

A Revolt from Within

Contextualizing Revolutionary Ballet

One day in the summer of 1966, Shu Qiao, the dancer who played the heroine Zhou Xiuying in *Dagger Society*, was on her way to work. In her memoir, she recalls feeling that something was amiss as she walked along the streets of Shanghai.¹ People in haphazard military uniforms patrolled the sidewalks, and women and shop owners were harassed in public. A sickness in Shu's stomach manifested her impending dread. When she arrived at the ensemble, her fears were confirmed:

I entered the Theater and saw large-character posters everywhere, on the walls, in the hallways, on the doors. In the rehearsal studio there were rows of large character posters strung up on wires like laundry hung in an alleyway. Suddenly, I saw my own name. It had bright red circles around it and a bright red cross through the middle. It reminded me of the 'execution upon sentencing' in ancient times, and a chill went up my spine. After looking down the rows, I counted at least forty or fifty names with red circles and crosses over them.²

The "large character posters" (*dazi bao*) that Shu describes—handwritten signs in large script hung in public places—had been developed in socialist China as a tool for average citizens to participate in political discourse. Although they had been used widely as a medium for personal attacks since at least the late 1950s, their appearance proliferated dramatically in the summer of 1966 with the launch of a new campaign known as the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (Wenhua da geming, hereafter Cultural Revolution). During this campaign, not only did a new swath of participants begin to take part actively in public political discourse, but unprecedentedly large segments of society also became targets of political persecution as a result.³ As a movement that grew out of rifts within the elite ranks of the CCP, the Cultural Revolution is now widely understood as

an internal struggle in which Mao sought to purge existing power holders and regain or maintain his central position in China's political leadership. Launched as a mass campaign grounded in the concept of "continuous revolution," the Cultural Revolution empowered average citizens, particularly agitational youth who became known as Red Guards, to stage revolts and attack their authorities. Students turned against teachers, employees turned against administrators, and groups who had felt marginalized within their respective fields found opportunities to seize power from those who had previously been dominant. Since this campaign was carried out more than a decade and a half into China's construction as a socialist nation, however, it called for a revolution within a system that had itself been constructed on revolutionary ideals. In this sense, the Cultural Revolution was also a counterrevolution—a revolt from within that challenged and in many ways redefined already established practices of Chinese socialist life.

In the field of dance, it was artists like Shu—performers, choreographers, teachers, and administrators who had reached high levels of accomplishment and recognition during the first seventeen years of dance creation in the PRC—who found themselves on the receiving end of what developed into quite violent attacks against influential individuals and groups seen to represent the status quo. Even the most revered early pioneers of the Chinese dance movement, most now in their fifties and sixties, were subjected to the attacks. Qemberxanim, for example, a celebrity dancer and highly respected dance educator who directed the PRC's first state-sponsored professional conservatory for ethnic minority performing artists, was labeled a criminal and put on house arrest shortly after the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. At the time, a group of Qemberxanim's colleagues and students used old photographs from her 1947–48 national tour, during which she had performed for Nationalist leaders such as Chiang Kai-shek, to accuse her of harboring antirevolutionary sentiments. Without due process, they confiscated and destroyed her personal belongings and forced her to carry out janitorial work while she lived in abject poverty in a storage room and was subjected to constant surveillance. Qemberxanim's daughter, who had just given birth to a second child, was thrown in jail on grounds of "colluding with a foreign government," because the daughter's father, Qemberxanim's husband, lived in the Soviet Union. Qemberxanim's attackers posted public cartoons caricaturing Qemberxanim's physical appearance and subjected her to large public denunciation sessions in which they shamed and physically abused her in front of large crowds. These sessions often became so violent that Qemberxanim prepared her own funeral shroud and wore it under her clothes, expecting that she would not return alive.⁴ Liang Lun, a widely acclaimed choreographer who led important early PRC dance institutions in southern China, recalls being subjected to similar abuses. In one account, he describes being paraded through the city in a truck, wearing a large sign around his neck that read "Liang Lun: Capitalist Roader Cultural Spy."⁵

Dai Ailian, the preeminent national leader of China's dance field in the early PRC era, also became a target. Initially, Dai was pushed out of her administrative roles but managed to avoid the first round of violent attacks in 1966. In late 1967, however, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who took on a leadership role in performing arts reforms during the Cultural Revolution, identified Dai by name as someone who should be investigated. Most likely wishing to ingratiate themselves to Jiang and avoid being attacked themselves, Dai's former students and subordinates carried out the instructions, setting a committee to search for "crimes" in Dai's past. Like most targets of the period, Dai was forced to write biographical accounts that could be used as incriminating evidence. Dai's poor written Chinese became additional fodder for her critics, who called her a "foreign/Western devil" (*yang guizi*). The 1940 photograph in which Dai performed "Guerilla March" dressed in the flag of the Republic of China was used out of historical context to question Dai's fidelity to the CCP. At the same time, Dai's connections with Ye Qianyu and Choe Seung-hui were employed to fabricate accounts of suspected espionage. Finally, the team confiscated Dai's home and subjected her, along with Dai's co-administrator Chen Jinqing, to public denunciations in which they were forced to stand bent over for long periods of time and face other physical abuse. Later, Dai was sent to a farm where she carried out manual labor and tended livestock. After Dai returned from the farm, she was still subjected to various abuses. At one point, she recalls being forced to darn ballet shoes for twenty days and nights without being allowed to sleep.⁶ During this time, Wu Xiaobang and other top leaders across the dance field also endured similar treatment.⁷

The impacts of these attacks were not isolated to the lives of a few individuals. Rather, they were part of a systematic restructuring of China's dance field, begun in 1966, that brought major changes to dance work over the next decade. At the heart of these changes was the replacement of Chinese dance with a new dance genre known as "revolutionary modern ballet" (*geming xiandai balei wuju*), which emerged in the years immediately preceding the Cultural Revolution.⁸ The work that introduced this new genre was *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*), a new ballet premiered in early October 1964. It was staged by CEOT's then newly founded Ballet Ensemble, the predecessor to today's National Ballet of China (*Zhongyang balei wutuan*).⁹ The second major work in this style was *White-Haired Girl* (*Baimao nü*), premiered in May 1965 by the Shanghai Dance School (*Shanghai wudao xuexiao*).¹⁰ Both of these new productions were adapted from popular Chinese revolutionary-themed works in other media—*Red Detachment* from a 1961 film and *White-Haired Girl* from a 1945 New Yangge drama and a 1950 film. These two productions, along with two subsequent ballets premiered in 1973—*Ode to Yimeng* (*Yimeng song*) and *Children of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan ernü*)—dominate public discourse on dance as represented in China's national media from 1966 to 1976. Apart from being performed as live productions, these four ballets

were also circulated as films starting in the early and mid-1970s.¹¹ In contrast to the earlier national dance dramas, which were created on performers specializing in Chinese dance, these new works were created on performers specializing in ballet. The initial cast of *Red Detachment of Women*, for example, had gained their performance experience staging ballets such as *Swan Lake*, *Le Corsaire*, *Giselle*, and *La Esmeralda*. Thus, while the new ballets did incorporate some elements of Chinese dance movement into their choreography, such use was limited and did not fundamentally alter the primary movement vocabulary, which was still ballet. When responding to the works at the time they appeared, dance critics categorized them as ballets, not as national dance dramas. This continues to be the way the productions are understood within Chinese-language dance criticism.

The ballets of the Cultural Revolution have already received significant attention in the English-language scholarship, which has examined their aesthetic form and narrative content, as well as their adaptation from earlier film and drama texts and their role within the broader Cultural Revolution performing arts complex, known as the “model works” (*yangban xi*).¹² My goal here is not to offer a new analysis of these issues. Instead, I aim to shed new light on the ballets of the Cultural Revolution by contextualizing them in a different way—through their relationship to the history of PRC dance in the pre-Cultural Revolution era. With the exception of Paul Clark’s book *The Cultural Revolution: A History*, few published writings on the ballets of the Cultural Revolution have considered their position vis-à-vis other genres of concert dance choreography that existed in China at the time the ballets first emerged.¹³ As Clark correctly points out, and as this book further demonstrates, the revolutionary ballets were but one in a long line of creative efforts to imagine and embody Chinese socialist culture and modernity through dance. Thus, to understand the significance of revolutionary ballet, it is essential to place it into a longer historical context of PRC dance history. Central to such an examination is the relationship of ballet to Chinese dance.

In this chapter, I examine the longer trajectory of ballet in China as it relates to other dance forms, culminating in an examination of the emergence of the two new ballets *Red Detachment of Women* and *White-Haired Girl* during the mid-1960s, as part of a larger trend of new dance experimentation occurring at the time. In my discussion of ballet’s development in China from the 1940s through the 1960s, I argue that ballet served as a constant “Other” against which the Chinese dance “Self” was defined and that this allowed for the erection of firm genre boundaries between Chinese dance and ballet, as well as the subjection of ballet to a subordinate position relative to Chinese dance. At the same time, I show that continued state support for ballet as one of several parallel genres to Chinese dance—along with, for example, military dance and Oriental Dance—demonstrated the fundamentally pluralistic outlook of China’s cultural leadership toward dance development during the pre-Cultural Revolution period.

By showing how ballet developed in relation to other dance forms in China before 1966, I challenge the common view that the policies of the Cultural Revolution were a continuation of earlier PRC dance development, in which some argue that ballet had always been the privileged dance form of the PRC due to its association with the Soviet Union. Rather, I suggest that it was the continued subordination of ballet to Chinese dance during the pre-Cultural Revolution era that created a situation in which ballet enthusiasts rose up against Chinese dance practitioners during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Thus, I argue that the predominance of ballet during the Cultural Revolution years represented a reversal of earlier PRC policies that had supported formal pluralism within a broader structure that privileged Chinese dance over other dance forms.

A SUBORDINATED OTHER: BALLET IN CHINA BEFORE THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Decades before the arrival of Soviet teachers, ballet already had a strong presence in several Republican-era Chinese urban centers, where it gained deeply rooted cultural associations and impacted the lives of many who would go on to work later in the PRC dance field. This first wave of ballet activities in China inherited the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian ballet tradition, which had itself been a development of the earlier ballet traditions developed in French and Italian courts since the European Renaissance.¹⁴ Beginning in the 1920s, Russian ballet gained a presence in China via a group known as the White Russians (*baiè*, as opposed to Red Russians), émigrés who fled the Soviet Union in the wake of the Russian Revolution and Civil War of 1917–20 in order to escape the new Bolshevik regime. Chinese cities that received particularly large numbers of these migrants included Shanghai, Tianjin, and Harbin, all of which already had large foreign populations and were located in areas of the country associated with industrialization, urbanization, and histories of imperialism and semicolonial rule. By January of 1933, Russians made up the second largest non-Chinese group in Shanghai after the Japanese, with a population of between fifteen thousand and twenty-five thousand out of a total of just over three million.¹⁵ The majority of these were former merchants, ex-army officials, rich peasants, and university teachers, and many of them were accomplished musicians, artists, writers, and dancers. Local Russian ballet dancers formed their own performance groups that appeared in Shanghai's theaters and nightclubs, giving broader exposure that was complemented by touring performances by international ballet stars.¹⁶

Many people who would go on to play important roles in the PRC dance field gained their start in dance through training from these White Russian ballet teachers living in China during the 1930s and 1940s, and it was during this time that ballet became associated with the cultural complex of colonial modernity and

its related trends of Western-oriented urban bourgeois culture.¹⁷ Zhao Qing, for example, who later played the role of Third Sacred Mother in *Magic Lotus Lantern*, recalls taking expensive ballet classes as a child from a White Russian woman in Shanghai who taught in an upstairs studio next to the Paris Theatre.¹⁸ For Zhao, as for other wealthy urban Chinese at the time, ballet classes were part of a broader class education in European culture that also included learning the piano, participating in spoken drama clubs, and watching British films at the cinema.¹⁹ Wu Xiaobang's wife and artistic collaborator, Sheng Jie, also the child of a wealthy urban Chinese family, had similar exposure to ballet during her youth in Harbin and Shanghai. In the late 1930s, Sheng was an actress in the Western-style spoken drama theater scene in Shanghai, where she met Wu, who had just returned from studying European classical music, ballet, and German modern dance in Tokyo.²⁰ Some of these early students gained significant expertise in ballet and performed with White Russian ballet ensembles. Korean Chinese dancer Zhao Dexian (1913–2002), for example, had performed with a White Russian ballet ensemble in Harbin during the late 1930s and early 1940s, where he played major roles in full-scale ballet productions. Zhao went on to become a founding member of the China Dancers Association in 1949 and a leader of dance institutions in Yanbian, where he promoted both Chinese dance and ballet in one of the PRC's most active ethnic minority dance communities.²¹ Although they focused on other dance styles after 1949, these dancers brought with them significant knowledge of ballet, as well as personal and cultural associations with the form, that would shape the way ballet was interpreted in China in later decades.

Two artists who went on to be important proponents of revolutionary modern ballet in the 1960s gained their early start in the pre-1949 ballet scene led by White Russian teachers in Shanghai. These were Hu Rongrong (1929–2012), who helped found the Shanghai Dance School and led the choreographic team of the 1965 ballet *White-Haired Girl*, and You Huihai (1925–2015), who shaped PRC ballet discourse as a dance critic for the *People's Daily* during the 1950s and early 1960s.²² Hu Rongrong began her performance career as a child film star around 1935. Throughout the latter half of the 1930s, her career was covered extensively in the Chinese popular press, which nicknamed her “the Shirley Temple of the East.”²³ In the early 1940s, Hu began studying vocal and dance performance, and by 1944 journalists reported that she was learning ballet in Shanghai at the school of Russian teacher N. Sokolsky.²⁴ Sokolsky had trained professionally in classical ballet in Saint Petersburg and, after leaving following the Russian Revolution, toured in Western Europe with the famed Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova.²⁵ Sokolsky began staging ballet in Shanghai as early as 1929 and was a leading figure in the scene by the mid-1930s, staging annual seasons with works such as *Coppélia*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and others, performed by dancers from Europe and Russia.²⁶ When Hu began studying with Sokolsky in the 1940s, the latter was running his Shanghai school together with his



FIGURE 19. Hu Rongrong in *Coppélia*. Published in *Huanqiu*, no. 39 (1949): 25. Photographer: Guang Yi. Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949), Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin (CNBKSY), Shanghai Library.

wife, Evgenia Baranova, who had performed in several of the earlier productions.²⁷ By 1946 photos of Hu performing ballet-style dances in pointe shoes were appearing in Shanghai newspapers and magazines, and in 1948 she performed the lead role of Svanhilda in the Sokolsky school production of *Coppélia*, a nineteenth-century comic ballet (figure 19).²⁸ An extant English-language program indicates that this production was accompanied by the Shanghai Municipal Symphonic Orchestra and was performed at the Lyceum Theatre on June 19–20, 1948. The program shows a mixed cast of Chinese and Caucasian dancers, as represented in a group photograph and the list of performer names.²⁹ Along with Hu Rongrong, who is listed

in the program as Hu Yung Yung, there also appears a dancer by the name of Hu Hui-Hai, who was almost certainly You Huihai.³⁰

This earlier history of urban ballet activity led by White Russian immigrants in pre-1949 China receded into the background after the establishment of the PRC, when such history became a symbol of bourgeois culture and of China's subjection to foreign imperialism, both of which were considered anathema to the new culture of socialist China. As the eclectic group of figures who led China's early dance field came together and consolidated a shared vision for the future of dance in the newly established PRC, ballet became a common foil against which they defined and contrasted their new vision for Chinese dance. All of the early leaders of the PRC dance field had prior familiarity with ballet in some form; during the 1920s and 1930s, Choe Seung-hui, Wu Xiaobang, Dai Ailian, and Qemberxanim had studied various styles of ballet in Tokyo, Trinidad, England, Tashkent, and Moscow, and Liang Lun also studied some ballet in Hong Kong in the 1940s. None of these artists, however, saw ballet as the appropriate style for expressing the new life and cultural sensibilities of contemporary China. Dai Ailian had expressed this view vividly in her 1946 lecture at the Chongqing *Frontier Music and Dance Plenary*, when she compared ballet to "a foreign language" that needed to be overcome to create a new form of Chinese dance.³¹ According to Dai's proposal, the very goal of creating Chinese dance was to produce a new "dance language" that could supplant the "foreign language" of ballet. In this way, ballet was encoded as a foreign "Other" against which Chinese dance was constructed as a new Chinese "Self."

Starting with the *Peace Dove* incident of 1950, discussed in chapter 2, debates about ballet among PRC dance critics tended to result in condemnation of Chinese choreographers who used ballet as a medium for new choreographic creation. While critics employed a variety of different arguments to convey this point, the final message was typically that ballet was not an appropriate form in which to express contemporary Chinese ideas through dance, because ballet was regarded as old-fashioned, foreign, bourgeois, and disconnected from Chinese life. Dai's address at the Second National Congress of Literature and Art Workers in September 1953, which served as an expression of official policy following the Rectification Campaign of 1951–52, offers one example of how this relationship was expressed not only by dance critics but also in statements by dance leaders that reflected the state policy. Dai's address repeated Maoist ideals about socialist culture that had emerged during the "national forms" debates of the late 1930s. For example, she started by criticizing China's dancers, including herself, for having held "bourgeois" attitudes and "ignored national traditions" in the past. Then, she outlined a correct future path, which involved pursuing innovation by studying China's own culture.³² The implied target of such criticisms about being "bourgeois" and "ignoring national traditions" was, at least in part, productions like *Peace Dove*, which had used ballet as a movement language for new choreography performed by Chinese ensembles.

This argument followed a discursive model that would be repeated again and again to subordinate ballet in China's dance field throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

This complex status of ballet as a foil to Chinese dance that was both ever-present and yet also constantly suppressed can be seen in the institutional development of the Beijing Dance School (BDS). Because BDS was the only institution that hosted Soviet ballet teachers and staged full-length ballet works by Chinese dancers during the 1950s, it had the strongest ballet influence of any dance institution in the PRC and has thus often been regarded as the primary vehicle for introducing ballet to China during the socialist period. Nevertheless, even as BDS was fulfilling a state mandate to "learn from the Soviet Union," it was also continuously criticized for its perceived "excess" of Soviet ballet influence, a cycle of self-adjustment vis-à-vis ballet's symbolic otherness that continues to the present day.³³ Thus, in 1955, just one year after BDS opened, an article in the *People's Daily* criticized the school for ignoring the "antibourgeois struggle" and accepting "nonproletariat values" such as the desire to "only study ballet."³⁴ In 1956 BDS staged its first complete ballet production, an adaptation of the eighteenth-century French ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*, under the direction of visiting Soviet instructor Viktor Ivanovich Tsaplin. Although most of the graduation program that year consisted of Chinese dance, critics in *Dance News* still felt that the school was "overly emphasizing the study of ballet" and "creating works that . . . smell of ballet."³⁵ The following year, in 1957, the school adopted a new educational mission, known as "dividing the disciplines" (*fen ke*), that emphasized a disciplinary separation between Chinese dance and ballet to allay future criticism.³⁶ This meant that instead of studying all the dance styles offered at the school, which had previously been required for all students, students enrolled in the regular program would now choose one of two tracks: Chinese dance or ballet.³⁷ To make clear the different cultural associations of the two tracks, the first was called the Department of National Dance Drama (Minzu wuju ke) and the second the Department of European Dance Drama (Ouzhou wuju ke). Hereafter, when the school staged ballet productions, only students in the Department of European Dance Drama would participate, thus leaving the remainder of the students—who constituted the majority, as discussed in chapter 2—to focus on other dance forms.³⁸

The intensive development of ballet at BDS that occurred in subsequent years, which culminated in the establishment of the PRC's first ballet ensemble in late 1959, continued in this model of disciplinary separation and thus involved only one portion of the school's students and staff, intentionally isolating ballet activities from other programs at the school. In 1958 the BDS Department of European Dance Drama staged *Swan Lake*, and in 1959 they followed with an adaptation of *Le Corsaire*, both classic works from the nineteenth-century Russian ballet repertoire that were also staged in new versions in the Soviet Union.³⁹ Both productions were performed by BDS students under the direction of visiting Soviet instructor

Petr Gusev. Stage photographs published in *China Pictorial* show alignment with ballet costuming and stage aesthetics, including tights, tutus, and camisoles, which are traditionally not worn in Chinese dance. They also show clearly the use of ballet movement.⁴⁰ While these activities were going on in the ballet program, the Chinese dance program was busy with its own projects. As discussed in the previous chapter, 1958 marked the beginning of a boom in national dance drama creation, in which dance institutions across the country participated. BDS contributed two new national dance dramas to this growing national repertoire: *Rather Die Than Submit* (*Ning si bu qu*), based on the revolutionary New Yangge drama *Liu Hulan*, and *Humans Must Overcome Heaven* (*Ren ding sheng tian*), about building a water conservancy project.⁴¹ Photographs of the productions published in *Dance* (*Wudao*) in 1959–60 show the use of costuming consistent with Chinese dance aesthetics and body postures that suggest Chinese dance movement.⁴² Within this divided framework, the two dance programs at BDS had separate personnel and different artistic goals, both in terms of training and in the development of repertoire. While the European dance drama program focused on teaching ballet and staging established foreign ballets, the national dance drama program focused on teaching Chinese dance and developing new choreography created by Chinese artists and dealing with local themes.

In 1959 this clear division of labor was disrupted by a third Gusev-directed BDS work, *Lady of the Sea* (*Yu meiren*). The work alarmed China's dance critics with its lack of adherence to established genre divisions, leading to another intervention that once again reaffirmed genre boundaries and subordinated ballet to Chinese dance. The story of the production was loosely based on a Chinese folk legend, which was heavily adjusted to suit themes and narrative devices commonly used in ballet choreography.⁴³ Although no film recordings were made of the original production, Chen Ailian (b. 1939), who performed a lead role, recalled that *Lady of the Sea's* 1959 choreography combined elements of both Chinese dance and ballet, in a way that had not been done before. According to Chen, this was possible in part because the cast included many students, such as Chen, who had begun studying at BDS before Chinese dance and ballet were made into separate programs. Thus, they were capable of performing both styles well, something that she argued was not replicated in later cohorts.⁴⁴ As described by co-choreographer Li Chengxiang (b. 1931), *Lady of the Sea's* choreography “took [Chinese] national and folk dance as its foundation, and according to the needs of the content and images, broadly and selectively incorporated ballet, Oriental dance, and acrobatic elements from Chinese ethnic minority dance, then blended it all together” (figure 20).⁴⁵ Fourteen photos from the 1959 production of *Lady of the Sea* stored in the Beijing Dance Academy Archives indeed show juxtapositions of aesthetic elements that appear



FIGURE 20. Chen Ailian and ensemble in *Lady of the Sea*. Published in *Renmin huabao* 11, no. 1 (January 1960): 26. Photographer: Wu Yinbo. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

jarring when viewed alongside similar documentation of other productions of the period. For example, ballet pointe technique is paired with Chinese dance's bent legs and coiling body positions, and xiquesque accessories and hairstyles are combined with revealing costumes and partnered lifts that challenge xiqu sensibilities.⁴⁶

In the voluminous debates that erupted over *Lady of the Sea* at the time, critics came out both for and against its method.⁴⁷ Ultimately, as had happened with *Peace Dove*, the final verdict landed in the opposing camp. Again, the perceived problem was the work's use of ballet as a creative form for communicating with Chinese audiences and expressing themes related to contemporary life in China. As co-choreographer Wang Shiqi reflected in a self-criticism published in *Dance* in 1964, the basic problem with *Lady of the Sea* had been his and the other choreographers' failure to recognize the fundamental differences between Chinese dance and ballet, and, more specifically, ballet's cultural status as a dance practice rooted in European sensibilities and ways of life. Wang wrote:

On the problem of integrating Chinese classical dance and ballet, we only saw their commonalities, not their differences. In this way, we rigidly and mechanically used pointe technique and other ballet movements. We treated this method as a purely technical problem and did not consider the fundamental issue that any artistic expressive medium bears the marks of its nationality and, thus, necessarily involves the question of national form and national style. We didn't see that ballet's pointe shoes and lifts are a way of expressing emotion specific to European ballets or that their emergence is closely connected to the lifestyles, aesthetic views, and artistic tastes of European people. At the same time, we failed to see that our own national dance art has its own unique form, style, and meter. Therefore, we used the simplified method of mechanical borrowing, which brought some negative consequences for the development of the national dance drama project.⁴⁸

According to Wang, it was the failure to recognize the cultural implications of dance form—the fact that different ways of dancing are connected to place-based cultural values and ways of life—that caused them to make mistakes with *Lady of the Sea*. Furthermore, he argued, by using ballet in what should have been a work of Chinese dance, they had harmed the development of national dance drama. This mistake, Wang went on to explain, went against basic principles of China's socialist cultural policy. Citing Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum" in 1942, Wang wrote that they had broken Mao's rule that "taking over legacies [here, borrowing ballet] and using them as examples must never replace our own creative work."⁴⁹ Thus, the debate over *Lady of the Sea* once again reaffirmed the official policy: while one can learn from foreign artistic genres such as ballet, using these forms cannot replace the new creation of national forms, which in this case meant Chinese dance.

In the years immediately following *Lady of the Sea*, ballet gained a greater footprint in China, while at the same time, its acceptable areas of use remained circumscribed to staging and adapting foreign works, rather than blending Chinese

dance and ballet or creating original ballet productions. On December 31, 1959, the Ministry of Culture established the Beijing Dance School Attached Experimental Ballet Ensemble, the PRC's first ballet ensemble, which consisted of recent graduates of BDS and young teachers and students in the school's Department of European Dance Drama.⁵⁰ The ensemble's first production, held in early 1960, was *Giselle*, a classic nineteenth-century Romantic ballet.⁵¹ In March 1960, the Shanghai Dance School was established and became the only other institution in China with a dance program designed specifically to train ballet performers. Modeled after BDS and founded with the help of former BDS teachers, the Shanghai Dance School also, like BDS, established separate programs for Chinese dance and ballet.⁵² In October of 1960, Tianjin People's Song and Dance Theater, which had previously specialized in Chinese dance, staged a ballet production titled *Spanish Daughter* (*Xibanya nüèr*), based on the Soviet ballet *Laurencia* first staged at the Kirov Theater in 1939.⁵³ This marked both the first full-length ballet work performed in the PRC by Chinese dancers outside the Beijing Dance School or its attached ensemble and the first Chinese production of a modern Soviet *drambalet* (a new type of ballet developed in the Soviet Union), as opposed to Soviet remakes of pre-twentieth-century French or Russian classics.⁵⁴ In late 1962 the BDS Attached Experimental Ballet Ensemble followed with its own Soviet *drambalet*, *Fountain of Tears* (*Lei quan*), an adaptation of the Mariinsky production *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, which premiered in 1934 and is considered a defining work of the *drambalet* form.⁵⁵ The BDS ensemble's last full-length ballet before *Red Detachment of Women* would be presented in 1964. Returning again to the nineteenth-century Russian repertoire, they staged *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*Bali shengmuyuan*), an adaptation of *La Esmeralda*.⁵⁶

In 1961 BDS initiated a second curricular revision, which remained in place until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. What was especially significant about this revision was that, for the first time, it made explicitly clear the intended unequal relationship between Chinese dance and ballet from the point of view of dance training. According to the new plan, which was instituted in April 1961 by a joint committee representing BDS, the Shanghai Dance School, and the China Dance Workers Association, students were still to be recruited into separate programs for Chinese dance and ballet, which were to each have separate administrations, staff, and teaching curricula.⁵⁷ However, students in the Chinese dance program would not be required to study any ballet, whereas students in the ballet program would be required to study some Chinese dance. For students in the Chinese dance program, studio course requirements were to include Chinese classical dance (2,216 hours), Chinese national folk dance (676 hours), xiqu tumbling and stage combat (730 hours), and Chinese dance repertoire (1,029 hours).⁵⁸ For students in the ballet program, studio course requirements were to include ballet (2,727 hours), European character dance (601 hours), ballet partnering (312 hours), Chinese classical dance (332 hours), and ballet repertoire (1,261 hours).⁵⁹ This plan subordinated ballet to Chinese dance by suggesting that Chinese dance was to be

incorporated into ballet, but ballet was not to be incorporated into Chinese dance. It also suggested that training in Chinese dance was universally important, while ballet was only necessary for ballet specialists.

Based on the history of how ballet was introduced to and developed in China prior to the mid-1960s, several observations can be made about the status of this dance form in China and its relationship to Chinese dance before the emergence of revolutionary ballet. First, ballet's introduction to China preceded both the development of Chinese dance and the start of the socialist era, meaning that in China, ballet already had deep cultural associations before establishment of the PRC in 1949. According to these earlier cultural associations, ballet was regarded as an elite Western art form that had antirevolutionary connotations because it was introduced to China by White Russians who had been trained in the pre-Soviet system and had fled the revolutionary regime. In semicolonial cities such as Harbin and Shanghai, ballet became a symbol of bourgeois culture and a marker of class status for Westernized, affluent Chinese urbanites. In part due to these earlier associations, after 1949 ballet became the foil against which to construct a new, revolutionary genre of Chinese dance. When local productions occasionally emerged that employed strong ballet aesthetics, such as *Peace Dove* and *Lady of the Sea*, they became lightning rods for critical debate, resulting in poor assessments that further discouraged the use of ballet as a medium for new choreography. The only Chinese institution that promoted ballet as part of its core mission during the 1950s, BDS, was often subject to criticism and as a result made significant efforts to isolate ballet activities and subordinate them to Chinese dance, which was the school's main focus. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, China's ballet practitioners engaged mainly in staging foreign productions, including both Soviet versions of pre-twentieth-century French and Russian classics and adaptations of select Soviet dramballets from the 1930s. By the early 1960s, institutions that staged ballet productions in China were limited to three coastal cities, whereas institutions that staged Chinese dance existed all over the country. As Paul Clark writes, "On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, there were about ten major ballets in the repertoire of the two ballet companies based in Beijing and Shanghai . . . Ballet had no hold anywhere else."⁶⁰ Thus, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, ballet was regarded as a foreign dance form whose ultimate roots were in European culture. While ballet was seen as something from which Chinese dancers should learn and gain experience, the consistent understanding was that ballet should never become a substitute for new creation in Chinese dance.

CONFLICT AND COEXISTENCE: DEBATES ON THE EVE OF THE 1964 RESTRUCTURING

Scholars have often written about revolutionary ballet as if it were a direction in which socialist China's dance field was already moving for many years before the start of the Cultural Revolution. For example, some have argued that the

emergence and expansion of a ballet program at BDS in 1954, the founding of a national ballet ensemble in 1959, and the staging of ballets in other cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin by the early 1960s offer historical evidence that revolutionary ballet was always the intended goal of PRC dance creators.⁶¹ Taking this line of reasoning a step further, some have even gone so far as to claim, anachronistically, that ballet had dominated PRC dance creation from 1949 onward. For example, Beijing-based dance scholar Ou Jian-ping, an early proponent of this view in the Anglophone scholarship, writes, “Ballet, which officially came into China via the so-called ‘Socialist Camp’ headed by the Soviet Union ‘Big Brother’ in the 1950s, was an instant success. Sino-Soviet friendship was just then at its peak, which naturally led to the enthusiastic, absolute, and essentially blind acceptance of this pure crystallization of Western civilization by both the Chinese State leadership and the professional dance community.”⁶² Ou also writes, “Ballet has become the preferred national dance genre and has nearly monopolized theatrical dance in mainland China since 1949.”⁶³

Such claims are quite obviously untrue from a historical perspective. However, they do provoke some important questions about the early history of revolutionary ballet and how it came to emerge as China’s dominant dance form during the Cultural Revolution era. As I have suggested here, ballet was long associated with colonial modernity, urban bourgeois culture, and pre-twentieth-century works, making it an unlikely choice for a political campaign that espoused anticolonial values, proletarian culture, and modernization. Moreover, from the 1940s until the mid-1960s, CCP cultural policy had consistently identified the newly created genre of Chinese dance as the officially sanctioned embodiment of China’s revolutionary culture in the dance field. Thus, if ballet was, in fact, neither a dominant dance form nor a symbol of revolutionary culture in socialist China prior to the mid-1960s, then how can we explain its emergence and sudden rise to prominence after 1966, during what is now often regarded as one of the most radically revolutionary eras of China’s socialist culture?

To answer this question, I argue, requires recognizing controversy and internal divisions, rather than a monolithic authoritarian uniformity, as the historical condition of China’s dance field during the socialist era before the Cultural Revolution. That is, even though CCP policy tended to support Chinese dance as the main national project of socialist cultural development in China’s dance field from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, competing voices and activities also existed that advocated for alternative possibilities. The BDS ballet program persisted and even gradually expanded during the late 1950s and early 1960s not because of a single dominant vision that marched China’s dance development toward the predetermined goal of revolutionary ballet but, instead, because there was no unified vision, and competing agendas persisted in the same space simultaneously. For this reason, in the midst of ongoing controversies surrounding the relevance of ballet to China’s dancers and audiences, as well as a nationwide boom of Chinese

dance creation that coincided by 1960 with the breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations and departure of all Soviet ballet instructors, ballet practitioners nevertheless remained active as a minority group within China's dance field and were able to advance their agenda despite its often running counter to predominant trends. Instead of demonstrating the homogeneity of China's socialist dance practice during the pre-Cultural Revolution period, the history of ballet in China before 1966 suggests the fundamental heterogeneity of dance activity at this time and the lack of consensus among dance practitioners about the future of dance innovation. Ultimately, revolutionary ballet was able to emerge and gain support because of this broader context of multiplicity. As a product of a time in which divergent paths were possible, revolutionary ballet was one among many options.

Examining dancers' writings in socialist China during the 1950s and early 1960s, one can have no doubt that China's dance field included ballet enthusiasts and that some of these enthusiasts dreamed of a time when ballet would play a larger role in China's dance world than it did then. One such enthusiast was You Huihai, the dancer who had likely performed alongside Hu Rongrong in the Sokolsky ballet school production of *Coppélia* in Shanghai in 1948. In addition to studying with Sokolsky, You had previously been a student of Wu Xiaobang in the early 1940s and had participated in Liang Lun's Frontier Dance group in wartime Kunming. Thus, in contrast to Hu Rongrong, who continued to teach ballet in Shanghai in the 1950s but did not receive national attention again until the mid-1960s, You took up Chinese dance after 1949 and soon rose to national prominence by this route. During the early 1950s, You was a member of important Chinese dance ensembles in Shanghai and Beijing (including both CEOT and the precursor to SEOT), and in 1953, he contributed to the adaptation of "Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies," which won an award at the WFYS that year. You's success in Chinese dance gave him a position of power from which he then began to advocate for ballet. Thus, in 1956, when others were criticizing the BDS graduation performance for what they saw as excessive ballet influences, You published an article in the *People's Daily* in which he reviewed the show positively and called for even more ballet in the future. After praising the students' performance of a waltz scene from the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*, a photograph of which was included in the article, You continued, "This couldn't help but make me think: in our theaters, the staging of a complete exquisite ballet dance drama by Chinese performers is already not so far away."⁶⁴ While You was careful to also praise a Chinese dance piece in the show, his enthusiasm for the possibilities of ballet at BDS was clear. You ended the article with what he called "a fantasy for the future," in which he described a snowy evening "in the year 196X," when posters outside the "capital dance drama theater" would advertise the current season of shows. Among the posters he imagined were *White-Haired Girl*, *White Snake*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Nutcracker*.⁶⁵

You would oversee the realization of this goal two years later as a member of the BDS choreography class led by Petr Gusev, who supervised BDS's staging of *Swan*

Lake, followed by *Le Corsaire*. However, by this time You, like many other ballet advocates, was witnessing the exciting developments then happening in national dance drama and was hoping to see China's ballet practitioners also get involved in this wave of new creation. Thus, You was no longer satisfied with simply staging foreign productions; he wanted to see Chinese choreographers create new ballets on Chinese themes. In an article published in *Theatre Gazette* reviewing the state of dance drama in China in early 1959, You began by lavishing praise on the recent boom in national dance drama. He gave special attention to the recently premiered national dance drama *Five Red Clouds*, which he called "an extremely good model for dance dramas dealing with modern themes."⁶⁶ You went on to discuss the status of ballet in China. As with the 1956 BDS production, he praised recent developments but also saw them as reason for new aspirations. After commending the performances of *Swan Lake* and *Le Corsaire*, he wrote, "It is without a doubt that upon this tradition of strictly inheriting the ballet dance drama art [by staging foreign ballets], we will in the near future also try out creation that uses the ballet form to reflect the content of our national life."⁶⁷ Here, what You likely had in mind was *Lady of the Sea*, which he mentions two paragraphs later is in the midst of being created. This work, he optimistically predicts, will "carry out many new experiments" and promote "mutual study and learning" between national dance drama and ballet. As we saw in the previous section, this production was indeed recognized as a new experiment. However, the method it proposed of "mutual study and learning" between national dance drama and ballet remained an ideal of only a small portion of the dance community.

Early 1964 has often been regarded as the starting point for major political shifts and policy changes that would emerge more fully during the Cultural Revolution.⁶⁸ In the dance field, too, early 1964 brought important changes that in some ways served as harbingers for later developments. However, while these changes predicted that ballet would retain and potentially expand its position within China's dance field, they also confirmed the continued importance of other dance styles, chief among them Chinese dance. Early in the year, China's Ministry of Culture implemented two important institutional changes that seemed to suggest a more equal position of ballet to Chinese dance, though still premised on the idea that the two forms should operate as independent, not comingled, art forms. First, on February 27, BDS was divided into two institutions, one called the China Dance School (Zhongguo wudao xuexiao), which would focus on Chinese dance, and the other the Beijing Ballet School (Beijing balei wudao xuexiao), which would focus on ballet.⁶⁹ In practice, the two schools still occupied the same physical address and shared a single teaching building. However, this change indicated a renewed commitment to the artistic independence of Chinese dance and ballet as separate artistic forms with their own training missions. In March a similar change was made to the Central Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CODDT, formerly CEOT), dividing it into the China Opera and Dance Drama Theater and the Central Opera

and Dance Drama Theater.⁷⁰ As with BDS, this division reflected a deepening of what had already been a largely divided system. For example, prior to this change, the CODDT already had separate Chinese- and Western-style ensembles for both opera and music, which had been known as the Number One and Number Two ensembles, respectively. The Number One ensembles had used “national singing style” (*minzu changfa*) and “national orchestra” (*minzu guanxian yuetuan*) and had specialized works by Chinese composers on Chinese themes, whereas the Number Two ensembles had employed “bel canto singing style” (*meisheng changfa*) and a European-style orchestra and had specialized in performed works by foreign composers set in foreign locations.⁷¹ Within the new division, what had previously been the CEOT national dance drama ensemble joined with the Number One groups to form the new “China” ensemble, while what had previously been the BDS Attached Experimental Ballet Ensemble joined with the Number Two groups to form the new “Central” ensemble. In the official CODDT history, published in 2010, this change is described as fulfilling a plan devised originally by Zhou Enlai during the 1950s, according to which divergent artistic paths (in this case, Chinese dance and ballet) could develop simultaneously.⁷²

Dance-related writings published around the time of these changes suggest that, beyond simply supporting the parallel development of different art forms, the new institutional divisions were motivated also by a renewed anxiety about the influence of ballet on Chinese dance, as well as a continued lack of consensus about what constituted “correct” revolutionary dance practice. The February 1964 issue of *Dance*, which also included Wang Shiqi’s self-criticism about *Lady of the Sea*, was published less than three weeks before the division of BDS and offers great insight into both dancers’ concerns and guiding policies during this period. The opening article chronicles the various arguments made during a music and dance symposium recently held in Beijing, in which leaders from the music and dance fields came together with the purpose of “inspecting the status of the implementation of Chairman Mao’s arts thought and the Party’s arts policies in music and dance work.”⁷³ Many of the recorded conversations from this symposium revolved around questions about how to implement the three guiding principles of the era, known as the “three transformations” (*san hua*): “nationalization” (*minzuhua*), “revolutionization” (*geminghua*), and “massification” (*qunzhonghua*). According to the report, one of the most serious problems obstructing the implementation of these principles in the dance field was the purportedly excessive psychological attachment many dance workers felt toward ballet. Recounting one dancer’s testimony, the report wrote, “One comrade said: I initially opposed those foreign dance theories, but then I became suspicious and vacillated. Finally, I surrendered, groveled, and appreciated them to the point that I was prostrating myself in admiration. What was even worse, not only did I myself get encased in this Western frame, but I used it to encase others. When others opposed it, I spoke in its defense.”⁷⁴

Throughout the report, the terms “groveling” (*baidao*) and “foreign/Western dogma” (*yang jiaotiao*) are used pejoratively to condemn a variety of practices related to the uncritical admiration for dance forms classified as *yang*—meaning foreign or Western, here often referring to ballet—that are described as detrimental to China’s socialist dance development. Examples of these practices cited in the report include employing too much ballet movement in one’s choreography, preferring dance works that incorporate balletic elements such as lifts and jumps, being unwilling to learn from the lives and expressions of the common people because of a preference for ballet themes and aesthetics, and using theoretical principles drawn from ballet choreography to limit new experiments in form or content. While learning from foreign experience was encouraged, the proper way to do this, according to the report, was to “take the self as the subject” (*yi wo wei zhu*), meaning not to lose one’s sense of self by copying others.⁷⁵ The fundamental problem with *Lady of the Sea*, the report resolved, was that it did not do this. To further clarify this issue, the report confirms that innovation does not mean incorporating foreign or Western things. Using a play on the Maoist slogan “weeding through the old to bring forth the new” (*tuichen chuxin*), which dance workers were supposed to promote, the report states, “innovation absolutely does not mean mechanically copying ballet; that is called ‘weeding through the old to bring forth the *yang*.’”⁷⁶

Given that the first revolutionary ballet would appear later that year and that ballet movement would soon become the dictated choreographic mode for portraying Chinese revolutionary heroes in dance, it is interesting to note that in early 1964 a predominant view expressed in China’s national dance publications was strong opposition to the use of ballet movement when portraying Chinese revolutionary characters. On this point, the report recounts the following argument made by a symposium participant, which points to the deeper issues involved in attitudes toward ballet at this time: “I don’t agree with using ballet to portray themes related to today’s China. We should first use ballet to express foreign revolutionary themes. If we [use it to] express China’s revolutionary themes, there will be a problem with national feeling. For example, when performing [the revolutionary martyr] Liu Hulan, if [the dancer] goes up on pointe and sticks out her chest, audiences will not be convinced. Using ballet to express Chinese content may happen in the future, but right now I’m afraid it won’t do.”⁷⁷

Here, the phrase “goes up on pointe and sticks out her chest” provides vivid insight into how dancers at the time imagined ballet bodies and why many saw them as fundamentally incompatible with the presentation of revolutionary Chinese characters. Liu Hulan, a poor peasant girl from rural Shanxi Province who died supporting the revolutionary cause, was originally made famous through a New Yangge drama during the 1940s, in which she was portrayed using movement repertoires derived largely from northern Han folk dances.⁷⁸ These movement repertoires, which featured an earthbound, flat-footed stance, swiveling hip and head

actions, and a relaxed upper body, were seen as kinetically incompatible with the elongated leg lines, elevated center of gravity, and erect, upward-oriented torso carriage demanded for ballet movement. Indeed, from the perspective of human physiology and movement principles, the two techniques are almost impossible to combine while still maintaining the stylistic integrity of either one. Thus, such a comment pointed to the practical problem that ballet posed for dancers and choreographers. That is, when incorporating ballet movement, one was often forced to abandon features of bodily comportment that were not only important from an aesthetic perspective but also carried significant local meanings, such as reflecting age, class, gender, ethnic, and regional identities. For audiences versed in these local meanings, then, a dancer who is performing on pointe and sticking out her chest does not move like the type of person who should be a revolutionary hero in a Chinese socialist story.

This concern about how the incorporation of ballet movement might dilute or distort portrayals of revolutionary Chinese characters was also a concern for dancers and teachers, who were engaged in the processes of performing such roles and teaching students how to move correctly onstage. One article, written by Chen Jianmin, a Shanghai-based dancer then performing the role of Liu Lichuan in *Dagger Society*, explained how he and other dancers in the production took steps to “correctively remove foreign/Western flavor” (*gaidiao yangwei*) from their performances.⁷⁹ According to Chen’s account, they had worked with leading xiqu practitioners Li Shaochun and Bai Yunsheng (both of whom had participated in the development of Chinese classical dance movement repertoires based on xiqu during the mid-1950s) to clean up their dancing by removing Western elements. First, Chen reported, they removed “ballet turns and leaps,” replacing them with xiqu-based alternatives. Next, they made changes to their postural habits. He writes, “The teachers discovered that some of us performers had the habit of sticking out our chests, facing our heads up, and looking down, and they pointed out that this was a Western-flavored expression that was often used by performers in ballets. Chinese xiqu performers have to bring their chests in, straighten their necks, and look horizontally.”⁸⁰ Through this process of correction, Chen and the other dancers became aware of their own habits and were able to bring their performances more in line with the images expected for the types of characters they were portraying.

Some worried that the root cause of the problems Chen described stemmed from the stubborn persistence of ballet habits among some Chinese classical dance instructors at BDS. A systematic criticism of such problems appeared in another essay, written by Li Zhengyi (b. 1929), a BDS faculty member who served as longtime head of the BDS Chinese classical dance program and also coauthored the nationally influential Chinese classical dance technique manual published in 1960. In her essay, Li outlined a list of common errors by Chinese

classical dance instructors at BDS that arose from introducing ballet elements into Chinese classical dance movement. Describing these problems idiomatically, she categorized them as either “using the Western to change the Chinese” (*yi Xi hua Zhong*) or “using the Western to replace the Chinese” (*yi Xi dai Zhong*), both of which she considered highly problematic.⁸¹ An example of the former was adding turnout—a basic feature of ballet—to Chinese dance movements that did not call for it, while an example of the latter included replacing Chinese classical dance poses, such as *tanhai* (literally, “observing the sea”), with superficially similar ballet positions, such as the arabesque. Avoiding such mistakes, Li argued, was essential to maintain the stylistic integrity of Chinese classical dance technique, which in turn had serious implications for the relationship between art and politics. “The reason for these mistakes, in the final analysis, is being distanced from politics, distanced from the masses, and distanced from tradition,” she writes. In other words, introducing ballet elements into Chinese classical dance training, in Li’s estimation, equated with not following the principle of “three transformations,” of revolutionization, massification, and nationalization.

The Ministry of Culture’s decision in February and March of 1964 to restructure BDS and CODDT so that each would henceforth be divided into separate institutions dedicated to Chinese dance and ballet allowed the ballet enthusiasts within China’s dance sphere to continue their work in spite of ongoing disapproval and skepticism from the majority of leading figures in the dance field at the time. Thus, as suggested in the CODDT history, it allowed for conflicting agendas to coexist and for divergent artistic visions to be pursued simultaneously. Rather than attributing this decision solely to Zhou Enlai’s long-standing artistic vision, however, we can also suggest additional potential motivations for this decision that reflect particular concerns of this historical moment. First, one likely motivation for this decision was a desire to reap the benefits of years of state investment in training specialized ballet dancers that had occurred with the support of Soviet teachers during the latter half of the 1950s and had continued through the early 1960s, led by local dancers with ballet training. By 1964 both BDS and the Shanghai Dance School had cultivated a cohort of students who, after years of training, were now finally fluent in the movement language of ballet, as demonstrated by their ability to stage numerous full-length foreign works, from revised pre-twentieth-century classics to Soviet-era drambalets. Because of the division of disciplines in 1957, these students would not have been able to easily adapt to Chinese dance choreography, so rather than letting their training go to waste, it made sense to give them an opportunity to at least continue the experimental attempts. Moreover, by creating separate institutions, these dancers could continue their work without having what many felt was a distorting effect on the continued development of Chinese dance.

Second, another likely motivation for this decision was the recognition of ballet's usefulness in Cold War diplomacy and, following from this, a desire to assert China's aspiration to superpower status and its self-representational agency vis-à-vis other nations such as the Soviet Union and Japan through ballet. During the early Cold War, ballet emerged as an important artistic medium for international competitions of influence and legitimacy, especially between the United States and the Soviet Union, spurred in part by the defection of Soviet ballet dancers.⁸² Initially, PRC cultural planners had focused on Chinese dance as the medium of choice for diplomatic arts missions, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, beginning in the mid-1950s, they also began a strategic effort to have Chinese dancers perform music and dance from Asia, Africa, and Latin America as part of diplomatic activities with nonaligned countries in the Third World.⁸³ China's Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, a national-level ensemble established in 1962, was created expressly for this purpose. During the same period, China also received visits by ballet ensembles from countries in Asia and Latin America, suggesting that ballet might be a viable tool of cultural diplomacy for China as well. Especially important in this regard were a tour by Japan's Matsuyama Ballet in 1958 and another by the National Ballet of Cuba in 1961.⁸⁴ Chinese ballet dancers made their own first international tour in 1962, visiting Burma, suggesting the beginning of a Chinese strategy to use ballet in diplomatic exchange.⁸⁵ China's ambition to rival the United States and the Soviet Union in international influence, which was given force with China's first successful explosion of an atomic bomb in October 1964, provides important historical context for the choice to continue promoting ballet in the era following the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s.⁸⁶ After 1962 Chinese dance delegations no longer attended the World Festivals of Youth and Students, which had previously offered an important venue for international influence and intercultural exchange through the medium of national dance. Thus, China's cultural leaders may have seen ballet as an important medium through which China could assert its cultural legitimacy in this new era. The fact that dance ensembles in the Soviet Union and Japan had both already performed ballet works on Chinese revolutionary themes—the Soviet Union in 1927 with *Red Poppy* and Japan in 1955 with *White-Haired Girl*—presented a challenge for Chinese choreographers to assert their cultural agency in the international ballet sphere by representing themselves in this medium.⁸⁷

Another important factor to consider in the Ministry of Culture's decision to continue to support the development of ballet, alongside Chinese dance, in its 1964 institutional restructuring of BDS and CODDT was its ongoing commitment to the idea, expressed in Mao's early writings on revolutionary art in the Yan'an era, that some elite Western cultural forms associated with the European Enlightenment had inherent value to China's socialist cultural mission. Like the Western symphonic orchestra, bel canto singing style, and oil painting, ballet was regarded

by some members of China's cultural leadership as a universally significant artistic form whose cultural value transcended particular ethnic, racial, or class associations.⁸⁸ Building on an earlier tradition of Chinese cosmopolitanism born out of colonial modernity that informed some aspects of socialist internationalism, this view allowed many to see ballet as a symbol of cultural modernity that could serve revolutionary goals.⁸⁹ Prior to 1966, this cosmopolitan attitude toward ballet coexisted with the more radically anticolonial cultural agendas embodied in Chinese dance. Although these agendas frequently came into conflict, as in the debates discussed above, they were also considered by many to be mutually compatible, part of an open-minded cultural vision in which different artistic styles could coexist within a pluralistic socialist arts field. At times, as in the case of Dai Ailian, these different agendas were even united in the work of a single person. Thus, while Dai was a leading advocate for the development of Chinese dance, she also contributed to the ballet effort. Through her roles as president of the China Dancers Association in 1949–54, director of the Central Song and Dance Ensemble in 1952–55, principal of BDS in 1954–64, principal of the Beijing Ballet School in 1964–66, and artistic director of the ballet ensembles at BDS and CODDT in 1963–66, Dai oversaw important developments in both Chinese dance and ballet.⁹⁰ By treating these fields as complementary, she modeled the diversity of artistic commitments reflected in China's dance field at the time.⁹¹

A NEW ROUND OF INNOVATION: CHOREOGRAPHIC CREATION IN 1964–1965

From the perspective of choreographic creation, the early 1964 transition did bring important changes to the dance field, particularly in thematic content. As with the banning of historical costume dramas and ghost stories in film and theater, in dance there was a clear shift away from dances based on legends and mythology, as well as works with romantic themes that did not clearly relate to revolution and modern life.⁹² Thus, for example, SEOT's successful 1962 production *Hou Yi and Chang'e* (*Houyi yu Chang'e*), a mythology-themed xiqu-style national dance drama that starred *Dagger Society's* Shu Qiao in the role of Chang'e, was by late 1963 labeled a "poisonous weed"; it could no longer be performed, and some members of the creative team, including Shu Qiao, were criticized.⁹³ Another highly successful work newly labeled a negative example at this time was BDS's Chinese classical dance solo "Spring, River, and Flowers on a Moonlit Night," which had won an award at the 1962 WFYS competition and was included in the popular 1959 Chinese dance film *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* (video 10).⁹⁴ This dance, performed by Chen Ailian from *Lady of the Sea*, was inspired by a Tang dynasty poem and employed the Chinese classical dance movement style developed in the 1950s BDS curriculum and works like *Magic Lotus Lantern*, emphasizing soft, subtle movements, curving



VIDEO 10. Chen Ailian in “Spring, River, and Flowers on a Moonlit Night,” from *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun*. Beijing Film Studio, 1959.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.10>



lines, and a xiqu-style use of breath and eyes to perform sentiment.⁹⁵ Clothed in a pastel gown and glittering hair accessories while dancing with two large fans edged in white feathers, Chen performed an otherworldly and romantic feminine image surrounded by flowers and moonlight, similar to the portrayals of female immortals Third Sacred Mother in *Magic Lotus Lantern* and Chang'e in *Hou Yi and Chang'e*. Citing “Spring River and Flowers on a Moonlit Night” by name, the February 1964 symposium report concluded that, though a good example of national form, it did not have sufficient class consciousness and socialist themes to be embraced in the new era.⁹⁶ To suit the new policies, in other words, original dance choreography now needed not only to pursue formal innovation, especially through new national forms, but also to deal with characters and themes that had a clear and explicit connection to contemporary life and revolution.

The years 1964–65 witnessed an outpouring of diverse choreography that was designed to meet this new challenge. These works took as their models successful Great Leap Forward-era national dance dramas such as *Five Red Clouds* and *Dagger Society*, which continued to be endorsed as positive examples of socialist dance creation. However, they also built on these earlier works through significant innovations. The first major national event to feature results of these new experiments was the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Third All-Military Arts Festival (Di san jie quanjun wenyi huiyan), which took place in Beijing in the spring of 1964 and featured more than 380 new works of music, dance, folk art, and acrobatics presented by eighteen PLA-affiliated performance ensembles from across



VIDEO 11. Excerpt of “Fires of Fury Are Burning,” from *Sun Rises in the East*. August First Film Studio, 1964.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.11>



the country.⁹⁷ Later that year, the August First Film Studio created two color films documenting twenty-two works from this festival, titled *Sun Rises in the East* (*Xuri dongsheng*) and *East Wind Forever* (*Dongfeng wanli*).⁹⁸ Of the works documented in these films, three offer especially striking examples of the new ideas being explored in choreography at this time. One of these was “Laundry Song” (*Xi yi ge*) by the Tibet Military Area Political Department Cultural Work Troupe (*Xizang junqu zhengzhi bu wengongtuan*), which melded song and dialogue together with military dance and Tibet-style Chinese national folk dance to produce a humorous dance on the theme of soldier-civilian and Han-Tibetan relations in Tibet following the 1959 uprisings.⁹⁹ Another of these was “Fires of Fury Are Burning” (*Nuhuo zai ranshao*) by the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Ensemble, a small-scale dance drama about racial discrimination in the United States that melded Chinese military dance with Afro-diasporic movement and racial impersonation, offering a message in support of African-American civil rights.¹⁰⁰ Among the many striking images in this dance are an altercation in which a white police officer, who is exposed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan, brutalizes a black boy, which is followed by a battle in which a multiracial group of protestors battles the KKK set against a backdrop of the US Capitol and a giant cross (video 11). Possibly inspired by the Soviet ballet *The Path of Thunder*, which was performed in China in 1959, this dance also built on a longer tradition of using racial impersonation in Chinese theater and dance to address anticolonial and antiracist themes.¹⁰¹ “Fires



VIDEO 12. “Female Civilian Soldiers,” from *East Wind Forever*. August First Film Studio, 1964.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.12>



of *Fury Are Burning*” represented a new development for PRC choreography in its treatment of the then contemporary US civil rights movement and its creation of a new movement vocabulary blending Chinese military dance with Afro-diasporic movement elements.

A third work that demonstrated considerable innovation at the 1964 PLA festival was “Female Civilian Soldiers” (Nü minbing) by the Shenyang Army Cultural Work Troupe (Shenyang budui wengongtuan) (video 12).¹⁰² Like “Laundry Song” and *Five Red Clouds* before it, “Female Civilian Soldiers” followed a long trajectory of PRC choreography that incorporated choral singing, dating back to *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan* in 1950. The dance features twelve women with short braided pigtailed dressed in identical light blue peasant-style pants and jackets with bayoneted rifles over their shoulders and ammunition packs strapped to their waists. The dance is reminiscent of the group scene “Bow Dance” in *Dagger Society* in that it employs a Chinese classical dance movement vocabulary adapted almost entirely from xiqu and martial arts movement, which it arranges in a new way through group sequences in geometrical stage formations using strict unison choreography. Additionally, as in “Bow Dance,” the tempo is calm overall and the movements deliberate, conveying a sense of discipline and focus through the use of slow lowering and rising actions, miming the balancing and aiming of weapons, and controlled stances on one leg. Also,

like “Bow Dance,” the score uses a tune played by a Chinese-style orchestra. Two aspects that differentiate this dance from dances in *Dagger Society*, however, are its use of modern weapons—in this case bayoneted rifles, rather than bows—and the use of simpler and more contemporary-looking costumes that appear more like everyday clothing. At a choreographic level, the dance also departs from earlier works such as “Bow Dance” by depicting women performing flips and other more acrobatic elements from xiqu tumbling sequences that previously were performed more often by male dancers. Finally, by performing stabbing and blocking actions and running and leaping across the stage in groups, the dancers imply readiness for group battle, but without the actual staging of combat scenes against enemy forces that occur in both *Dagger Society* and *Five Red Clouds*. In its images of women soldiers performing in unison with rifles, this dance clearly foreshadows similar dances in the ballet *Red Detachment of Women* that would premiere just a few months later. However, one obvious difference between these works is that while “Female Civilian Soldiers” is composed using Chinese dance movement vocabulary, such scenes in *Red Detachment of Women* are composed almost entirely in ballet movement.

In the fall of 1964, three important works of new choreography premiered in Beijing that demonstrated the new direction of choreography as performed by China’s national-level dance ensembles. Like many past dance productions that appeared in the fall season, these works also doubled as celebrations for the October 1 anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The first two of these new works, which premiered in September, were both large-scale dance dramas created by the newly divided dance ensembles of CODDT. The dance ensemble of the China Opera and Dance Drama Theater, which specialized in Chinese dance, presented the national dance drama *Eight Women Ode (Ba nü song)*, and the dance ensemble of the Central Opera and Dance Drama Theater, which specialized in ballet, presented *Red Detachment of Women*. In terms of their subject matter, the two works were similar in that both told stories of women participating in modern Chinese wars. *Eight Women Ode* recounted the story of eight female soldiers who fought in the Northeastern Anti-Japanese United Army during the War of Resistance against Japan and died in 1938 when they threw themselves into the Mudan River to avoid surrendering after they ran out of ammunition. By comparison, *Red Detachment of Women*, which was set on Hainan Island during conflicts between the CCP and the KMT (Nationalists) between 1927 and 1937, portrayed the story of a young woman who, after being abused by a wicked landlord, joins a women’s detachment of the Red Army and becomes a revolutionary soldier. When these works first premiered, media reports treated them as a pair and gave them equal attention. For example, *China Pictorial* ran a single-page announcement that contained one identically sized black-and-white photo and one similar-length paragraph of descriptive text for each work.¹⁹³ Similarly, *Dance* published back-to-back articles of roughly the

same length.¹⁰⁴ In both cases, the works were praised as models of dance creation embodying the “three transformations.”

Since *Eight Women Ode* was never documented on film and *Red Detachment of Women* was only filmed seven years later in a revised version, it is difficult to know exactly what the choreography in the original 1964 versions looked like. Zhao Qing, who performed the role of Hu Xiuzhi in the original version of *Eight Women Ode*, recalled its movement vocabulary being grounded mainly in xiqu-style Chinese classical dance.¹⁰⁵ A contemporary review confirmed this, describing *Eight Women Ode* as technically similar to xiqu-style national dance dramas the ensemble had performed previously, such as *Magic Lotus Lantern* (premiered by the ensemble in 1957), *Dagger Society* (imported from SEOT in 1960), and *Lei Feng Pagoda* (premiered by the ensemble in 1960).¹⁰⁶ Another critic noted that *Eight Women Ode* also made use of folk dance material from northeast China, where the story is set, and made important innovations within the Chinese dance vocabularies to suit the work’s relatively contemporary setting.¹⁰⁷ Extant performance photographs in the CODDT archive show what appear to be a yangge-style handkerchief dance and a round fan and streamer dance likely also derived from northeastern-style yangge.¹⁰⁸ The photograph published in *China Pictorial* in 1964 shows women in military uniforms holding their hands in fists and striking martial poses that combine Peking opera postures with Chinese military dance.¹⁰⁹ By contrast, all contemporary evidence suggests that the 1964 version of *Red Detachment of Women*, like its 1971 film production, was choreographed primarily using ballet movement. The photograph published in *China Pictorial* in 1964 shows a scene that also appears in the film, in which women dancers balance on pointe in arabesque positions while aiming their rifles.¹¹⁰ Likewise, contemporary critics described the production as a ballet that incorporated some Chinese dance elements, which is also an accurate description of the choreography in the 1971 film.¹¹¹ Bai Shuxiang (b. 1939), who performed the lead role of Wu Qionghua in the 1964 production of *Red Detachment of Women*, was China’s prima ballerina at the time, having also performed the lead roles in the Chinese productions of *Swan Lake*, *Le Corsaire*, *Giselle*, and *La Esmeralda*. Thus, for both *Eight Women Ode* and *Red Detachment of Women*, the casts were mature dancers with significant achievements in their respective primary movement forms, Chinese classical dance in the case of *Eight Women Ode* and ballet in the case of *Red Detachment of Women*. Both works had innovated by using these respective forms to present stories set in twentieth-century China, something that in the case of Chinese classical dance had been done previously, though not in the same way, by Chinese regional ensembles, and in the case of ballet had been done previously by companies from the Soviet Union and Japan (figure 21).

The last of the three major dance productions premiered in Beijing in the fall of 1964 was *East Is Red* (*Dongfang hong*), created by a team of artists assembled from sixty-seven different performance ensembles, schools, and other organizations.¹¹²



FIGURE 21. *Red Detachment of Women*. Published in *Renmin huabao* 16, no. 5 (1965): 22. Photographer: Li Jin. Image provided by China Foto Bank.

Rather than being a dance drama, *East Is Red* was a “large-scale song and dance historical epic” (*daxing yinyue wudao shishi*), meaning that it featured both dance and vocal and instrumental musical performances and that rather than telling a continuous narrative with a set group of characters, it focused on a broader theme, in this case the history of modern China.¹¹³ Although *East Is Red* was not a dance drama, it incorporated a significant amount of dance elements, and many leading choreographers and dancers participated in its original creative team and cast.¹¹⁴ Thus, it was considered an important event for the dance field, receiving considerable attention from dance critics and extensive coverage in publications such as *Dance*.¹¹⁵ With a cast of over three thousand, *East Is Red* premiered with grand ceremony on October 1 in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, for an audience of approximately ten thousand that included top state leaders and foreign dignitaries.¹¹⁶ A film based on the work, released in 1965, documented the original production almost in its entirety, offering a useful record of its choreography.¹¹⁷

The choreography documented in the 1965 film shows that *East Is Red* used a large amount of Chinese dance movement, with the other most commonly used dance style being military dance. Ballet was not a significant part of this production, except in the form of ballet elements, such as individual turns and leaps, that had already long been incorporated into works of Chinese dance and military dance. *East Is Red's* opening dance, “Sunflowers Face the Sun” (*Kuihua xiang taiyang*), which was the most commonly reproduced dance in photographs at



VIDEO 13. Excerpt of “Sunflowers Face the Sun,” from *East Is Red*. Beijing Film Studio, August First Film Studio, and Central News Documentary Film Studio, 1965.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.13>



the time, featured choreography grounded in existing Chinese classical and folk vocabulary (video 13). For example, it features *yuanchang bu* (circling small heel-toe steps), *ping zhuan* (flat turns with arms out to the sides), *woyu* (the spiraling seated position), kneeling backbends, and oppositional hand, head, and hip swaying walks. The dancers also manipulate pairs of large fans, using standard movements used in earlier Chinese dance choreography of Han-style folk dance, Korean-style folk dance, and Chinese classical dance. A later scene, portraying a mother forced out of extreme poverty to sell her daughter, similarly employs standard Chinese dance movements derived from *xiqu*, such as *tabu* (the T-step position), modified *fanshen* (diagonal upper body rotation), and *guizi bu* (kneeling walks). Throughout *East Is Red*, fight choreography typically features acrobatic tumbling elements adapted from *xiqu*, sometimes combined with postures borrowed from martial arts and military dance; celebratory scenes typically employ Han and minority folk dances. The most technically elaborate solo dances in the entire production appear in the minority dance segment in scene 6, performed by China’s top ethnic minority dance artists of the time. For example, well-known soloists who appeared in this scene in both the 1964 stage version and the 1965 film version included Mongol dancer Modegema, Uyghur dancer Aytilla Qasim, Dai dancer Dao Meilan, Korean dancer Cui Meishan, and Miao dancer Jin Ou.¹¹⁸ Tibetan dancer Oumijiacan performed in the film version, in addition to serving as a member of the original choreography team.¹¹⁹ While the choreography in *East Is Red* mainly employed existing dance styles developed in China during the socialist era, it innovated on these styles by expanding them to a much larger scale than had ever been performed in China previously.

The year 1965 brought further experimentation and new innovations in both the form and content of dance choreography, with a special emphasis on dance

productions dealing with international themes. After the success of their first project, the *East Is Red* creation team went on in April 1965 to premiere *Fires of Fury in the Coconut Grove* (*Yelin nuhuo*), a large-scale song and dance production about the Vietnam War.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, many regional song and dance ensembles also premiered their own large-scale music and dance epics about the Vietnam War and anti-imperialist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Prominent examples of these that appeared in 1965 are the Hunan Provincial Folk Song and Dance Ensemble's *Ode to Wind and Thunder* (*Feng lei song*), the Liaoning Opera Theater's *We Walk on the Great Road* (*Women zou zai dalu shang*), and Guangxi Folk Song and Dance Ensemble's *Remain in Combat Readiness* (*Yanzhenyidai*).¹²¹ In June 1965 the dance drama ensemble of the China Opera and Dance Drama Theater, working with the *East Is Red* choreography group, also premiered its first original full-length dance drama on an international theme. Titled *Congo River Is Roaring* (*Gangguohe zai nuhou*, a.k.a. *The Raging Congo River*), it commemorated the Congolese independence movement and the life of late Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba.¹²² Furthering the experiment begun in the 1964 US civil rights-themed work "Fires of Fury Are Burning," the team attempted to employ Afro-diasporic movement vocabularies, here with a focus on West African dance, as the primary movement language in the production. To develop this movement, members of the cast studied with members of China's Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, who had previously studied in several African countries.¹²³ Following what was at the time standard practice for Chinese dance works featuring black characters, the dancers in *Congo River Is Roaring* performed with dark body and facial make-up, as well as head wraps and costumes meant to approximate various styles of Congolese urban and tribal dress.¹²⁴ However, the goal of this racial impersonation was to celebrate anticolonial themes and the Congolese struggle for national independence.

Another trend that emerged in 1965 was the appearance of new Chinese music and dance productions focused on the revolutionary history of ethnic minority communities within China. In April the Central Academy of Nationalities Art Department, working with the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble, premiered a new Chinese dance drama, *Great Changes in Liang Mountain* (*Liangshan jubian*), which portrayed democratic revolution and socialist construction in an Yi community in Sichuan.¹²⁵ Later that year, the Tibet Song and Dance Ensemble, working with other Lhasa-based groups, premiered the new large-scale music and dance historical epic *Reformed Peasant Slaves Face the Sun* (*Fanshen nongnu xiang taiyang*), and a multiethnic group of music and dance artists in Xinjiang premiered a "new Muqam" large-scale song and dance work, *People's Communes Are Good* (*Renmin gongshe hao*).¹²⁶ Although no film recordings remain of these productions, clues about their choreography can be gleaned from published reviews and photographs. According to a review in *Dance*, the Yi-themed production *Great Changes in Liang Mountain* used a primary movement

vocabulary derived from a wide range of Yi folk dances documented in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou, which included the “mouth harp dance,” “shawl dance,” “drinking song dance,” “guozhuang dance,” “facing feet dance,” and “smoke box dance.”¹²⁷ Photographs of this work show the dancers performing as Yi villagers wearing long-sleeved jackets and striped skirts or pants, hats with feathers or embroidered head coverings, large earrings, and colorful capes or vests. Their body positions suggest aesthetic continuities with styles of Chinese dance choreography on southwestern ethnic minority themes that had been developing since the 1940s, but with new developments on those themes. Photographs and descriptions of the Tibet and Xinjiang works also provide evidence of continued experimentation in the styles of Tibetan and Xinjiang dance, both forms that had also played a large role in Chinese dance choreography since the 1940s.¹²⁸ No pointe shoes or other visual markers of ballet movement appear in any of the extant documentation of these works.

China’s two ballet schools each produced new works of ballet in 1965: the Beijing Ballet School’s *Red Sister-in-Law* (*Hong sao*) and the Shanghai Dance School’s *White-Haired Girl*.¹²⁹ As already mentioned, *White-Haired Girl* went on to be named the second of the two “model ballets” promoted across the country during the early years of the Cultural Revolution and was made into a film in 1971. *Red Sister-in-Law* also enjoyed success during the Cultural Revolution, when it was revised as *Ode to Yimeng* (*Yimeng song*) in the early 1970s and made into a film in 1975.¹³⁰ Based on the evidence of the two films, these works show more variation in vocabulary, more delicacy, and more Chinese dance movement than *Red Detachment of Women*. However, like their predecessor, both are clearly works of ballet that use some Chinese dance elements, not works of Chinese dance.¹³¹ As in *Red Detachment of Women*, pointe technique is used by female dancers throughout both productions, and ballet postures and lines generally dominate the dancers’ physical expression, even in scenes of rural celebrations that feature women and men in peasant clothing dancing to folk melodies. At times, a cosmetic folk aesthetic is generated through the use of costuming, music, and material objects such as baskets and handkerchiefs. However, these strategies use extrachoreographic elements to lend a sense of localization to choreography that is grounded firmly in ballet movement. If ballet was a foreign language, as Dai Ailian once suggested, then the style of these works was like a Chinese story told in a foreign language, with occasional Chinese words mixed in but ordered according to a foreign grammar and pronounced with a foreign accent. As in *Red Detachment of Women*, xiqu-style tumbling elements and acrobatic highlights borrowed from Chinese dance appear in the battle sequences in these works. However, the heroic poses of the central protagonists almost always feature ballet body lines, such as arabesques or other poses performed with straight, turned out, and pointed leg lines produced while balancing on a

single toe shoe. As with *Red Detachment of Women*, critics described both productions as a ballet works, and they were produced by institutions and casts that specialized in ballet performance.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the years 1964 to 1965 marked a new surge of choreographic creation across multiple fields of Chinese dance, which included xiqu-style national dance dramas on modern Chinese revolutionary history, ballets on modern Chinese revolutionary history, large-scale song and dance epics dealing with both Chinese history and contemporary international events such as the Vietnam War, dance dramas incorporating Afro-diasporic dance elements to address the US civil rights movement and Congolese anticolonial nation building, and both national dance dramas and large-scale music and dance epics dealing with modern revolutionary history in ethnic minority communities within China. While the newly created ballet works were an important part of this broader trend of choreographic innovation, they were by no means the only innovation, nor were they even the ones that received the most attention from critics and the media at the time. One telling example of media attention is the reportage in *Dance*, China's national dance journal. Over the course of 1965, *Dance* dedicated six pages to *White-Haired Girl* and one to *Red Detachment of Women*, while it devoted thirteen pages to *Fires of Fury in the Coconut Grove*, nine pages to *Congo River Is Roaring*, six pages to *We Walk on the Great Road*, and two each to the three large-scale ethnic minority-themed works. Reviews published in *Dance* described the major productions of 1965, like those of 1964, as exemplary models of the "three transformations." Thus, as of late 1965, all of these differing projects appeared to be valid paths for China's future dance development.

CONCLUSION: THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

On May 16, 1966, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued a directive initiating the Cultural Revolution, a new campaign that fundamentally altered the way dance was practiced in the PRC until the mid-1970s. In the weeks following this announcement, the national dance journal *Dance* ceased publication, and dancers employed in professional dance schools and performance ensembles across the country stopped their regular work. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, a reversal of existing hierarchies soon unfolded, in which longtime leaders in the dance field were denounced and removed from their positions. Recalling the events of the summer of 1966, the institutional history of the Beijing Dance Academy recounts that the two schools then in operation were first occupied by a PLA work team in June, then attacked by outside Red Guards in July, and finally divided into two factions, after which internal attacks began in August and continued until December, when the teachers at both schools were sent to a suburb to carry out manual

labor and undergo thought reform.¹³² The institutional history of CODDT similarly records that large character posters and denunciations began in May, and from June all artistic creation and performances stopped for the remainder of the year, with the exception of a performance of *Congo River Is Roaring* for the 1966 National Day.¹³³ Reports in *Guangming Daily* described violent criticisms of cultural leaders continuing in the national performance ensembles through the summer of 1967.¹³⁴ In July 1967 *Guangming Daily* reported that remaining students at the Beijing Ballet School had begun to rehearse and perform the ballet *White-Haired Girl*.¹³⁵ At the same time, *China Pictorial* ran an article announcing the naming of the eight “model works”—including the two ballets—together with a photograph of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, dressed in military attire surrounded by a group of Red Guards.¹³⁶

Describing the changes in China’s dance field that followed from these events, Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei write:

In June 1967 the *People’s Daily* called for “promoting model works to the entire country.” All at once, dance stages across China surged with enthusiasm vying to perform the two ballets. In each province, city, and autonomous region, professional song and dance ensembles and even amateur dance companies, regardless of whether they possessed the conditions to perform ballet dance dramas, and regardless of whether performers had mastered ballet technique, all began to create an unimaginable artistic marvel. Dozens, hundreds of Wu Qinghuas, Hong Changqings, Xi’ers, and Dachuns¹³⁷ came to life on stage. The Cultural Revolution brought an abnormal popularization and development of ballet art to China’s vast land; the entire country’s dance stage turned into a deformed landscape in which ballet was the single blossoming flower.¹³⁸

Recent studies of Cultural Revolution performance culture suggest that actual artistic experiences during this time were often varied and complicated.¹³⁹ Indeed, among the dozens of interviews I conducted with dancers who lived through the Cultural Revolution, some revealed creative experiences during this time that went beyond reproductions of the nationally sanctioned revolutionary ballet works.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Wang’s and Long’s account points to what stands out as the most prominent and dramatic dance trend of the Cultural Revolution period. Namely, in place of a diverse dance field that previously supported active innovation by ensembles across the country in a variety of dance forms, there was now a severely restricted range of creative possibilities, as ballet works produced by two institutions in Beijing and Shanghai became required repertoire for performers across the country. As ballet achieved this new, preferred status, other dance forms, particularly Chinese dance, were actively suppressed.¹⁴¹

In a talk she gave in London in 1986, Dai Ailian spoke bitterly of these years and argued, “There was no logic to the cultural policies of the Cultural Revolution.”¹⁴² Certainly, from the perspective of dancers of Dai’s generation and their immediate students, most of whom saw Chinese dance, not ballet, as the ultimate expression

of China's socialist revolutionary culture, the policies of the Cultural Revolution made little sense. They contradicted the CCP vision that had continuously supported these dancers' work and upheld Chinese dance as the country's national dance form. At the same time, however, there were also many who disagreed with the previous system and stood to benefit from a change of direction. Insofar as the Cultural Revolution was about the disruption of existing power hierarchies, promoting ballet allowed those who had been disenfranchised previously to rise up against those who had enjoyed a monopoly of influence. As Paul Clark points out, divisions in the dance world broke down along lines of the dominant and the non-dominant, where the dominant referred to "the mainstream efforts from the 1950s and early 1960s at melding an indigenous and modern form of dance."¹⁴³ Thus, it was in part due to the unwavering support the socialist state had given to Chinese dance during more than two decades of socialist cultural development during the pre-Cultural Revolution period that the nondominant group that gained power during the Cultural Revolution ended up being, ironically, the group that supported ballet. The lead choreographer of *Red Detachment of Women*, Li Chengxiang, who had also been one of the choreographers of *Lady of the Sea*, expressed in 1965 his excitement at having finally proven wrong those who doubted whether ballet could be used to perform Chinese proletarian heroes.¹⁴⁴ For artists like Li and others who had long been supporters of ballet but had worked during a period when ballet was constantly criticized and subordinated to Chinese dance, the Cultural Revolution offered an opportunity to finally gain long desired recognition and opportunities.

Accounts suggest that not only choreographers but also dancers played a role in advocating for the rise of revolutionary ballet during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Liu Qingtang (1932–2010), who played the hero Hong Changqing in *Red Detachment of Women*, was one of the most energetic supporters of Cultural Revolution policy in the dance community, and he took advantage of the campaign to advance his own career. Liu was famous for having organized and personally overseen the largest number of public denunciations of artists in the Beijing dance scene during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, including those of his initial dance partner, Bai Shuxiang. In his denunciation sessions, Liu used cruel tactics that drove several of his victims to suicide. He also had a reputation for abusing his power to take sexual advantage of younger women. Although Liu had begun training in ballet late in life, he gained lead roles because he was physically strong enough to perform lifts, a skill considered necessary for ballets.¹⁴⁵ Liu reportedly portrayed the role of Hong Changqing over five hundred times between 1964 and 1972, and he also appeared in the 1971 film, gaining significant personal fame. By 1975 Liu had ascended to the position of deputy minister of culture, the highest post ever held by a dancer at the time. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1982, Liu was sentenced to prison on counts of conspiracy

supporting activities of the Gang of Four, as well as public defamation of innocent persons and personal misconduct.¹⁴⁶

From an artistic perspective, some argued that revolutionary ballet was consistent with artistic and ideological agendas of earlier socialist dance creation, especially when viewed within the limited sphere of ballet. In one of the first reviews of *Red Detachment of Women*, which served as a model for later interpretations, choreographer Huang Boshou wrote:

In the past, ballet was a tool used to display the nobility and aristocracy, to propagate feudal and bourgeois morality, and to beautify the rule of the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, the working people did not have the right to enter the ballet stage, and even when they did occasionally appear it was only to be portrayed as foolish clowns, to be disrespected and made fun of. The choreographers and performers of *Red Detachment of Women*, in order to express our country's life of seething revolutionary struggle and revolutionary worker, peasant and soldier images, whether through themes, medium, plot, character, or language, have broken down the previous conventions of ballet, bravely innovated, causing ballet to undergo a revolutionary change.¹⁴⁷

Here, Huang interprets the use of ballet form in the revolutionary ballets not as a copying of Western forms, as it was often described by Chinese dance critics in the past, but rather as an intervention that fundamentally revolutionized the Western form itself. Through their adaptation of ballet to contemporary local narratives, as well as their introduction, even superficially, of Chinese dance elements, Huang argued that the creators of the revolutionary ballets did enact innovation and localization within the art of ballet. In this way, he argued, Chinese choreographers and dancers gained artistic agency even though they were enacting this agency by way of an imported movement vocabulary. From this perspective, the emergence of revolutionary ballet allowed Chinese dancers to position themselves as equal participants in a global conversation of ballet exchange, joining the growing number of countries that were promoting their own stylistic visions of ballet internationally during this period.

Through its promotion of ballet as the new national dance form, together with the suppression of Chinese dance practitioners, institutions, and repertoires, the Cultural Revolution left a deep mark on China's dance field. No new choreographic works were reported on in the national media from 1966 until the early 1970s; this absence represented a significant departure from the previous years, when new dance creation had emerged continuously across the country at a break-neck speed. As professional ensembles were closed down or consolidated, dance conservatories stopped admitting students, and leading artists were put on house arrest, jailed, and sent to labor camps, the institutional structures that previously supported Chinese dance creation stopped functioning as they had before. Under these circumstances, one development that emerged was that ballet reached a much wider audience in China than it ever had previously. Moreover, through its

new promotion as a symbol of the Cultural Revolution, ballet became culturally recoded in the eyes and bodies of a new generation of Chinese dancers and audiences. That is, instead of seeing ballet as traditional, foreign, and bourgeois, as it had previously been understood, many now saw it as modern, familiar, and revolutionary. By 1967 a new name had been introduced for the ballet works that even erased their identity as ballet. The new term, “revolutionary modern dance drama” (*geming xiandai wuju*), eroded the previous distinction between national dance drama and ballet, further undermining the status of Chinese dance.¹⁴⁸ As time passed, the younger generation invested ballet with their own meanings, and many either forgot that Chinese dance ever existed or began to see it fundamentally as a thing of the past. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, however, Chinese dance would return, with new meanings in a new historical context.