arched footbridge and blossoming tree branch. Dai Ailian emerges dressed in a folkloric costume of red balloon pants and a rose-colored silk jacket, a ring of red flowers in her hair and shoes topped with red pom-poms. Puppetlike, two false legs kick out from under the back of Dai's jacket, while the false torso and head of an old man hunch forward in front of her chest, creating the illusion of two characters: an old man carrying his young wife on his back. This dance is Dai's adaptation of "The Mute Carries the Cripple" (Yazi bei feng), a comic sketch performed in several regional variations of xiqu, or Chinese traditional theater (video 1). This particular version is derived from Gui opera (*Guiju*), a type of xiqu specific to Guangxi Autonomous Region in south China. Dai demonstrates her dance skill by isolating her upper body and lower body, so that her pelvis and legs convincingly portray the movements of an old man while her torso, arms, and head those of a young woman. As the man, Dai takes wide sweeping steps, kicking, squatting, and balancing with her feet flexed and knees bent between steps, occasionally lurching forward as if struggling to balance under the weight of the female rider. As the woman, Dai grips the old husband's shoulders with one hand while she lets her head bob from side to side, her eyes sparkling as she uses her free hand to twirl a fan, point to things in her environment, and dab the old man's forehead with a handkerchief.

Recorded in New York in 1947 by the China Film Enterprises of America, Inc., Dai Ailian's solo choreography "The Mute Carries the Cripple" is one of the earliest complete works of Chinese dance recorded on film still extant today.¹ Dai, who was born and raised in Trinidad and moved to China in 1941 when



VIDEO 1. Dai Ailian in “The Mute Carries the Cripple.” China Film Enterprises of America, Inc., 1947. Video obtained from the C. V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University. © Wan-go H. C. Weng, Hsing Ching Weng Trust. Used with permission.

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she was twenty-four, developed this work in the early 1940s, during her first years in China.² Dai could barely speak Chinese at the time, but she visited Guangxi and learned *xiqu* movement there from a famous Gui opera actress, Fang Zhao Yuan (a.k.a. Little Flying Swallow, 1918–1949). Dai’s study with Fang gave “The Mute Carries the Cripple” a distinctly local movement vocabulary, demonstrated in Dai’s circling, bent-legged and flex-footed walks, her manipulation of the fan, and her curving, coordinated articulations of the hands, torso, and eyes. Apart from its *xiqu*-style movement, the dance also has a local soundscape, employing gong and drum percussion, a libretto sung by a man and a woman using folk-style vocal techniques, and a two-stringed Chinese fiddle, all staples of Chinese village music.³ Finally, the dance has a narrative structure punctuated with slapstick humor, also a common element of Chinese folk performance. For example, at one point the wife strains to pick flowers from a tree branch just a little too tall. Then, atop the footbridge, she leans forward to view her reflection, nearly causing them to fall in the river.

“The Mute Carries the Cripple” is one of two dances by Dai that appear in the 1947 recording. The other is “Yao Drum” (*Yaoren zhi gu*), also a solo Dai developed in China during the early 1940s (video 2).⁴ Both works reflect the new directions Dai’s choreography took after she moved to China, and both became part of the first nationally recognized repertoire of Chinese dance by the late 1940s. Unlike “The Mute Carries the Cripple,” which takes Han folk culture as its basis, “Yao Drum” invokes an ethnic minority identity, in this case of the Yao, a historically marginalized people who reside largely in remote, mountainous areas of southwest China.⁵



VIDEO 2. Dai Ailian in “Yao Drum.” China Film Enterprises of America, Inc., 1947. Video obtained from the C. V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University. © Wan-go H. C. Weng, Hsing Ching Weng Trust. Used with permission.

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Based loosely on a ceremonial dance Dai observed while conducting field research in a Yao community in Guizhou, “Yao Drum” has an abstract, form-driven composition organized around the rhythmic progression of the drumbeat. The stage set consists of a painted backdrop depicting a forest landscape and a large circular floor drum. As in the first piece, Dai appears in a folkloric costume, this time featuring the same pom-pom shoes, matching red blouse and calf warmers, a black pleated skirt, and silver head and chest ornaments. Dai dances in circular patterns around the drum, revolving clockwise and counterclockwise in hops, steps, turns, and leg sweeps. There is no musical accompaniment except the sounds Dai makes on the drum with her two drumsticks. These include beats from striking the top of the drum and clacks from hitting the necks of the drumsticks against one another. Dai weaves the beats and clacks evenly between each step at a constant tempo, and as the dance progresses, tension builds through increasingly complex variation in both rhythm and movement. At the climax, Dai is hitting the sticks under one leg as she jumps, striking the drum as she lands, sweeping one foot over the drum while hitting the sticks together above her head, then hooking one foot behind the other for a quick turn before she strikes the drum and the cycle restarts. Dai’s visual focus remains on the drum until the end of the dance, when she stops drumming and strikes a pose: standing still behind the drum, she crosses her drumsticks overhead, arches her body back, and looks up in profile.

In their foregrounding of local folk aesthetics and minority themes, “The Mute Carries the Cripple” and “Yao Drum” embody the early values of Chinese dance, a new genre that emerged during the 1940s amid the transformative events of world war, communist revolution, and the intensified global circulation of dancers and dance works. Although many individuals contributed to the founding of Chinese

dance during this period, Dai Ailian stands out as particularly influential. Not only was Dai the person who first launched Chinese dance into the realm of China's national discourse, she was also the first person to perform, choreograph, and theorize a repertoire of Chinese dance that is still consistent with the definitions of the genre in use today. Dai's devotion to research on local folk forms and her conceptualization of Chinese dance as essentially modern while also culturally distinct laid the groundwork for the innovative approaches Chinese dance practitioners would advance, often under Dai's leadership, during the period of socialist nation building. As an early leader in the Chinese dance movement, Dai has a historical importance that is unparalleled.

Apart from her historical contributions to Chinese dance, Dai also provides a narrative lens through which to understand major developments in China's dance history during the early twentieth century. Although Dai grew up outside China, her personal experiences mirrored China's own encounters with concert dance during this same period, which were driven largely by intercultural processes. Dai's path from ballet to modern dance to Chinese dance reflects a parallel process that also occurred in China, and it represents the broader shift from a vision of modernity as assimilation into Euro-American culture to one of modernity as the assertion of a distinctly local cultural vision. Dai's encounters with constructed colonial race hierarchies and her efforts to carve out a space for herself within an international dance field that privileged European bodies reflects China's own confrontations with Western cultural hegemony during the early half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, Dai's vision of Chinese dance found audiences and collaborators in China because both were facing a similar conundrum at the time: how to find a form of cultural expression that neither assimilated into Eurocentric norms nor reproduced orientalist and racist conceptions of China, while also recognizing the internal variation and multiplicity that defined China as a modern nation. From the perspective of her biography, Dai's story also reverses the common understanding of cultural relations between the nation and its diaspora. In her case, it shows how a citizen of the diaspora could redefine the nation in cultural terms.

SETTING THE STAGE: DAI AILIAN AND CHINESE DANCE AS A GLOBAL AMBITION

The woman who became known as Dai Ailian was born on May 10, 1916, in Couva, Trinidad. Her grandparents had immigrated there from southern China during the latter half of the nineteenth century, making her a third-generation Chinese Trinidadian. Because Trinidad was at the time a British colony, Dai's citizenship would have been British.⁶ Dai attended British-style schooling in Trinidad through the age of fourteen, after which she moved to London with her mother and two sisters. The language Dai spoke growing up was English (she also studied French

and Latin in school), and although she learned to speak Mandarin after she moved to China, she never learned Cantonese, her paternal grandparents' native tongue.⁷

Dai's multicultural identity was reflected in her multiple names. When she was born and throughout her childhood, Dai's name was Eileen Isaac. Dai's paternal grandfather, who was Cantonese, was given the surname Isaac upon his arrival in Trinidad, based on the English transliteration of his Cantonese nickname, Ah Sek. Dai never knew for certain her grandfather's Chinese surname, although she later believed it to be Ruan (Yuen).⁸ Dai's mother, who was Hakka, had the Chinese surname Liu (Liew) and was known in Trinidad as Francis. When Dai was born, she was given the English name Eileen, from which came her Chinese given name, Ailian. The surname Dai came about when Dai moved to England around 1930. Apparently, when Dai arrived at Anton Dolin's ballet studio, Dolin was surprised to see that his new pupil was Chinese, because the name she had signed in her letters from Trinidad was Eileen Isaac. Dolin asked for her Chinese surname, prompting Dai's mother to produce the surname Tai, from her father's nickname, Ah Dai.⁹ Documents of Dai's dance career in England during the 1930s typically use the surname Tai, but with a variety of spellings of her given name. In newspapers and periodicals, she appears as "Eilian Tai," "Ay Lien Tai," "Ai Lien Tai," "Ai Lien-tai," and "Ai-leen Tai."¹⁰ Student records at the Jooss-Leeder School of Dance at Dartington Hall, where Dai studied in the late summer and fall of 1939, include at least three variations.¹¹ Similarly, during her tours in Hong Kong and the United States in the 1940s, she appeared as either "Tai Ai-lien" or "Tai Ai Lien."¹² This seems to be the English spelling Dai used herself through the early 1950s.¹³ The spelling Dai Ailian was a product of the official Pinyin spelling system introduced in the PRC during the late 1950s. It was not until the 1970s, Dai recalls, that her acquaintances in England began to know her by this name.¹⁴

Early twentieth-century Trinidad, where Dai grew up, was a colonial society governed by legally established racial hierarchies. In the skin tone-based caste system of the time, communities categorized as "white" (mainly British, French creoles, and Venezuelans) possessed a near monopoly on upper-class status, followed by those categorized as "coloured" (including Chinese, South Asians, and light-skinned mixed-race people) and, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, "blacks" (dark-skinned people of largely African descent).¹⁵ For people categorized as coloured or black, upward mobility was often associated with assimilation into white culture, a process Trinidad's small Chinese population was first to carry out.¹⁶ Dai came from a prosperous family that followed this path. When he was eighteen, Dai's father inherited a large fortune that included several orange, coffee, and coco plantations. Eugene Chen (Chen Youren, 1878–1944), a famous diplomat, was the cousin of Dai's mother, and Dai's maternal grandfather at one point apparently owned the famous Pitch Lake.¹⁷ A photograph of Dai's paternal grandparents, father, and aunt taken around the turn of the century shows the entire group dressed in European attire.¹⁸ Dai's family kept black servants and practiced Christianity, and Dai recalls her maternal

grandmother dressing at home in Victorian-style skirts and her aunts plucking their eyebrows according to American fashions. When Dai's skin became tanned from playing outdoors, her aunt rubbed her face with Coty powder, a French cosmetic. Dai's childhood bedtime stories included *Alice in Wonderland*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*, and piano lessons were required for her and her sisters in hopes of ensuring "good marriages."¹⁹

Dai's early interest in and access to ballet—a dance form historically associated with European royalty—was a product, in part, of this colonial upbringing. Dai's first ballet teacher was her second cousin Sylvia (Si-lan) Chen (a.k.a. Chen Xuelan and Chen Xilan, 1909–1996), the light-skinned mixed-race daughter of Eugene Chen and his French creole wife, Agatha Ganteaume.²⁰ Like Dai, Sylvia had been raised in an upper-class Europeanized cultural environment. While living in England, Sylvia was enrolled at the Elms, "a school for the daughters of gentlemen," and she had studied ballet, even partnering in a performance with Dai's later teacher Anton Dolin.²¹ Dai was only around five when she learned dance from Sylvia, but the experience left a lasting impression. Sylvia moved to China with her father in the mid-1920s, and later she studied dance in Moscow and became an internationally renowned modern dancer, offering a role model for Dai.²² When Sylvia left, Dai began studying ballet with Nell Walton, the daughter of an English judge who had a small dance school in Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital city. Because Walton's other students were all white, Dai's mother had to seek special permission for Dai to attend.²³ This would be the first of many dance schools in which Dai was the sole student of Chinese descent.

After Dai moved to England, she continued to gain access to dance styles typically reserved for white students. However, when she began to seek work as a dancer, racial discrimination limited Dai's access to professional roles in these fields. Dai studied with leading figures in the British dance world, including ballet dancers Anton Dolin, Marie Rambert, Margaret Craske, and Lydia Sokolova and modern dancer Lesley Burrows-Goossens. However, while several of Dai's classmates went on to have highly successful dance careers, Dai was unable to find a steady job, and racial bias in casting was likely a factor.²⁴ Recalling her life in England, Dai describes being stared at constantly and treated as a racial other in everyday interactions.²⁵ This racial stereotyping also seems to have extended into Dai's professional career, since all of the known roles Dai performed in England were racially designated. Dai recalls her first professional dance role as a Native American group dancer in the 1932 pageant *Hiawatha*, a job she believed she gained because she "had dark skin, and looked a bit like a Native American."²⁶ In 1937 Dai was cast as a Chinese dancer in the British film *The Wife of General Ling*, and in 1937–38, she performed the role of a Tibetan girl in the dance production *Djroazanmo*.²⁷ The Mask Theatre, which produced *Djroazanmo*, was the only ensemble that consistently engaged Dai in performances during her time in England.²⁸

Although led by two German modern dancers, Ernest and Lotte Berk, the Mask Theatre specialized in works with non-Western themes, ranging from interpretations of Javanese dance to choreographies such as “Voodoo Sacrifice” and “Life of Buddha.”²⁹ In May 1938, a portrait of Dai published on the cover of *The Dancing Times* succinctly expressed the racist assumptions that London’s dance environment imposed on her. The caption reads: “Ai Lien Tai . . . She came to England to study ballet . . . , but turned her attention to Oriental dancing as more suitable for her type and style.”³⁰ Bias occurred even at Dartington Hall, an organization known for progressive values.³¹ During her four months at Dartington, Dai had trained exclusively in European dance styles, with the stated goal of joining the modern ballet ensemble Ballets Jooss upon completion of her studies.³² However, when Dartington had to close at the end of 1939 because of the eruption of World War II, Jooss recommended that Dai instead join the ensemble of Ram Gopal, an Indian dance company.³³ “Since you come from the East” was the explanation Dai recalled Jooss offering.³⁴ Since Dai did not study Indian dance, sending her to Gopal’s company clearly had more to do with her race than her dance abilities.

The troubling effects of racism on Dai’s early London career are visible in the only surviving recording of Dai’s dancing from this period: her brief appearance in the 1937 British film *The Wife of General Ling*.³⁵ This film is not mentioned in Dai’s oral histories and biographies, possibly due to its offensive portrayal of Chinese people. A typical Yellow Peril narrative, the film features a bloodthirsty Chinese villain, white actors performing in yellowface, and a plot that revolves around the efforts of a white male hero to “save” a white woman from her marriage to a Chinese man.³⁶ Dai’s dance embodies China as Yellow Peril by presenting a menacing image that supports racial fears expressed in the film. The scene in which Dai appears takes place during a cocktail party held in the lavish Hong Kong residence of the film’s villain, General Ling. Dai plays the role of a dancer performing as entertainment for a group of mainly European guests. Dai’s props and costumes set up a stark contrast between her and her audience: as they mingle with drinks and cigarettes, Dai appears flailing a bladed-pole weapon, and while the guests wear waved coiffures, evening gowns, and tuxedos, Dai wears her hair in four hornlike pigtales and is dressed in a short tunic exposing her bare arms, legs, and feet. Dai contorts her face into furrowed brows, a grimacing mouth, and an unfocused gaze, circling the weapon in rings above her head while she rolls her torso and hips in wide circles. Dancing to music conveying fast-paced agitation, Dai grips the pole with both hands, thrusting it rapidly forward and back and side to side. The dance ends with two thrusting lunges, and Dai freezes in a pose in which she appears to stab something. Dai’s appearance serves as backdrop to a conversation that confirms the theme of her dance: as he watches her perform, the white male hero of the film learns with horror that all prisoners under Ling’s control have just been shot.³⁷

It was during Dai's experiences working in London in the 1930s, possibly encouraged by these external forces, that she began to develop a sense of Chinese identity and a desire to create her own Chinese-themed choreography.³⁸ One development that inspired Dai in this regard was seeing Asian choreographers staging their own works of Asian-themed dance. While "oriental dances" by white performers had been common in London since the early twentieth century, the 1930s saw the rapid increase of dancers and choreographers of Asian descent staging their own concert dance shows in Europe. Among these were Indian dancer Uday Shankar, who toured in London in 1933 and 1937; Japanese dancer Yeichi Nimura, who toured London in 1934; a group of students from Java, Bali, and Sumatra, who appeared in London in 1939; and Korean dancer Choe Seung-hui (also known at the time by her Japanese name, Sai Shōki), whose 1939 New York and Paris shows were covered in London magazines.³⁹ Dai was clearly aware of some of these dancers, as an interview published upon her arrival in Hong Kong in 1940 lists Uday Shankar and Indonesian dancers among her artistic influences.⁴⁰ Dai's biographer Richard Glasstone records her recalling that seeing performances of Japanese, Indian, and Javanese dance in London made her wonder why there were no performances of Chinese dance.⁴¹ These Asian dancers appearing on London's stages were all, like Dai, quite cosmopolitan: Shankar had studied in Europe and collaborated with the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova; Nimura had long been working with modern dancers in the United States; the Indonesian dancers were students based in Holland; and Choe had studied in Japan and toured North America before she arrived in Europe. These artists and their work gave Dai models for envisioning Asian dances as modern art forms. Soon she had developed a desire to travel to China, with the expressed goal of researching and creating what she called modern Chinese dance.⁴²

Another dance development that shaped Dai's creative aspirations during her time in London was the emergence of modern ballets dealing with serious social and political themes. The foremost representative of this trend was Ballets Jooss, originally a German company that fled Nazi persecution in 1933 and, from 1935, was based at Dartington Hall in southwest England.⁴³ The Ballets Jooss toured internationally throughout the 1930s with its hit production, *The Green Table*, which won first prize at the International Dance Congress's choreographic competition in Paris in 1932. *The Green Table* presented what choreographer Kurt Jooss called "a vividly realistic commentary on the destructive forces of war."⁴⁴ Centering on the personified figure of Death and satirizing leaders who orchestrate war for personal benefit at the expense of humanity, the dance moved audiences with its haunting imagery, innovative choreographic methods, and incisive social critique.⁴⁵ Contrasting Ballets Jooss with the existing Russian-dominated ballet tradition, one London-based critic wrote in 1938, "Ballet Russe is a drug, an escape from reality, while the Ballet Jooss is hard fact, a bringing down to earth, even at times a nasty jolt."⁴⁶ When Dai saw *The Green Table* for the first time around early 1939, she recalls, "I was extremely excited, and I felt I had found the perfect form

of dance art.”⁴⁷ Dai approached Jooss after the show backstage and asked to join his ensemble, leading her to enroll as a scholarship student at the Jooss-Leeder Summer School that August at Dartington Hall.⁴⁸

While she was still in England, Dai began staging performances of her own choreography on Chinese themes. The platform that facilitated this breakthrough for Dai was a London-based organization founded in 1937 known as the China Campaign Committee (CCC), whose mission was to generate support and aid for China during the war against Japan, which began in 1937.⁴⁹ By 1938 Dai was performing regularly at CCC fund-raising events, where her dancing became a lead attraction.⁵⁰ Two dances Dai performed at these events were “The Concubine Beauty Dances before the Emperor” and “March,” both solos of Dai’s own creation. First devised in 1936, “Concubine” was based on the story of Yang Guifei, a famous imperial consort known for dying in tragic circumstances during a war, which Dai had read about in the British Museum Library.⁵¹ A British reviewer who had seen Dai perform the dance in London described it thus: “To what seemed a plaintive Tartar melody, she danced before her seventh century Emperor, a strange meditative ‘inward’ dance, humming the tune to herself and making classical and exquisite gestures with her long sleeves and her hands.”⁵² Dai performed the piece in a xiqu costume given to her by a Malaysian Chinese friend she had met in London. The choreography was Dai’s own invention, which she described as “what I imagined to be Chinese dance movements.”⁵³ “March” was developed from a student piece Dai created at the Burrows-Goossens School around 1935.⁵⁴ It was set to the third movement of Sergey Prokofiev’s “The Love for Three Oranges” and featured powerful, martial arts–like actions performed in a type of Chinese jacket typically worn by men.⁵⁵ Describing this dance, a London reviewer covering a CCC benefit event in 1938 called it “ultramodern in military guise, danced by Miss Ai-leen Tai to a thunderous accompaniment of Chinese drums.”⁵⁶ Through Dai’s performances with the CCC, she launched her career as a solo artist through work that blended political activism with innovative interpretations of Chinese themes.

The outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939 brought Dai the opportunity to travel to Asia. Leveraging her connections in the overseas Chinese community in London, Dai benefited from a funding program designed to repatriate Chinese students to secure a boat passage to Hong Kong. Although a British colony, Hong Kong had a majority Chinese population and was located next to China, making it a good pathway to Dai’s ultimate destination.⁵⁷ Dai arrived in Hong Kong around March of 1940, just over a month before her twenty-fourth birthday.⁵⁸ She stayed there for one year before moving on to China in the spring of 1941.⁵⁹ The sea journey from England to Hong Kong was long, taking Dai through Egypt, Sri Lanka, and Malaya (Malaysia), where she reconnected with her older sister, who was married and living in Penang. Dai’s sister would provide Dai with living expenses during her year in Hong Kong, allowing Dai to live comfortably and focus on her creative work.⁶⁰ Soon after Dai arrived in Hong Kong, she found

an invaluable patron in Song Qingling (a.k.a. Soong Ching-ling, 1893–1981), the former first lady of China. Song spoke fluent English and was a close colleague of Dai's relative Eugene Chen.⁶¹ Song took a special interest in Dai, helping her to arrange rehearsal space, providing advice on her dance choreography, and writing her letters of introduction to leading figures in China.⁶² Song organized both of Dai's major performances in Hong Kong, held on October 18, 1940, and January 22, 1941, at the Peninsula Hotel and the King's Theatre, respectively.⁶³ Both events were fund-raisers for the China Defense League, of which Song served as chair. The shows were sold out with audiences of five hundred and one thousand each, and they generated significant positive press for Dai.

While she was in Hong Kong, Dai met and married a famous Chinese cartoonist, Ye Qianyu (1907–1995), whom Song had engaged to draw publicity sketches for Dai's shows.⁶⁴ Ye was ten years Dai's senior, had been born and educated in China, and was well-connected in China's art scene.⁶⁵ An accomplished visual artist and fluent Mandarin and Cantonese speaker with a basic command of English, Ye translated and interpreted for Dai and helped with set and costume designs during her early years in China.⁶⁶

The dances Dai performed in Hong Kong in 1940–41 illustrated the eclectic style she had developed in England, combining excerpts from ballet repertoire with Dai's original choreography on Chinese and non-Chinese themes.⁶⁷ Dai's most popular dances were those dealing with the war, such as "Alarm" and "Guerilla March." "Alarm," which Dai created in London in 1939, was danced in bare feet and used a round drum that Dai held under her left arm and beat with her right hand as she danced.⁶⁸ The choreography combined a drumming technique Dai had learned in her modern dance classes with footwork adapted from a Javanese dance Dai saw performed in London.⁶⁹ According to Dai, the dance portrayed "the emotional state of a young guerilla fighter on sentry duty for the first time."⁷⁰ "Guerilla March" was a development of Dai's earlier work "March," with a new costume featuring the red, blue, and white flag of the Republic of China, at the time a symbol of China's anti-Japanese resistance.⁷¹ A Hong Kong news photograph depicts Dai in the costume: she wears a leotard with the white sun motif emblazoned on her chest, a flag-like swath of fabric draped over one arm, her legs and feet bare. She stands in a wide lunge position and reaches her arms out on a strong diagonal line.⁷² Dai performed "Guerilla March," still set to the music of Prokofiev, in both of her Hong Kong shows.⁷³ Compared to the new choreography Dai would produce in China during the 1940s, her Hong Kong repertoire shows a view of China from outside. The movement vocabularies she used in these works came from her ballet and European modern dance background, dances from other Asian countries she had seen performed abroad, and her own imagination. Additionally, using symbols such as the national flag and the guerilla fighter, works like "Guerilla March" and "Alarm" represented China as an undifferentiated whole, without highlighting variations such as region, ethnicity, or class within the national body. The shift to

develop new movement vocabularies based on local performance forms and to express internal differences within China would become the focus of Dai's new work after she left Hong Kong.

DANCE IN WARTIME CHINA: COMPETING VISIONS OF MODERNITY

The world Dai entered when she crossed the border from Hong Kong to China in early 1941 was one in which wartime conditions were generating rapid transformations in culture, including the dance field. To contextualize Dai's early work after her arrival, it is thus necessary to first gain an understanding of the broader dance developments already going on in China at the time. One of the most important factors shaping these developments was the War of Resistance against Japan, begun in 1937. Lasting eight years and fought primarily on Chinese soil, this war impacted almost everyone in China, soldiers and civilians alike. While large swaths of the country were consumed into the rapidly expanding Japanese Empire, an estimated fourteen to thirty million people lost their lives and eighty million became refugees, leading to one of the largest demographic shifts in modern history.⁷⁴ Scholarship on China's literary and artistic transformations during the war has been extensive, examining diverse communities from the Japanese-occupied eastern seaboard to the Nationalist-controlled inland areas to the Communist zones.⁷⁵ Conventionally, China's wartime cultural developments were seen as a move away from the modernist experiments of the 1920s and early 1930s. Recently, however, scholars have begun to rethink this conception and see wartime culture too as a modernist project. In her study of wartime literature, visual art, and film, Carolyn FitzGerald, for example, argues that a blurring of artistic boundaries and self-consciousness about form characterized wartime art, continuing prewar projects and generating new forms of Chinese modernism.⁷⁶ In dance, the war had a similar effect, with debates about genre and form leading to new innovations and competing approaches to the meaning of modernity and modernism in artistic expression.

Before the war, several dance projects were already ongoing in China's major urban areas, all of which were concerned in some way with modern or modernist experiments.⁷⁷ As discussed in the introduction, one such project began in the 1900s and 1910s with the modern Chinese-style choreographies of Qing dynasty court lady Yu Rongling (1883–1973) and Peking opera actor Mei Lanfang (1894–1961). Another project began in the late 1910s and 1920s and involved the importation and adaptation of European and American popular dance forms such as ballroom, cabaret, and jazz. The most well-known figures in this field were the composer and songwriter Li Jinhui (1891–1967), who created the first successful Chinese cabaret ensemble, and taxi dancers or dance hostesses, who were essential to early Chinese dance hall and cabaret culture. In Shanghai especially, these dance hall entertainments came to be regarded as symbols of a cosmopolitan modern

lifestyle.⁷⁸ A third project, which began in the 1920s and 1930s, was the importation and adaptation of Western elite dance forms, such as ballet and European and American modern dance. Key figures in this field were Russian émigrés, responsible for the early transmission of ballet following the Russian Revolution of 1917, and Wu Xiaobang (1906–1995), who imported to China in the 1930s Western modern dance forms and ideas he had studied with Japanese teachers in Tokyo.⁷⁹

The outbreak of the War of Resistance brought new directions to some of these existing dance activities, while also launching completely new dance experiments. By the end of 1937, Japanese armies had occupied the major urban centers on China's east coast, such as Beijing, Harbin, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, which had previously been the hubs of the three dance projects launched in the prewar period. While some artists continued their work under Japanese governance, many fled inland, forming new artistic centers in places like Chongqing, Guilin, Kunming, and Yan'an. The operatic experiments of Mei Lanfang were continued in the wartime period through the work of Japanese-trained Korean dancer Choe Seung-hui, the results of which came to fruition after 1949 and are discussed in the next chapter. Cabaret, jazz, and ballroom culture largely continued under the Japanese occupation, as did activities in ballet. Wu's adaptations of Western-style modern dance also continued, although with some new variations as discussed below. The first entirely new dance projects began to emerge in the early 1940s in the inland areas. Among these, the wartime dance movement known as "New Yangge" (*xin yangge*) was the first.

New Yangge symbolized the emerging Chinese socialist culture developed in Yan'an, a remote area located in northwest China that had become the base of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1935. The establishment of Yan'an coincided with the rise of Mao Zedong as the preeminent leader of the CCP and the driving figure of China's socialist revolution.⁸⁰ Mao's principles of socialist cultural production were formulated and promoted in Yan'an during the early years of the war, and New Yangge was the first new artistic genre to be developed out of the direct application of these principles.⁸¹ As its name suggests, New Yangge was a modern performance genre created on the foundation of yangge, an existing folk practice.⁸² Before the 1940s, folk yangge was an amateur community performance carried out among predominantly Han communities in rural north China around the New Year holiday. It integrated music, theater, dance, sport, ritual, and popular entertainment, typically featuring processions, group dances performed with lanterns and other props, and skits featuring humorous, often obscene, content.⁸³ As a localized, amateur, and orally transmitted folk culture, yangge was embedded in the lives of poor peasant communities and thus constituted the type of nonelite local culture that Mao instructed revolutionary artists to study and adopt in their activist work. New Yangge was developed through collaborations between folk performers and communist intellectuals, following cultural directives of CCP policy.⁸⁴

The intellectual underpinnings of the New Yangge movement came from two ideas propagated in the writings of Mao Zedong in Yan'an during the early

1940s: “national forms” (*minzu xingshi*) and “remolding” (*gaizao*). According to Wang Hui, the “national forms” discussion began with a report Mao gave in 1938 in Yan’an, in which he wrote, “The foreign ‘eight-legged essay’ must be banned, empty and abstract talk must be stopped and doctrinairism must be laid to rest to make room for the fresh and lively things of Chinese style and Chinese flavor which the common folk of China love to see and hear.”⁸⁵ Over the next four years, writers across much of China debated the meaning of this position in what became known as the “national forms” debates. The discussion involved not only those in Yan’an but also people working in many of the cities that would later become important sites of the early Chinese dance movement. Wang writes, “The discussion was opened up in Yan’an . . . after which several dozen publications in Chongqing, Chengdu, Kunming, Guilin, the Shanxi-Shaanxi-Henan border region, and Hong Kong got drawn into the conversation; this eventually resulted in the publication of almost two hundred essays and treatises.”⁸⁶ One central issue in the debate was whether or to what extent national forms could be based on the Westernized cultural practices that had been developed and promoted by many of China’s leftist urban intellectuals during the May Fourth New Culture Movement of the 1920s. Another central theme was to what extent local folk and vernacular forms could contribute to the construction of new national forms. Here, the question of form was directly related to the question of audience. In the realm of literature, for example, debaters asked, “What forms should writers use, especially what language, and who were the readers?”⁸⁷ In his influential 1940 essay “On New Democracy,” Mao clarified his position on the issue of Westernization. He wrote, “To nourish her own culture China needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture, not enough of which was done in the past. We should assimilate whatever is useful to us today not only from the present-day socialist and new-democratic cultures but also from the earlier cultures of other nations, for example, from the culture of the various capitalist countries in the Age of Enlightenment. However, we should not gulp any of this foreign material down uncritically. . . . To advocate ‘wholesale westernization’ is wrong.”⁸⁸

The issue of folk and vernacular forms was more controversial and continued to be debated through the 1940s, with strong views on both sides. Within this debate, however, the New Yangge movement was clearly on the side of using folk and vernacular forms as the basis for new national forms. Thus, in the realm of performance, the New Yangge movement offered the first model for how to successfully develop a new revolutionary national form on the basis of local and vernacular culture.

The principle of remolding appeared as a key theme in Mao’s 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” regarded as his most important treatise on China’s revolutionary art and culture. Although related to the issue of national forms, remolding touched on the deeper source of the cultural divide between many communist artists and their rural audiences. Namely, it pinpointed the visceral sense of superiority and disgust that many educated urbanites, even those who were politically progressive, felt toward the majority of China’s population

at the time: poor illiterate people living in rural areas. “Remolding” in this case referred to the process of psychological and physical self-reform that Mao felt such artists needed to carry out to rid themselves of their elitist attitudes. To illustrate this idea, Mao reflected on his own experience:

I began life as a student and at school acquired the ways of a student; I then used to feel it undignified to do even a little manual labor, such as carrying my own luggage in the presence of my fellow students, who were incapable of carrying anything, either on their shoulders or in their hands. At that time I felt that intellectuals were the only clean people in the world, while in comparison workers and peasants were dirty. I did not mind wearing the clothes of other intellectuals, believing them clean, but I would not put on clothes belonging to a worker or peasant, believing them dirty. But after I became a revolutionary and lived with workers and peasants and with soldiers of the revolutionary army, I gradually came to know them well, and they gradually came to know me well too. It was then, and only then, that I fundamentally changed the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois feelings implanted in me in the bourgeois schools. I came to feel that compared with the workers and peasants the un-remolded intellectuals were not clean and that, in the last analysis, the workers and peasants were the cleanest people and, even though their hands were soiled and their feet smeared with cow-dung, they were really cleaner than the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois intellectuals. That is what is meant by a change in feelings, a change from one class to another. If our writers and artists who come from the intelligentsia want their works to be well received by the masses, they must change and remold their thinking and their feelings. Without such a change, without such remolding, they can do nothing well and will be misfits.⁸⁹

In this discussion, Mao highlighted the importance of the body in Chinese conceptions of class difference. To carry out revolutionary art, he argued, required not just promoting progressive political messages in one’s work but being willing, in a physical way, to be close to the working classes. Remolding meant living with the rural poor, taking part in their physical labor, dressing in their clothes, and reprogramming one’s unconscious sensibilities so that even the dirt on their skin would seem clean. Because bodily culture was such an important marker of identity, and so difficult for many to change, it became a central focus in socialist ideas of revolutionary culture and revolutionary transformation. As such, it was the central ideological principle motivating choices about dance form in the New Yangge movement.

The New Yangge performances developed in and around Yan’an during the early and mid-1940s incorporated two types of performance practice, both of which had a dance component. The first type featured dramatic productions known as “yangge theater” (*yangge ju*), which adapted local musical tunes and performance conventions to perform revolutionary stories, usually centering on poor peasants and their desire for social change. The most well-known examples of this genre were *Brother and Sister Open the Wasteland* (*Xiongmei kaihuang*, 1943), *The White-Haired Girl* (*Baimao nü*, 1944), and *Liu Hulan* (1948). The second type featured participatory events such as parades and communal dances, in



FIGURE 3. New Yangge team performing in National Day Parade. Published in *Renmin huabao* 1, no. 1 (July 1950): 1. Photographer unknown. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

which yangge groups entered public spaces performing collective dances accompanied by loud drumming, gongs, and colorful scarves, usually inviting bystanders to join in. Both forms of New Yangge used a specific type of bodily movement known as *niu yangge* (literally, “twist yangge”), referring to a distinctive hip-swiveling walk performed in yangge dance. A common action in *niu yangge* involves the dancer performing a bouncing version of a jazz square (stepping across, back, side, and forward), while the top of the head bobs from side to side, hips twist freely, and wrists spiral in opposite directions with the elbows tucked in and hands spinning, often holding a fan or handkerchief, at waist level. Because of its association with poor peasants and its use in village festivals, this yangge “twist” projected a distinctly lowbrow rural working-class aesthetic that contrasted sharply with the elite, Westernized concert dance forms practiced in China’s coastal cities. Over time, the twisting bodies of New Yangge spread across China, becoming a symbol of revolutionary ideals that promoted egalitarianism and placed peasants at the center of a new vision of Chinese modernity (figure 3).

New Yangge was not universally supported, even by artists who considered themselves revolutionary. Because it embodied movement habits of the rural poor, many urban intellectuals were repulsed by the visceral form of yangge choreography. In his study of revolutionary theater in China during the 1940s, Brian DeMare recounts the story of Han Bing, an urban actress who moved to Yan’an during the Japanese invasions but experienced difficulty adjusting to the new performance culture, especially its emphasis on village characters and rural performance styles. According to DeMare, “the real hurdles [for Han Bing] were *yangge* dance and

drama. Like the many urbanites that saw *yangge* as ugly, Han Bing looked down on this folk form as low-class and crude.⁹⁰ The crudeness that made urban elites like Han Bing uncomfortable, however, was exactly what gave New Yangge its power as a political statement from the perspective of Mao and his followers. To perform yangge—marching down a village street to the sound of gongs and drums, bouncing up and down and twisting to the beat of the common people—was, for urban elites, to be stripped of the bodily marks of education, cosmopolitanism, and sophistication that separated them from the rural masses. In yangge dramas, traditional hierarchies were reversed, making peasants the heroes. For urban artists like Han Bing, to “twist yangge” meant following the communist dictum to “become one with the masses.” Meanwhile, for many peasants and folk performers, it meant learning to see oneself as an agent of revolutionary social change.⁹¹

While New Yangge was taking off in Yan'an, artists who remained in the coastal cities took other approaches to wartime dance culture. Wu Xiaobang, the early importer of Western modern dance from Japan, was one of many Chinese elites who sought alternatives to the local performance aesthetics represented by the New Yangge movement. Wu had grown up under the name Wu Zupei in a wealthy Han family in Suzhou, was educated through the university level in China, and, in 1929, moved to Japan to pursue further study.⁹² During his early trips to Japan between 1929 and 1934, Wu began studying ballet and Western modern dance with Japanese teachers.⁹³ By 1931 Wu had changed his name to Xiaobang, based on the Chinese transliteration of the name of his favorite composer, Frédéric Chopin.⁹⁴ In September 1935, at the age of twenty-nine, Wu gave his first public dance concert in Shanghai, presenting a set of eleven solo works that featured the ballet and Western modern dance forms he had studied in Tokyo.⁹⁵ Photographs in a promotional spread show Wu performing barefoot in a series of poses designed to express different emotions: loss, pain, struggle, disappointment, joy, sadness, and hope (figure 4). According to the description, the dances were set to music by European composers Chopin, Debussy, and Dussek. The headline reads “Gentleman Wu Xiaobang Performs Western Dance Poses.”⁹⁶ In one image, of a dance set to Chopin’s *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, Wu stands in a belted jacket with legs exposed, standing in what resembles a ballet *passé* with his arms reaching up and forward. In another, of a dance set to Chopin’s *Funeral March*, Wu appears in a long black gown with his head thrown back and his spine arched, palms raised as if cupping his heart as an offering to the sky. The accompanying text states that Wu hoped to import Western concert dance to China, as the first step toward developing China’s new concert dance.

During the wartime period, Wu continued to envision himself as a conduit for Western dance approaches, which he adapted to China’s wartime culture.⁹⁷ In a short interview published in 1937, Wu described the dance style he practiced as “New Dance” (*xinxing wuyong*), using the Japanese neologism *buyō* (in Chinese, *wuyong*).⁹⁸ New Dance, Wu argued, had roots in the United States and Europe: “The



FIGURE 4. Wu Xiaobang in “Funeral March.” Published in *Shidai* 8, no. 6 (1935): 12.
Photographer: Wan Shi. Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949), Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin (CNBKSY), Shanghai Library.

genesis of ‘New Dance’ was initiated by [the American Isadora] Duncan, then Germany’s [Rudolf] Laban originated a new kind of theory, and Germany’s Mary Wigman was the one to put ‘New Dance’ into practice,” the interview recounted.⁹⁹ Between 1937 and 1941, Wu traveled extensively across southern China, promoting his New Dance in Nanjing, Nanchang, Huizhou (Anhui), Chongqing, Guiyang, Guilin, Changsha, Yangzhou, and Qujiang (Guangdong).¹⁰⁰ During this time, he also periodically returned to Shanghai, and in 1939 he apparently made a brief trip to Hong Kong.¹⁰¹ Around 1938 Wu spent two months in a village in Huizhou (in Anhui, a relatively poor part of eastern China) and composed a southern drama called “Sending Him to the Front Lines.” However, Wu writes that “Although the effect of the performance was positive, many folk artists (*yiren*) did not approve of this method.”¹⁰² Thus, after a brief experiment with local form, Wu returned to New Dance. In 1939 Wu returned to Shanghai and began working with a group of students at the China-France Theater School, several of whom had experience with Western-style spoken drama and ballet.¹⁰³ Under Wu’s direction, they staged a forty-five-minute dance drama called *Poppy Flowers* (*Yingsu hua*).¹⁰⁴ While the production had patriotic themes appropriate to the new wartime period and told a leftist story focused on the heroism of Chinese peasants, it does not appear to have employed local dance forms. There is no extant recording of the production, but photographs suggest a European aesthetic, including peasants dressed in white babushkas and flowered aprons and choreography borrowing from ballet and European modern dance. In one image, six dancers playing female peasants stand on the balls of their feet with their torsos erect, arms reaching with palms upward and faces tilted toward the sky. In another, dancers pose with one hand on their hips and the other pointing forward, while others raise their fists in defiance.¹⁰⁵

In both his prewar and his wartime writings, Wu conceptualized China’s local culture as old and backward and Western culture as new and progressive, reproducing the logic of colonial modernity popular among Chinese intellectuals who supported the Westernizing strand of May Fourth-era thought.¹⁰⁶ Before the war, in 1935, Wu’s promotional materials had stated, “The dance techniques of Chinese old theater . . . can also be called Chinese dance. However, we all know that the inheritance of these dances does not suit the current society, so we need to create new Chinese dance.”¹⁰⁷ This conception of local culture as old reappeared in a 1939 essay, in which Wu derided what he considered the outdated training techniques used in Fuliancheng, a famous school for Peking opera: “The entertainers who grow up in [Fuliancheng]—how could they match the performance techniques needed by modern people!” Wu writes.¹⁰⁸ In 1940, in an essay titled “Chinese dance” (*Zhongguo wuyong*), Wu conceded that “Chinese dance must have a close connection to its own history.”¹⁰⁹ However, when discussing what this would mean, he made it clear that he did not believe such a connection should be predicated on the study of local performance forms. Wu’s negative view of local dance culture is expressed clearly when he asserts, “In our own garden, we cannot find

even one dance tree. . . . In China people crowd around magicians, streetwalkers, bodyguards, and boxing teachers with open mouths, applauding those who have gone to the *jianghu*.”¹¹⁰ Wu proposed the idea of “national consciousness” (*minzu yishi*), which served implicitly as an alternative to the concept of national form. For Wu, national consciousness “includes all of the citizens’ life” and thus has no specific aesthetic form. In this way, Wu called on artists such as himself to lay claim to being “national” without having to perform local movement such as New Yangge, which they regarded as culturally below them.¹¹¹ In 1941 Wu directly criticized the widespread interest in folk art that had emerged in recent years. Referring to the period from March 1940 to February 1941, Wu wrote, “During this time, the entire art world was surging with the national forms controversy. Many people believed folk forms are the only source for national forms, driving the car in reverse toward the past.”¹¹² This statement directly opposed the New Yangge movement based on Mao’s socialist cultural policies promoted at Yan’an. At this time, Wu also undermined the Maoist idea that intellectuals should learn from peasants, by claiming that it was the peasants who needed him, rather than the other way around.¹¹³ As late as 1944, Wu’s published writings on dance training continued to advance concepts he had learned in Japan, such as the coordination of breath and tempo and the use of “natural law” (*ziran fazhe*), a key component of his theory and practice of New Dance.¹¹⁴

During the War of Resistance, the CCP’s New Yangge and Wu Xiaobang’s New Dance represented competing visions of modernity in China’s dance field. For the promoters of New Yangge, local rural movements offered the basis for a new approach to Chinese modernity grounded in the culture of the disenfranchised. Applying the Maoist principles of national forms and remolding, CCP-affiliated activists and their peasant collaborators conceived of yangge folk performance as a powerful and dynamic force that could be mobilized to realize visions for a better future, both in terms of building a stronger, more sovereign nation and of reforming society to be more progressive and egalitarian. In their revolutionary vision of cultural development, the New Yangge promoters redefined local peasant culture, formerly something backward or unenlightened, as the only viable path to the future. As Chang-tai Hung observed, “By putting the common people on center stage, Chinese Communists glorified the power of the masses . . . and argued that . . . the future of China lay not in the coastal cities, but in the interior, in villages.”¹¹⁵ In this new vision of China’s future as expressed through dance, local folk performance was recast from something inherently old that holds China back from modernization to the essential foundation for building China’s new, modern culture.

In contrast to the proponents of New Yangge, Wu Xiaobang, through his practice of New Dance, argued that China’s dance activities, in order to become modern, must depart from local performance forms. Inheriting ideas of the May Fourth era, Wu believed in a strict division between tradition and modernity, in which he associated Chinese culture with the “traditional” and Western culture with the

“modern.” Applying this logic, Wu insisted that xiqu was old and out of date, even though it was, in fact, a site of constant innovation and immense popularity during the period in which he was writing.¹¹⁶ In his reflections on the relationship between Western and Chinese performance practices, Wu reproduced Eurocentric and racist views underlying both May Fourth modernization theory and Western modern dance discourse. Thus, although Wu located the origins of New Dance in the United States and Europe, he believed in the universal validity of this dance form, arguing that it was better suited to the expression of Chinese modernity than any performance form that already existed in China. Like many white Euro-American modern dance critics of the time, Wu also clearly distinguished his New Dance from popular dance genres associated with African American culture, such as jazz and tap dance.¹¹⁷ Whereas Wu described these other genres as morally corrupt and harmful—often citing their perceived excessive sexuality as the reason—the New Dance that he promoted was, in his words, universally “positive” and “healthy.”¹¹⁸ “In any society, dance must go along with the rhythm of contemporary life,” Wu wrote, implying that New Dance alone was capable of fully expressing contemporary experience.¹¹⁹ This view fundamentally clashed with Mao’s notion, applied in New Yangge, that Western culture should not be used as a wholesale replacement for local practices and that modern Chinese culture should thus “have its own form.” Dai arrived in China in 1941, just as the national forms debates were at their peak. Given her family’s cultural preferences for European culture and her professional dance training in Western ballet and modern dance, it seemed likely that she might side with Wu in the ongoing debates. However, she took a different stance.

FROM MARGIN TO CENTER: THE EMERGENCE OF A NATIONAL DANCE MOVEMENT

Between 1941 and 1946, Dai Ailian developed an entirely new choreographic repertoire based on her experiences in China. Exemplified by works such as “The Mute Carries the Cripple” and “Yao Drum,” this repertoire set out a third direction for Chinese concert dance that differed from both the New Yangge and the New Dance movements. Ultimately, her approach had more in common with New Yangge, as both were grounded in the study of local aesthetics and sought to develop a new vision of Chinese modernity based on folk and vernacular forms. However, through its incorporation of a much broader range of ethnic and regional culture, Dai’s repertoire expanded the New Yangge model to find a path that could represent new and broader understanding of Chinese culture. Due to the unusual conditions of wartime and her personal interests as a dance researcher, Dai spent her early years in China in various locations across the southwest, including Guangxi, Guizhou, Chongqing, and what is today Sichuan. Traditionally, these areas were considered geographically and culturally marginal in the Chinese intellectual imagination.

However, Dai's choreographies reimagined them as the foundation for a new Chinese cultural identity. Because Dai's repertoires highlighted the culture of non-Han groups and places imagined to be located at the geographical margins of China, the name initially given to her early Chinese dance repertoire was "Frontier Dance" (*bianjiang wu*). By the end of the 1940s, however, these dances represented a national dance movement that would replace New Dance and combine with New Yangge as the basis for a new form: Chinese dance.

In the early spring of 1941, Dai and her husband, Ye, left Hong Kong for Macao and from there entered the Chinese mainland. Traveling by a combination of boat, public bus, truck, bicycle, and on foot, they eventually made it to Guilin, a city located in Guangxi about halfway between Hong Kong and Chongqing, where they were headed.¹²⁰ Although today Guilin is known largely as a tourist destination with picturesque rock formations, rivers, and rice paddy-filled landscapes, during the war it was a major cultural center due to the influx of artists and intellectuals fleeing the Japan-occupied coastal cities. As Pingchao Zhu has demonstrated, in the early 1940s Guilin was China's biggest hub for experimental theater, where leading dramatists such as Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962) had taken an interest in Gui opera, a local xiqu form performed in northern Guangxi dialect.¹²¹ In Guilin, Dai saw performances of Gui opera staged by drama reformers but performed by local artists, one of which was "The Mute and the Cripple."¹²² Dai sought out the performer of the piece, the famous Gui opera actress Fang Zhaoyuan, and studied with her, laying a foundation for the work Dai would premiere in Chongqing a few years later.

After their stay in Guilin, Dai and Ye went on to Chongqing, at the time the center of the KMT-led Nationalist government and China's wartime capital. They made it to Chongqing around early April 1941, just in time to attend the wedding of Wu Xiaobang and his second wife, Sheng Jie (1917–2017), a former student from the China-France Theater School.¹²³ That June, Dai gave a joint performance in Chongqing with Wu and Sheng, in which she performed her first new choreography since arriving in China: "Nostalgia" (*Si xiang qu*), a solo dance set to the eponymous violin solo by Chinese composer Ma Sicong, which was inspired by a Suiyuan folk tune.¹²⁴ Dai performed the dance in a Chinese peasant-style costume and expressed the longing for home felt by Chinese war refugees driven out of their homes by invading armies.¹²⁵ In addition to "Nostalgia," Dai also performed in a duet with Sheng Jie titled "Joining Forces" (*He li*) choreographed by Wu.¹²⁶ Due to a health complication that required Dai to return to Hong Kong for surgery in the early fall of 1941, she and Ye left Chongqing temporarily and then made a second overland journey from Hong Kong to Chongqing in early 1942.¹²⁷ During this second trip, the couple spent about two months visiting Miao (a.k.a. Hmong) and Yao communities in Guizhou Province, where Dai gained her inspiration to create "Yao Drum."¹²⁸

Between 1942 and 1946, Dai spent most of her time in Chongqing, where she focused on building a cohort of students, conducting dance research, learning to speak and read Chinese, and developing her new repertoire. Dai was hired to

teach dance at three educational institutions during this period: the National Opera School in 1942–43, the Mount Bi National Social Education Academy in 1943–44, and the Yucai School in 1944–46. During the summer of 1944, she also co-taught a six-week dance summer program.¹²⁹ During this time, Dai's spoken and written Chinese improved significantly, and by 1946 she was able to converse in basic everyday Mandarin and read and write some characters.¹³⁰ Working with her students, Dai set up two dance research collectives in Chongqing: the Chinese Dance Art Society (*Zhongguo wudao yishu she*) and the Chinese Folk Music and Dance Research Society Dance Group (*Zhongguo minjian yuewu yanjiu she wuyongzu*).¹³¹ In 1944 Dai created a series of new works, including “The Mute Carries the Cripple” and “Yao Drum.” In June of 1945, she left Chongqing with her husband, Ye, and her student Peng Song (1916–2016), an expert in folk songs who also worked at the Yucai School, to conduct further field research. They initially arrived in Chengdu, where Dai and Ye stayed for a few months with the painter Zhang Daqian, while Peng conducted research in Jiarong and Qiang communities.¹³² Later that summer, Peng returned to Chongqing, and Dai and Ye traveled alone to Kangding, located in what is now central Sichuan Province, on the border of what was historically the Kham region of Tibet. Dai stayed in the home of a Tibetan trader from Batang (*Bà'an*) and studied dance with Tibetans of various backgrounds living in Kangding. Altogether, Dai notated eight Tibetan dances, seven from Batang and one from Garze.¹³³ In December 1945, Dai and Ye returned to Chongqing.¹³⁴

The culmination of these years of work occurred in the spring of 1946, when a major performance in Chongqing launched Dai and her dancing into the national spotlight. The *Frontier Music and Dance Plenary* (*Bianjiang yinyue wudao dahui*), which opened at the Chongqing Youth Hall on March 6, 1946, was a gala-style concert performance featuring fourteen dance, music, and theater works that represented six ethnic groups: Han, Qiang, Tibetan, Uyghur, Yao, and Yi.¹³⁵ Dances varied in scale from solos to group works, with themes ranging from religious to romantic. The ethnically mixed cast included Dai and her students at the China Folk Dance Research Group and Yucai School Music Group, most of whom were Han, as well as Tibetan and Uyghur performers from the Frontier School Tibetan Students Group, the Xinjiang Community Association, and the Frontier School Tibetan Students Music and Dance Group. Two female performers from Tibet also participated, as did members of the Central University Frontier Research Group. Of the fourteen pieces presented, seven were new choreographies Dai had created based on her experiences in China. These included her solo “The Mute Carries the Cripple”; a trio version of “Yao Drum”; a Yi-themed group dance, “Luoluo Love Song” (*Luoluo qingge*); a Buddhism-themed group dance, “Amitābha” (*Mituo fu*); a Tibetan group dance performed with long sleeves, “*Bà'an xianzi*”; a Uyghur-themed romantic duet, “*Kanbà'erhan*”; and a Uyghur-themed group dance, “Dance Song of Youth” (*Qingchun wuqu*). Two works were created by Dai's student Peng Song: a duet, “*Duan Gong Exorcises Ghosts*”



FIGURE 5. Tibetan students performing in Dai Ailian's "Ba'an *xianzi*." Published in *Jin ri huakan*, no. 2 (1946): 3. Photographer unknown. Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949), Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin (CNBKSY), Shanghai Library.

(Duan gong qugui), based on Qiang exorcism rituals, and a Tibetan group dance, "Jiarong Drinking Party" (Jiarong jiuhui), which featured dancers drinking through straws from a large wine vat and ended with a climax of group spins. The remaining five works were contributed by the Tibetan and Uyghur performers: a Tibetan dance, "Spring Outing" (Chun you); a Lhasa-style Tibetan "Tap Dance" (Tita wu); two excerpts of Tibetan opera, "Auspicious Dance" (Jixiang wu) and "Goddess Yi Zhu" (Yi Zhu tiannü); and an improvisational Uyghur dance. A highlight of the evening, according to one critic, was Dai's choreography "Ba'an *xianzi*," based on her fieldwork in Kangding, which was danced by a group of Tibetan students (figure 5).¹³⁶ The work combined six different styles of Tibetan song and dance into a single piece, showing how dances from everyday life could be adapted effectively for the concert stage. The *Plenary* was extremely popular, attracting an audience of over two thousand on its first night. Journalists uniformly described it as "unprecedented," and one asserted that it "has created a new epoch for the future of China's new dance."¹³⁷

There were a number of reasons, political as well as artistic, that the *Plenary* created such a stir in Chongqing and garnered major attention in the national

media. The concept of the frontier has a long history in Chinese thought. However, its emergence as a distinctly spatial concept central to national politics was a product of China's early twentieth-century transformation from a premodern empire into a modern nation-state. As James Leibold explains:

The very concept of *Zhongguo*¹³⁸ presupposes the existence of other, peripheral states or civilizations, and thus it is not surprising that the Chinese term *bianjiang* can be traced back as far as the fourth century BCE, where the *Zuo zhuan* describes it as an intermediary zone between two sovereign states. But only during the Qing period did the term become common in state discourse with its modern connotation of a linear and exclusionary boundary (*bianjie*) represented on Qing and European maps. Unlike the indistinct *wafang* (exterior) of old, the *bianjiang* was in peril under the new global nation-state system unless the state fully exercised its authority over the frontier. In twentieth-century China, the state constructed thousands of miles of roads, telegraph lines, and, most important, railway lines, gradually projecting state power—in the form of its military, political, educational, and economic institutions—into the furthest corners of the nation.¹³⁹

From the 1920s onward, deliberations regarding China's "frontier" and its many non-Han communities were critical components of the political discourses of both China's rival political parties, the CCP and the KMT (a.k.a. Nationalists). Xiaoyuan Liu uses the term "ethnopolitics" to describe these deliberations.¹⁴⁰ During the 1940s, these ethnopolitics surrounding China's frontier dealt typically with territories such as Mongolia, Manchuria, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the southwest—all of which had been part of the Qing Empire (1644–1911) and were claimed by the KMT-led Republic of China (1912–1949) but nevertheless included large communities who spoke and wrote non-Chinese languages and were seen by many as being culturally distinct from China's ethnic majority, now identified as "Han."¹⁴¹

A key concept at the center of China's wartime ethnopolitics was the idea of the *Zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation). Like many terms now fundamentally embedded in contemporary Chinese cultural and political discourse, *Zhonghua minzu* was a modern neologism developed around the turn of the twentieth century through Chinese intellectuals' translingual engagements with emerging discourses about race, ethnicity, and the modern nation-state.¹⁴² The CCP and the KMT each developed their own changing definitions of *Zhonghua minzu*, with the KMT tending to emphasize its unity as a single race or nationality and the CCP tending to recognize the nationality status of non-Han groups. However, during the War of Resistance against Japan of 1937–45, the united front policy between the KMT and the CCP pushed the two parties to find a consensus position that lasted through the war. Xiaoyuan Liu writes:

By the time of World War II, the two parties' presentation of the "Chinese nation" shared these features: The "Chinese nation," or *zhonghua minzu*, occurred in history long before the modern era; the Han was the magnetic nucleus of the

“Chinese nation”; the formation of the “Chinese nation” involved other ethnic groups, named “clans” by the KMT but “nationalities” by the CCP, that had either assimilated into or amalgamated with the Han; the official boundaries of the Republic of China demarcated the territorial domain of the *zhonghua minzu*, which included all the borderlands inhabited by the non-Han groups; the *zhonghua minzu* was the common political identity for all members of the Republic of China; equality, not right to secession, should be the ultimate goal pursued by all ethnic groups in China.¹⁴³

With the end of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1945, the tenuous alliance between the CCP and the KMT came to an end, leading to the outbreak of full-scale civil war by the end of 1946, along with the resumption of competitive ethnopolitical positioning on both sides. Dai’s *Plenary* occurred at the moment of this transition period, when the meaning of *Zhonghua minzu* and the future of China’s “frontiers” were once again coming to the fore as a point of national contestation.

In terms of the dance works she presented on stage and her theorization of Chinese dance as an amalgamation of Han and non-Han performance practices, Dai’s *Plenary* clearly employed dance as a form of wartime ethnopolitics. At this moment of transition, however, it was unclear exactly which, if either, side of the political spectrum the *Plenary* was intended to support. Because it took place in Chongqing and received support from the local KMT-affiliated government and frontier schools, some interpreted the *Plenary* as a demonstration of the Nationalists’ emphasis on national unity.¹⁴⁴ The use of the term “frontier music and dance” in the naming of the *Plenary* also linked it to a longer history of performances employed in the cultural deployment of KMT frontier politics. Events with similar names had been held in the KMT capital in Nanjing in 1936 and in Nationalist-controlled Chengdu and Guiyang in 1945.¹⁴⁵ Nationalist use of this model continued in December of 1946, when a “Frontier Song and Dance Appreciation Performance” was staged in Nanjing in conjunction with meetings of the National Assembly, to sold-out audiences.¹⁴⁶ As Ya-ping Chen has demonstrated, the KMT-led government continued to employ Frontier Dance, renamed *minzu wudao* but still enacted by some of Dai’s former students, as a tool for projecting authority over the Chinese mainland after its move to Taiwan in 1949.¹⁴⁷

The Nationalists were not alone in using dance in frontier politics, however, and the *Plenary* also aligned with parallel activities that were emerging in CCP-occupied territories at the same time. In the spring of 1946, coinciding roughly with the *Plenary*, a group of cultural activists from Yan’an had moved to Zhangjiakou, in what is now northwestern Hebei province, where they prepared to establish the first CCP-sponsored, ethnic minority-focused music and dance ensemble, the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe (Neimenggu wengongtuan), which later became the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Ensemble. The troupe was formally established on April 1, 1946, with a membership comprising artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds and a goal of developing revolutionary performances that

focused on themes and aesthetic forms of non-Han groups in what is now Inner Mongolia.¹⁴⁸ Among those involved in the project was Wu Xiaobang, a new arrival in Yan'an in 1945, who gave dance classes to troupe members and collaborated with local artists to choreograph several Mongol-themed dance works for the troupe's repertoire.¹⁴⁹ By this time, Wu had made the political decision to join forces with the CCP culture activists from Yan'an, despite his artistic protestations over the issue of national form.¹⁵⁰ The establishment of the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe was important for ethnopolitics, because it illustrated CCP efforts to ally with nationality movements. It preceded the establishment of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1947, a symbol of nationality recognition under the CCP.

Dai's personal politics were also complex. Although Dai was based in Chongqing, the seat of the wartime KMT-led Nationalist government, she maintained continued contact with the Communist movement. Given Dai's family background (Eugene Chen was a longtime political opponent of Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek), her prior work with the left-leaning CCC in London, and her close ties to Song Qingling in Hong Kong, it seems likely that her political sympathies were with the CCP underground, not with the Nationalist government. In her oral history, Dai recalls that while living in England, she had read Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*, which inspired her to want to move to the CCP base at Yan'an.¹⁵¹ While living in Chongqing, Dai and Ye met several times with high-ranking CCP leaders Zhou Enlai and Deng Yingchao, who shared with them knowledge about New Yangge and other Yan'an cultural activities. According to Dai's oral history, Dai and Ye reportedly told Zhou and Deng of their desire to move to Yan'an but were advised that their contributions were more effective in Chongqing.¹⁵² Dai remembers that the Yucai School, where Dai worked from the fall of 1944, was located next door to the Chongqing Eighth Route Army Office, an administrative center for the local CCP. Dai recalls that she often accompanied CCP members who worked there to see performances, including, in 1945, a New Yangge drama presented by an ensemble from Yan'an.¹⁵³ Yucai School founder Tao Xingzhi (1891–1946), a key supporter of Dai's Frontier Dance activities, was blacklisted by the Nationalist government and died suddenly in late 1946, possibly because of KMT persecution.¹⁵⁴

From an artistic perspective, the *Plenary* embodied a new direction for China's dance development whose impact would ultimately outlive the wartime era and make it a foundation for the emergence of Chinese dance under the auspices of the socialist state. Although the label "frontier music and dance" linked the *Plenary* to earlier activities that used this term, Dai's realization was different from its earlier uses. Whereas "frontier dance" had previously been regarded primarily as a medium of education and cultural exchange for Han audiences to learn about non-Han culture, Dai reconceived it as an artistic project aimed at developing shared forms of cultural expression to which Han and non-Han forms and people both contributed. Dai's choreography included both Han choreographies (such as "The Mute Carries the Cripple") and non-Han choreographies (such as

“Ba’an *xianzi*”). Moreover, it featured performances by Han and non-Han dancers together on the same stage. For Dai, new choreographies inspired by Uyghur, Yao, or Tibetan sources were not expressions of cultural difference used to facilitate interethnic understanding; rather, like choreographies based on local Han sources such as Gui opera, these were all essential building blocks for what she envisioned as the same new national modern dance form, what she called Chinese dance.

Dai outlined this new vision in a lecture, presented at the start of the *Plenary*, titled “The First Step in Developing Chinese Dance.”¹⁵⁵ In it, Dai called for the creation of a new form of concert dance, what she called in the lecture both “Chinese dance” (*Zhongguo wudao*) and “Chinese modern dance” (*Zhongguo xiandai wu*), on the basis of existing dance practices from all across China. As discussed in the lecture, Dai argued that Chinese dance should have three defining characteristics, corresponding to the three principles of Chinese dance that I outline in the introduction. First, Dai argued that Chinese dance should use movement vocabularies adapted from local sources, what I call kinesthetic nationalism. Second, she argued that Chinese dance should take inspiration from all existing local performance in China, from Han and non-Han sources in every geographic region, what I call ethnic and spatial inclusivity. And third, she argued that Chinese dance should be new and modern while also learning from the past, or what I call dynamic inheritance.

Dai felt that form, not content, was the key feature that should distinguish Chinese dance from other dance styles. To develop this new form, as Dai envisioned it, would thus require researching all of China’s existing performance practices, analyzing them, and using them to inspire new concert choreography. Here, Dai’s idea largely followed the understanding of “national form” outlined in Mao’s speeches and modeled in the New Yangge movement. However, it had one important difference from New Yangge. That is, rather than simply revolutionizing traditional hierarchies based on ideas of class, education, and urban/rural distinction, Dai’s vision also sought to overturn hierarchies based on ideas of ethnicity and geography. New Yangge had treated northern Han culture as the sole foundation for its new national form. Dai envisioned a national dance form that would take inspiration from the existing practices of all China’s ethnic groups and regions. Explaining this process as she envisioned it unfolding, Dai wrote, “If we want to develop Chinese dance, as the first step we must collect dance materials from all nationalities around the country, then broadly synthesize them and add development.”¹⁵⁶ The dances Dai presented in the *Plenary* program clearly illustrated this idea, since they represented many different ethnic groups and geographic regions, placing special emphasis on southern and non-Han forms. The *Plenary* also highlighted Buddhist culture, which, though integrated into Chinese religious life, was nonnative in origin. Buddhism originated in India and developed local forms in China over the first millennium CE. Although considered one of the “three main religions” of the Han, Buddhism also had deep and culturally distinct historical traditions among non-Han groups in China’s border regions, such as Tibetans and

Dai in the southwest and Mongols in the north. It was also a major component of the cosmopolitan culture of China's northwest, where Buddhism interwove historically with the cultural traditions of Islam and religions of Central Asia.

Following Mao's idea of "national forms," Dai regarded Chinese dance as something that did not yet exist but, with effort, could be created. The *Plenary* represented her own initial effort toward its creation, hence the lecture's title, "A First Step. . . ." In the lecture, Dai offered a variety of interpretations of the cultural and historical relations among existing dance materials in China, and she explained that she saw Han and non-Han religious practices, theater, and folk dance all as legitimate sources for the new Chinese dance choreography. She also speculated that the modern dances of some non-Han communities, such as Tibetans, retained the sophisticated dance styles of the Tang dynasty, which Dai and others regarded as a historical peak of Chinese dance culture, and which she argued had also been preserved in some modern Japanese dances. While some Chinese critics found Dai's ideas controversial, the debates and responses they sparked launched important conversations that would continue in the Chinese dance field for years to come.¹⁵⁷

Dai's new Frontier Dance repertoire was not alone in its rethinking of national forms along these lines. Her new choreography, ways of staging non-Han performance, and the ideas she promoted in her lecture resonated with similar activities being carried out by other artists working in parallel in other parts of China. As already mentioned, a group of CCP-affiliated artists from Yan'an were exploring similar approaches with their establishment of the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe in early 1946. However, similar projects had also been launched earlier in Xinjiang and Yunnan, some led by non-Han artists. In Xinjiang, for example, a Frontier Dance movement was being launched with works that were created, taught, and performed by a Uyghur dancer named Qemberxanim, the person who likely inspired Dai's Uyghur dance "Kanba'erhan" featured in the Chongqing *Plenary* (figure 6).¹⁵⁸ Like Dai, Qemberxanim had a diasporic background and learned dance abroad before she launched her career in China in the early 1940s. Born around 1914 to a Muslim Uyghur family in Kashgar, Qemberxanim had moved as a child with her parents, who were migrant laborers, to the Soviet Union, growing up in parts of what are today Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.¹⁵⁹ Around the time she completed primary school, Qemberxanim was recruited to a professional dance school in Tashkent led by the world-famous Armenian Uzbek dancer Tamara Khanum (a.k.a. Tamara Khonim, 1906–1991).¹⁶⁰ After completing her training, Qemberxanim worked as a professional dancer in the Uzbek Song and Dance Theater, and in the late 1930s, she was recruited to study in Moscow, where she performed at the Kremlin. In early 1942, Qemberxanim relocated back to Xinjiang, where she worked in Dihua (Ürümqi) developing a new dance repertoire based in local dance forms, especially Uyghur dance. After winning several regional dance competitions in Xinjiang, Qemberxanim gained national fame in late 1947 and early 1948, when she starred in a "frontier song and dance" tour by the Xinjiang Youth Ensemble that visited major cities across the Chinese mainland



FIGURE 6. Qemberxanim on Xinjiang Youth Ensemble China tour. Published in *Yiwen huabao* 2, no. 5 (1947): 2. Photographers: Lang Jingshan et al. Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949), Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin (CNBKSY), Shanghai Library.

and Taiwan.¹⁶¹ Dai and Qemberxanim would meet, most likely for the first time, when this group visited Shanghai in December of 1947.¹⁶² It is unclear how they would have spoken to one another though, since Qemberxanim's primary languages were Uyghur, Uzbek, and Russian, and her knowledge of Chinese was even more limited than Dai's. As discussed in the next chapter, Qemberxanim would, like Dai, become a leading figure in the development of Chinese dance in the early PRC.

Starting in 1945, another parallel project was also happening in Yunnan, led by Liang Lun (b. 1921), another dancer who would go on to play an important role in early PRC dance. Liang was born and raised in Foshan, Guangdong, making his mother tongue, like Dai's paternal grandfather, Cantonese. Like Qemberxanim, Liang had lived abroad when his parents moved to Vietnam as migrant laborers; however, they had moved back to Foshan when Liang was still a toddler.¹⁶³ In the mid-1930s, a teenage Liang became involved in amateur drama and singing activities, and after the war with Japan broke out in 1937, he joined an anti-Japanese street theater group. In 1942, while studying theater at the Guangzhou Provincial Art Academy in Qujiang, Liang was exposed to dance for the first time through workshops taught by Wu Xiaobang and Sheng Jie. After moving to Guangxi in 1944, Liang began creating his own dance choreography, collaborating with a woman who would later become his wife, Chen Yunyi (b. 1924). In the spring of 1945, when the Japanese armies reached Guangxi, Liang and Chen fled farther west to Kunming. In Kunming, they founded the Chinese Dance Research Association (*Zhonghua wudao yanjiuhui*), through which they taught dance courses and staged original dance works, many of which drew on local folk performance such as Guangdong folk dances and Yunnan flower lantern (*huadeng*) theater.¹⁶⁴ In July of 1945, at the time Dai was conducting field research in Sichuan, Liang traveled to Yi communities in the Mount Gui area southeast of Kunming. Based on this research, Liang began to create choreography on Yi themes, and in May 1946, he helped organize a performance in Kunming known as the Yi Compatriots Music and Dance Performance (*Yibao yinyue wuyonghui*), featuring Yi music and dance performed by Yi artists.¹⁶⁵ Like Dai's *Plenary* in Chongqing one month earlier, the *Yi Compatriots* performance was a major event that attracted the attention of leading intellectuals and artists in Kunming and beyond.¹⁶⁶

Like Dai and Qemberxanim, Liang took his new dances on tour in the late 1940s. In the summer of 1946, Liang and his friends were facing Nationalist persecution in Kunming and fled for Hong Kong, where they became the first Chinese dance group to perform the new "frontier music and dance" outside China.¹⁶⁷ In December 1946, Liang and Chen would join the China Music, Dance, and Drama Society (*Zhongguo gewuju yishe*) and begin an influential two-year tour of Thailand, Singapore, and Malaya (Malaysia), during which they helped promote Frontier Dance and New Yangge among overseas Sinophone communities, while also studying local dance styles and created new works inspired by them.¹⁶⁸ In 1947, while on tour, Liang

published an essay titled “The Problem of Making Dance Chinese,” in which he echoed Dai’s vision for a new national style of Chinese concert dance derived from local performance sources. Like Dai, Liang saw non-Han sources as a crucial foundation, together with Han sources, for the creation of this new form. As discussed in the introduction, Liang also located his and Dai’s innovations in a longer history of modernist dance experiments in China that also included the earlier works of Liang’s teacher, Wu Xiaobang. Within this discussion, Liang clearly identified the Frontier Dance activities of the mid-1940s as the correct path for China’s dance development. He saw New Dance and other styles derived from Western modern dance as part of the past, whereas the future was in the creation of new dance forms in a distinctively “Chinese style” that would take inspiration from local theater, religious ritual, and folk performance of Han and non-Han communities.¹⁶⁹

After their successful performances in Chongqing, Dai and her students took Frontier Dance on the road, first to universities around Chongqing and then to Shanghai, where their art of the margins enthralled a city once considered China’s culture center. In a published oral history, Peng Song recalls how, following the *Plenary*, he and other members of Dai’s group were invited to teach on university campuses in the Chongqing area, launching a Frontier Dance student movement that soon spread across the country.¹⁷⁰ In August of 1946, Dai traveled to Shanghai and gave a solo tour there just before she and Ye left for the United States.¹⁷¹ Dai’s Shanghai program, though it included some ballet and modern dance, was heavily weighted toward works from the Chongqing *Plenary*. Moreover, the program was arranged to show a developmental progression that started with ballet and Western modern dance and ended in Dai’s vision of Chinese dance.¹⁷² In the spring of 1947, while Dai was with her husband in the United States, Peng Song led a group of Dai’s former students from the Yucai School to Shanghai, where they gave their own sold-out shows later that fall.¹⁷³ Dai and Ye returned to China from the United States in late October of 1947, and Dai began teaching at the China Music and Dance Academy (*Zhongguo yuewu xueyuan*), established by Peng and her other students in Shanghai.¹⁷⁴

By the end of 1946, Dai had become China’s most popular dancer (to be upstaged a year later by Qemberxanim), and her name was synonymous with a new path for Chinese concert dance.¹⁷⁵ As seen through the responses of contemporary reviewers, Dai’s Frontier Dance had brought to the Shanghai stage something new, namely, concert choreography that reflected the local heritage of China in an ethnically and regionally diverse manner that was linked closely to folk culture. Critics expressed this idea in a number of ways in their 1946 reviews of Dai’s Shanghai performances. “This performance gave Shanghai people their first lesson in Chinese dance,” one critic wrote.¹⁷⁶ “This is art that comes from the people and touches the root,” described another critic.¹⁷⁷ Others echoed: “This is finally China’s ‘own dance,’”¹⁷⁸ “What Dai presents is our own content and form,”¹⁷⁹ and “[S]he found Chinese nationality art, our own art, and brought it to Shanghai.”¹⁸⁰ Another summed it up: “Frontier Dance

makes us proud. . . . It is ours.”¹⁸¹ Although critics recognized the influence of Western dance on Dai’s choreography, they distinguished her approach from the introduction of Western dance approaches associated with New Dance. “She wasn’t satisfied with introducing foreign dance to China,” one critic wrote.¹⁸² Another elaborated, “[H]er greatest achievement is making Western dance serve China’s introduction of national forms.”¹⁸³ Indicating this difference, none of the critics reviewing Dai’s dances called them New Dance (*xinxing wuyong*). Rather, they came up with new labels that expressed the fact that they saw this style as an entirely new approach, but for which there was yet no standard term. The labels they used included “new Chinese dance” (*xin Zhongguo wudao*),¹⁸⁴ “Chinese national form dance” (*Zhongguo minzu xingshi wudao*),¹⁸⁵ “national shared forms” (*minzu gongtong xingshi*),¹⁸⁶ “national standard art” (*minzu benwei de yishu*),¹⁸⁷ “China standard dance system” (*Zhongguo benwei de wudao tixi*),¹⁸⁸ and “Chinese national dance” (*Zhongguo minzu wuyong*).¹⁸⁹ Soon these diverse labels would converge into the name Dai herself had used: Chinese dance.

CONCLUSION: ASSEMBLING THE NATION

During the War of Resistance, and to a lesser extent the Chinese Civil War, new ways of using dance to explore modern Chinese culture had emerged across China, largely in regional movements that took different directions depending on local conditions and the people involved. In Yan’an and north China, Communist-affiliated artists and intellectuals developed New Yangge, grounded in the adaptation of popular folk performance of rural Han communities in those areas. In Shanghai and other places across the southeast, Wu Xiaobang developed New Dance, premised on introducing and adapting Western dance styles imported to China by way of Japan. In Chongqing and other places across the west and southwest, Dai Ailian, Qemberxanim, Liang Lun, and others developed Frontier Dance, based on the adaptation of regional forms of Han and non-Han performance from remote parts of China. While the circulation of people and print media during the wars generated some communication among these various projects, to a large extent they advanced independently. When the wars ended, and the time came to create unified national dance organizations, it was unclear how the different projects would fit together, or even which would prevail as a guiding direction for dance in the new PRC.

The first time that the many dancers and choreographers involved in these different wartime regional projects assembled in a single place was in the summer of 1949, during a CCP-sponsored event held in Beijing, soon to be renamed Beijing and made the new capital. They met there to attend the All-China Literature and Arts Worker Representative Congress, held July 2–19, 1949, along with hundreds of other delegates. Among the dancers in attendance, Dai was the first to arrive in Beijing. She had moved there from Shanghai in February of 1948, when her

husband, Ye, was offered a professorship at the Beiping National Art School, and Dai also soon took up teaching positions at local universities.¹⁹⁰ Peng Song arrived in February of 1949, when he and his wife, Ye Ning (b. 1913), also formerly a student of Dai's at the Yucai School, entered the city on foot, dancing as part of a yangge troupe parading with the People's Liberation Army.¹⁹¹ Liang Lun arrived next, in late April 1949, by boat from Hong Kong. He had returned to Hong Kong from Southeast Asia just a few months earlier, and he arrived in Beiping early to attend the All-China Youth Federation in May.¹⁹² Wu Xiaobang and Sheng Jie were the last to arrive, reaching Beiping in late June 1949, just a few days before the start of the Congress. They had been teaching at the CCP-affiliated Lu Xun Art School in Shenyang, about four hundred miles northeast of Beiping.¹⁹³ With them came two other dance delegates representing the CCP-affiliated northeast: Chen Jinqing (1921–1991), a founding member of the Yan'an New Yangge movement, and Hu Guogang (1921–1983), also from Yan'an, who headed the oldest professional People's Liberation Army dance ensemble.

The Congress was a decisive event for the future of China's arts and culture fields. As Brian DeMare writes, “[The Congress] laid the cultural foundations for the emerging PRC order.”¹⁹⁴ Party leaders and cultural representatives gave speeches outlining past and future work, and delegates within each field met to make plans for new organizations and projects in their areas. Apart from meetings, the Congress also hosted performances. From June 28 to July 29, a packed festival featured shows by thirty-four ensembles and more than three thousand performers, including spoken drama, new opera, xiqu, music, film, dance, and storytelling.¹⁹⁵ Two of the festival's evening-length events were dedicated to dance, giving many delegates their first view of wartime choreography from across the country.

Frontier Dance, and to a lesser extent New Yangge, dominated the dance performances at the Congress festival. The first of the two, held on July 19, included dances by the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe, the 166th Division Propaganda Team (a primarily Korean ensemble), and the Lu Xun Art School Dance Class.¹⁹⁶ Their program featured a number of works based on Inner Mongolian and Korean themes, such as Wu Xiaobang's “Hope” (Xiwang), a Mongol-themed female duet, and “Hand drum dance” (Shougu wu), which used the *nongak*, a type of drum used in Korean peasant dance. The program also included works celebrating labor, such as “Farmer Dance” (Nongzuo wu) and “Blacksmith Dance” (Duangong wu).¹⁹⁷ The second dance event, given the name *Frontier Folk Dance Introduction Plenary* (*Bianjiang minjian wudao jieshao dahui*), was held on July 26 and was a joint performance featuring works by Dai Ailian and Liang Lun.¹⁹⁸ The show included Dai's “The Mute Carries the Cripple” and “Yao Drum,” along with four other works from the 1946 Chongqing *Plenary*.¹⁹⁹ It also included several items from the Frontier Dance repertoire Liang and Chen had developed in Kunming. These included “Five-Mile Pagoda” (Wu li ting), a small dance drama that used Yunnan *huadeng* folk theater elements; “Dancing the Spring Cow”

(Tiao chun niu), a partner dance that employed rural Han folk dance from Guangdong; and “Axi Moon Dance” (Axi tiao yue), a group dance derived from Liang’s work with Yi performers. The program also included Dai’s “Sale” (Mai), a short dance drama about a couple of war refugees forced by poverty to sell their child, and several additional dances on minority themes.

Through the 1949 summer activities, it became clear that Dai and her vision would likely lead dance activities in the new PRC. Dai’s high position was first indicated in March of 1949, when she was selected as one of twelve individuals to represent China’s entire arts and culture sphere at the Paris-Prague World Peace Congress later that April.²⁰⁰ When the All-China Literature and Arts Worker Representative Congress opened in July, Dai was the only dance delegate serving on the ninety-nine-person Congress Chairs Committee.²⁰¹ She also gave the only Congress-wide speech representing the dance field.²⁰² On July 16, a recording of Dai’s speech was broadcast over the Beijing Xinhua Radio Station, making her Trinidadian-accented Chinese the first voice many radio listeners would associate with the new form of art known as “dance work” (*wudao gongzuo*).²⁰³ That same day, selections were announced for delegates to represent China at the Second World Festival of Youth and Students in Budapest; although the program contained none of Dai’s choreography, it nevertheless aligned with her artistic vision. The program included two dances in the style of New Yangge—“Waist Drum Dance” (Yaogu wu) and “Great Yangge” (Da yangge)—and two dances in the style of Frontier Dance—Wu Xiaobang’s Mongol-themed work “Hope” (Xiwang), performed by two young women of Mongol ethnicity, and Manchu choreographer Jia Zuoguang’s self-performed “Pasture Horse” (Muma wu).²⁰⁴ On July 21, the All-China Dance Workers Association (Quanguo wudao gongzuozhe xiehui) was formally established, marking the creation of China’s first nationwide organization dedicated to dance. The Association’s National Standing Committee included representatives from all of the major wartime dance movements.²⁰⁵ On August 2, it was announced that Dai Ailian had been elected the association’s president, with Wu Xiaobang serving as vice president.²⁰⁶

As the wartime contestation among regional dance movements came to an end, the 1949 Congress suggested that Dai’s Frontier Dance, combined with New Yangge, would be the path forward. Dai’s selection over Wu for the presidency of the All-China Dance Workers Association was the clearest indication of this direction. Traditional hierarchies predicted that Wu would have been selected for this position: he was ten years Dai’s senior, had been promoting dance in China longer than Dai, was a CCP member and male, and had been born, raised, and educated in China with fluent command of the Chinese language. Dai’s selection, however, shows that her vision was the one preferred by the new leadership. Clearly disappointed to be ranked second, Wu complained in his memoir more than thirty years later that the selection committee had been biased.²⁰⁷ Seeing that his approaches did not have a future in the new capital, Wu left for Wuhan, where he promoted his

“natural principle” methods in a new program for training military dance ensembles managed by the People’s Liberation Army.²⁰⁸ Over time, it would be within this genre of Chinese military dance (*junli wudao*) that Wu’s model of New Dance would have its greatest impact.²⁰⁹ Meanwhile, in the capital, Dai and her colleagues focused on merging New Yangge and Frontier Dance and creating choreography to represent the new nation. Their first challenge in this effort would be *Long Live the People’s Victory* (*Renmin shengli wansui*), a national dance pageant slated for September to celebrate the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress and the founding of the PRC.²¹⁰ Dai would both codirect the production and star in it, working with a group of artists drawn largely from the New Yangge movement and Dai’s Chongqing Frontier Dance circle.

Tracing the genealogy of contemporary Chinese dance backward in time, one finds multiple origin points. One possible origin point is Yu Rongling’s and Mei Lanfang’s early Chinese-themed dances performed in the context of court performance and Peking opera. Another is the launching of the New Yangge movement in Yan’an, based on Mao’s principles of national forms and remolding. Still others are Wu’s first solo concert of New Dance in Shanghai, Qemberxanim’s performances of Uyghur dance in Ürümqi, Liang Lun’s stagings of Frontier Dance in Kunming, and Dai’s hosting of the Chongqing Frontier Dance *Plenary*. Among these various origin points, I see Dai Ailian’s as the most compelling, not just because Dai went on to lead the early national dance movement in the new PRC but because it was Dai who first embodied and theorized the path that Chinese dance would eventually follow. Among the many people who helped create the modern genre of Chinese dance, Dai was the first to insist, categorically, that Chinese dance should pursue a new aesthetic form inspired by local performance practices and that this form should draw on local sources from across the country, including northern and southern, secular and religious, elite and popular, rural and urban, Han and non-Han. Having personally experienced the racist hierarchies embedded in ballet and Western modern dance culture, Dai possessed a critical relationship to these forms that artists like Wu Xiaobang did not. As a result, she was capable of envisioning a future for Chinese dance that did not rely on Western forms as its foundation but instead sought to represent itself, using new movement languages and a new aesthetic vision.