



DANCING
ART & THEORY

Zi Huayun



CHUNFENG LITERATURE AND
ART PUBLISHING HOUSE



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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

舞艺舞理/资华筠著. —沈阳:春风文艺出版社, 2002.3

I. 舞… II. 资… III. 舞蹈史 — 中国 — 当代 IV.
J709.2

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2001) 第 085917 号

春风文艺出版社出版、发行

(沈阳市和平区十一纬路 25 号 邮政编码 110003)

沈阳新华印刷厂印刷

开本: 890 毫米 × 1240 毫米 1/32 字数: 300 千字 印张: 7 $\frac{5}{8}$ 插页: 2

2002 年 3 月第 1 版

2002 年 3 月第 1 次印刷

责任编辑: 赵 平

责任校对: 白小牛

封面设计: 耿志远

版式设计: 马寄萍

ISBN 7 - 5313 - 2390 - 7/J · 155

定价: 28.00 元



Zi Huayun(1936—)

Dancer, Scholar, Vice President of China Dancers Association

*1950—Began her professional dancing career
1952—1987 Used to be the principle dancer and art director of the China Central Song and Dance Ensemble; played leading role in near 100 repertoire of various dancing styles, is Well known in China and abroad. Has won awards in international and national dance competitions*

1987—1999 Director of Dance Institute of China Arts Academy, the senior fellow and professor of China National Research Art Academy, engaged in research and theory works; She has published academic thesis, and literary works(essays, poems, film scripts, etc.), more than 200 million words, some of them has won national prize; visited more than 40 countries to promote the development of international culture exchange programs; in 1997 was selected as the Senator of IOAC(the present IUAC).

Author's Preface

China is a country with a long history and tradition. Dance also stands along with long traditions and living youth.

Regretfully, among the more than 40 countries I have visited, and among all the different kinds of international cultural exchange events I have attended, I have seldom seen the translation version of the Chinese Dance from the shops or libraries overseas. But the fact is, in China, we have a special dance research institute at the national level, and it has created many excellent piece of works. Whenever I am asked by foreign friends, where to get books introducing Chinese dance, I'm touched by their aspirations for getting to know the Chinese dance culture, and at the same time, feel so guilty about it.

So I developed the idea of publishing some of my works which have been translated over the past 10 years (Most of the works have been collected into books after various international conferences, and some of them have been published on publications overseas). This book collects all the works regarding historical depiction and research theories, but only a small part of my Chinese book with more than 200 millions words. However, if this book could help people to learn little bit more about our splendid Chinese dance, and to understand the working status at china dance scholars, I shall feel pleased.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the publishing company and those friends who have given me valuable help during my translation of the articles, particularly Mr. Su Yinda, Mr. Ni Jiangbo, and Mr. Du Youliang.

I hope this book, as a fresh, crystal drop pouring into the long river of the great civilization, dialog, and to make its own little contribution.

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TRACING THE ORIGIN OF THE MOTHER OF ART: A HISTORY OF CHINA'S DANCING ART

Dance, an ancient yet modern art, has been developing along with the evolution of mankind. It plays a unique and irreplaceable role in the process of human civilization. An art form which takes the human body and movement as its way of existence and expression, dance is generally thought of as one of the most ancient arts and called "the Mother of Art".

Anthropologists often regard dance as an important part of the identity of a nation. They say, "Dance for me, and I know what you are." As a body language, dance reflects a nation's living environment, history, culture, characters, sentiments, traditions and customs, aesthetic values and philosophy. Therefore, to study a nation's history of dancing helps us to understand a nation's civilization.

China, an ancient nation with 5,000 years of splendid civilization, has a long history of dance which has left a rich heritage for today's Chinese. In the prolonged course of de-

velopment, outstanding attainments have been made one after another in the art of Chinese dance. Although there is little left about the dance of our ancestors, we can still feel the spirit of ancient Chinese dancing through cultural relics, ancient poems and essays, grotto murals and dancing occasions in remote villages.

Origin and History

About the Origin of Dancing

There are many versions of the origin of dancing, most of which are from folk tales. In recent years, with more and more cultural relics excavated, original functions of dancing for primitive people have been gradually unfolded before us.

In 1973, a Neolithic painted ceramic bowl was excavated in Datong County, in northwestern Qinghai Province. (Fig. 1) The bowl reveals how our ancestors danced 5,000 years ago. On the inner sur-

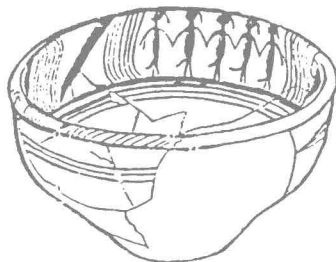


Fig. 1 Neolithic painted ceramic bowl excavated in northwestern of China's Qinghai Province. (copy)

face of the bowl is painted three groups of dancers. Those dancers, five in each group, danced hand in hand and at the same pace, demonstrating dynamic movements and vital energy. If we relate it to excavated ceramic drums and whistles of the same period, it is quite reasonable to believe that people at that time danced with music. Moreover, the decorations of animal feathers and tails on these dancers have verified descriptions of primitive dancers in ancient books, providing evidence about hunting life and totem worship of ancient people. Those excavated articles, along with a number of cliff paintings discovered recently in Xinjiang, Gansu, Guangxi, Yunnan and Inner Mongolia provinces, demonstrate how our ancestors imitated animals to celebrate their hunting victories and hail valor of hunters. They serve as evidence that dancing originated in people's laboring activities.

In the course of conquering the natural world, primitive people had a basic instinct to protect themselves from dangers and outside attacks. Such conquering life created the aggressive nature of ancient dancing. In addition, primitive dancing played an important role in stimulating soldiers' morale and bravery, coordinating attacks against enemies, practising military drills and celebrating victories. For example, in the above mentioned cliff paintings, there were scenes of arrow shooting and celebrating the victory with

skulls of enemy soldiers. Perhaps they are the origins of the ancient martial dance system recorded in ancient documents.

However, some historians and scholars believe that dancing was derived from ancient sorcery. Sorcery was used by ancient people to communicate with supernatural power, something that they believed could endow them with blessings and protect them from evils. In magic ceremonies, dancing played the role of entertaining gods, communicating with gods and even incorporating gods into human bodies. As an important part of the ceremony, dancing helped to create a mysterious atmosphere to move the ceremony toward its climax. In *Notes on Books of Songs*, China's first poem collection, it was written that "sorcery is a profession of entertaining gods and people with dancing and singing." Here we can see that sorcerers are the "main performers" in sacrificial ceremonies, or the country's earliest professional dancers. In *Book of Rites*, it was written that "Yin people respect gods and offer sacrificing service to gods." It indicates that in grand sacrificial ceremonies presided by slave owners, senior sorcerers were officials in charge of these events. It also shows that sorcery and dancing were closely linked in ancient times.

Another version of the origin of dancing is that it was associated with genital worship. The large cliff paintings of

genital worship discovered recently in north-western Xingjiang Autonomous Region have provided evidence for this version. Such paintings were also discovered in Inner Mongolia, Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces (Fig. 2) Moreover, some scholars believe that dancing figures on the above-mentioned painted ceramic



Fig. 2 Cliff paintings discovered in Guangxi Huashan. (copy)

ic bowl are nude males offering sacrifices for the purpose of childbirth. The decorated tails symbolize male genitals and the painted ceramic bowl is a divine instrument used for praying to gods for childbirth. Sexual intercourse is a basic human instinct. The awareness of sex was often expressed through dancing and related to sorcery. Although sex and love were long under rigorous control in feudal society, this basic instinct was strongly echoed in dancing.

In conclusion, it is generally proved that dancing is poly-genetic. Actually, in the course of the dancing art in every Chinese ethnic group, labor, war, sacrifice and spouse-seek-

ing all played important roles. It is the combination of all these factors that created the art of dance.

Transformation of Dancing's Function in Pre-Qin Period

China's dancing experienced major development in the Zhou Dynasty (about the 11th century B. C. – 256 B. C.), a transitional period from the heyday of slavery to feudal society. Although the tradition of relating dancing to sacrificing was carried on, the function of dancing changed from entertaining gods to entertaining people.

Actually, the transformation started in the Shang Dynasty (about the 17th century B. C. – about the 11th century B. C.). It is recorded in *Book of History* that “singing and dancing were often performed in the court.” And King Shangzhou “filled the pond with wine and hanged meat on trees, asking male and female slaves to dance through the woods to accompany his drinking all night.” These historical records prove that singing and dancing originally performed for the sacrificing purpose began to be used to entertain slave owners.

In order to consolidate his rule, King Zhougong of the Zhou Dynasty established grand court music and dancing institutions and a ritual music system. He intended to set up codes of ethics and morality and a strict hierarchical so-