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THE CHARM OF CHINESE DANCE

Jiang Dong

新星出版社 NEW STAR PRESS



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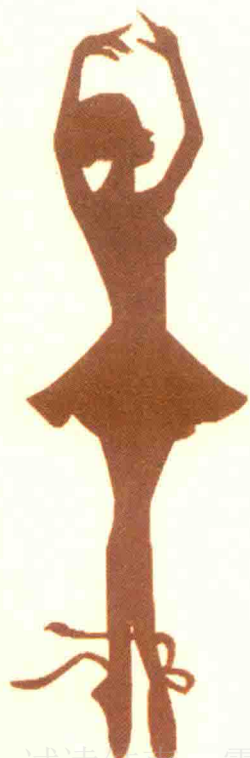
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Foreword

Chinese dance is an art form which offers robust content, profound meaning, diverse forms, and constant innovation. As China developed over the past 5000 years, Chinese dance has also evolved. As history made way for contemporary times, the art of dance in China is showing more glamour than ever, not only reflecting and recording the emotions and ideas of contemporary Chinese people, but also offering the lush fruits of art for contemporary Chinese society, using beautiful artistic images to bring aesthetic enjoyment to the public, and enriching the art life in China. Dance is proving its value in its unique way and constantly attracting people with its aesthetic ideals.

Contemporary Chinese dance experienced a renaissance during the early 20th century. Unlike traditional dance, the new form of dance is vivid and showcases the dreams and ideals of the new age. It plays a brand new role in Chinese society in a new way of thinking and from a new perspective, proving to be irreplaceable and essential. During times of war, dance was the horn for people's pursuit of

liberty and wish for peace. In times of peace, it is an ideal tool for portraying the beauty of art. Reminiscing about contemporary Chinese dance in the past century, one could always feel the imprint of the times on dance. Dance has always shared the same destiny with and served the Chinese people through the years.

Of course, China has experienced tumultuous times, so has contemporary Chinese dance. Different political and economic conditions have made their marks on the art form, which, passing the test of all challenges, has never lost its allure. One could feel the vitality and creativity of dance as an art form which will also generate more aesthetic appeal.

As time goes by, generations of dancers have relentlessly pursued their ideals and revealed different styles of dance in each age, winning recognition and accolades from the society and the people, and sharing aesthetic pleasures with the audience. One excellent work after another is showcasing the creative thinking of the dancers, who use the language of dance and the appeal of aesthetics to praise the times, to honor what is true, kind, and beautiful, and to be a spokesperson for beauty.

All across China, many dance groups are dancing for the people, and many art venues are showing the silhouettes of dance. The contemporary Chinese dance in a positive and vibrant form has become the mainstream of today's dance, and is surging forward without stop.

Contemporary Chinese dance, like other art forms, is loved by the people. It is also supported by the government and respected by

the society at large. Today we have achieved fruitful results in the art of dance: the field is growing and developing constantly, and dance galas at all levels and in all regions of China are presented.

Currently, events for the creation, performance, teaching, and academic research of dance are developing simultaneously. Dance is contributing its own wisdom and strength to the unprecedented growth of China.

This book is the record of this journey. It portrays the progress of contemporary Chinese dance in the past century. First written 10 years ago, it is now published again, in the hope that it will provide supportive facts to help people across the world to understand the evolution and development of contemporary Chinese dance, and make contemporary Chinese dance more well-received than ever.

Preface



A Sculpture of Mme.Dai Ailian

Contemporary Chinese dance emerged in embryonic form during the New Culture Movement, often referred to as China's Renaissance, of the 1920s-1930s. It was at this time that this ancient country opened its long-sealed doors to receive a deluge of Western artistic influence in such fields as film, drama and sculpture.

Performances of Western modern dance were staged in China's big cities, and ballroom dancing and gymnastics soon became items on the Chinese school curriculum. Modern dance pioneers of the time Wu Xiaobang and Madame Dai Ailian, introduced and promoted fresh concepts of dance. They effectively brought modern dance and ballet to Chinese audiences.

From the 1950s onwards, modern dance began to develop rapidly in China, most conspicuously during two periods.

The first was from the 1950s through to the 1960s. It was at

this time that the aesthetics of modern dance began to be understood and that the three main types of modern Chinese dance -- classical, folk and ballet -- began simultaneously to develop.

Chinese Classical Dance originated in traditional Chinese Opera roles, most particularly Peking Opera. Among the oldest and most representative Chinese Classical Dances are *Stealing the Fairy Grass*, a one-act dance drama; *Lotus Lantern*, a six-act drama; *The Story of Kind-hearted Mr. Dongguo*, a trio; *Floral Moon Night on the Spring River*, a solo, and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, a duet. These dances are based on popular myths and heroic legends.

Folk dancing also became more broadly appreciated during this early period of New China. Chinese artists drew upon traditional Tibetan, Uygur, Korean, Mongolian as well as well known Han nationality folk dances such as the red silk, Yangge and waist-drum dance. What had originally been family or community entertainment thus entered the mainstream.

Among the most popular folk dances of the period were *Lotus Dance*, *Red Ribbon Dance*, *Song of Harvest*, and *The Clothes Washing Song*. These will be looked at in more detail in later chapters. Innovations were made to elevate dances originally reflecting aspects of everyday life and traditional values to a celebration of the life and spirit of Chinese people. These staged folk dances were as bright



Tibetan Dance

1. Mongolian Dance
2. Korean Dance
3. Tibetan Dance
4. Uygur Dance
5. A Chinese Classical Dance



and optimistic as the idealism that pervaded in the society at the time.

Chinese ballet started in the mid-1950s. Former Soviet ballet teachers and choreographers trained the first batch of Chinese ballerinas at the newly established Beijing Dance School (now known as Beijing Dance Academy). Chinese productions of Western classical ballets such as *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* soon began to be performed in Chinese theatres. It was not long after that pioneers of Chinese dance began to create ballets that were utterly Chinese. Most famous in this genre are *White Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women*.

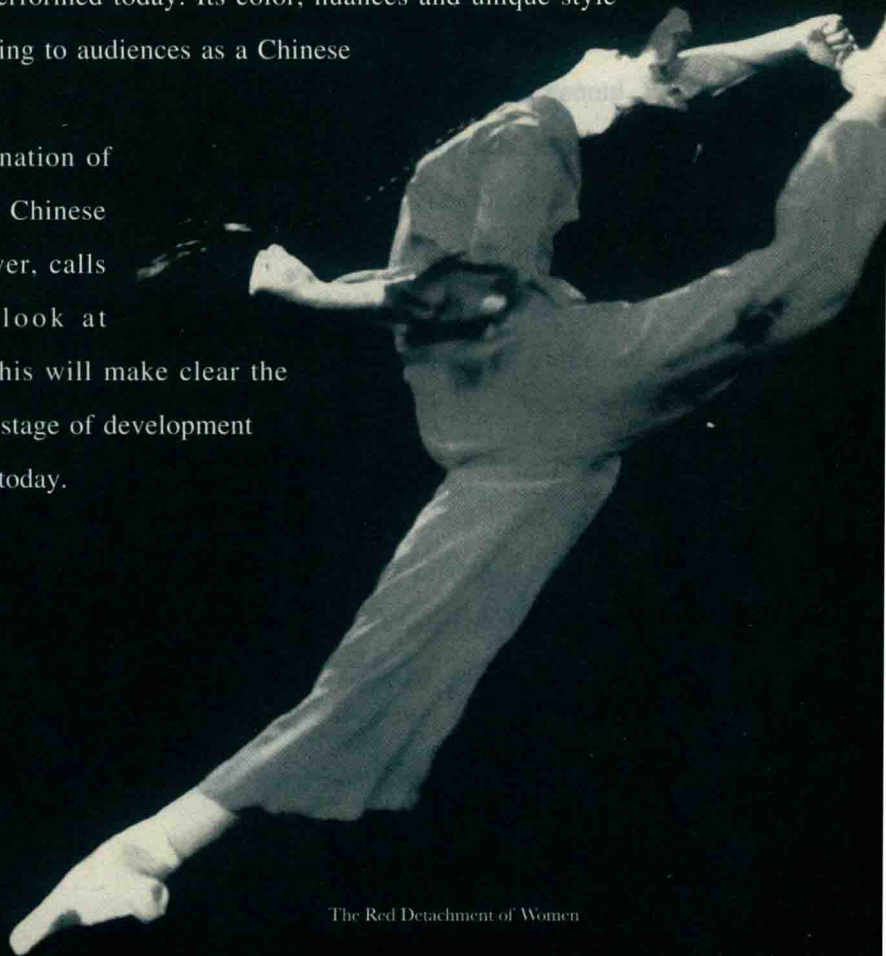
Since the 1980s, there has been a popular resurgence of Chinese modern dance. New Western dances are now eagerly performed by Chinese dancers and watched by Chinese audiences. There have also been dramatic changes in Chinese classical dance, such as the casting off of Peking Opera conventions and the revival of millennia-old dances.

The Flower Rains on the Silk Road, *Dance Accompanied by Music of the Tang Dynasty* and *Nine Songs* are the most representative examples

of this latest renaissance. Today's choreographers break through the confinements of traditional folk dance by infusing it with elements of ethnic minority dances. The result leads to the development of the contemporary dance whose roles are far more complex emotionally than the predictable two-dimensional characters of the 1950s and 1960s.

In half a century contemporary Chinese dance has undergone drastic development. It is now at a crucial stage of transformation; its break with tradition is the foundation and its infusion of Western elements the catalyst. The rich background of Chinese dance makes it that most performed today. Its color, nuances and unique style are as tantalizing to audiences as a Chinese banquet.

An examination of contemporary Chinese dance, however, calls first for a look at its history. This will make clear the extraordinary stage of development it has reached today.



A Brief Introduction to Ancient Chinese Dance



Chinese ancient *Nuo Dance* mask

Dance is a main component of Chinese national culture. Pottery unearthed in Qinghai Province dating back 5,000-6,000 years bears images of dancing groups of Chinese ancestors. Primitive dances, among other rituals, are also featured in cliff paintings discovered in Inner Mongolia, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Yunnan Province and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

The various ancient dances of 5,000-6,000 years ago were not merely a representation of work and life, but also a form of totemism.

Tang Dynasty dancing figures





Song Dynasty dance image



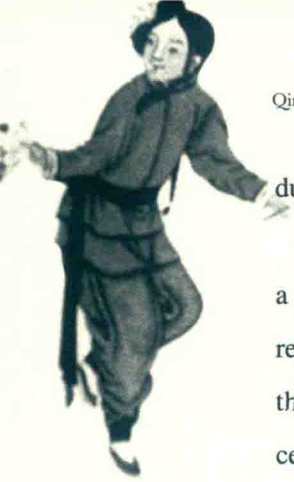
Han Dynasty dance picture

To participating people they were also a pleasurable pastime.

As talented dancers emerged during the Xia Dynasty slave society and the succeeding Shang Dynasty, dance gradually became a performing art. It is said that one Hsia Dynasty emperor enjoyed the grand spectacle of mass dancing so much that he had as many as 30,000 female slave dancers.

Under the Shang Dynasty thearchy, nothing could be done without first consulting the oracle. With the ascendancy of shamanism, *Wu Dance* became commonplace in many regions among various nationalities, and were passed down through generations.

Chinese ancient *Nuo Dance*, characterized by the animal masks worn by its performers, also dates back many centuries. Whereas *Wu shaman Dance* pleaded for protection and good luck from the Gods, the masked *Nuo* dancers were expected to ward off evil spirits. This symbol of human resistance against fate also became a feature of Korean and Japanese culture. *Nuo Dance* evolved into *Nuo Drama*



Qing Dynasty dance image

during the Song Dynasty.

It was during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty that Chinese dance as a performance art reached its first peak with the revival of many representative primitive dances. They included the *Da Shao*, a dance that praised the ancestral emperor Shun; the *Da Hsia*, a legend celebrating Emperor Yu and his successful battle to control flooding rivers, and the *Da Wu*, which praised Emperor Wu, the first emperor of the Zhou Dynasty.

It was at this time that the famous *Six Big Dances* and *Six Small Dances* were choreographed, in the form of *Yayue* (court music and dance). As *Yayue* was a fundamentally religious rite it was stiff and lacking in artistic appeal. By the Spring and Autumn Annals and the Warring States periods *Yayue* had been superseded by folk dance, as mentioned in the *Shijing* (Book of Poems) -- China's first complete collection of poems and songs.

Another peak of popularity in Chinese dance occurred during



Yuan Dynasty dance image



Chinese folk dance

the Han Dynasty. The most popular performance art at that time was *Baixi* (the “one hundred acts”) that combined music, dance, acrobatics, magic and martial arts.

Chinese culture and art reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty. It was an era so glorious that Chinese people became referred to as Tang Ren -- people of Tang. The many overseas China Towns are also colloquially known as Tang Ren Jie -- street of Tang people.

Dance, along with literature and music, reached its zenith during the Tang Dynasty. It was a time when dances in the tradition of past dynasties became enhanced with the finer merits of those of other nationalities and neighboring countries. Tang Dynasty dance constitutes valuable cultural heritage to China and the whole world.

The popularity of dance waned from the Song and Yuan Dynasties through the Ming and Qing Dynasties , having been supplanted by Chinese Traditional Opera. It survived through being absorbed into opera. The four main components of Chinese



A contemporary dance



Traditional Chinese Opera

traditional opera are “singing”, “speaking”, “acting” and “fighting” (martial arts). Among these, acting and fighting are imbued with many moves that owe their grace to dance.

Folk dances, another strand of Chinese dance, are closely linked with the daily lives, conventions and religious rites of the common people. Most were performed at main festivals by ordinary folk celebrating harvests, praying for peace and happiness, expelling disease, praising heroes, pursuing love and friendship, and expressing the duality of happiness and bitterness. These dances hit peaks and nadirs for thousands of years, but never disappeared.

Traditional dance is a priceless aspect of China’s 5,000-year heritage. Its international popularity has carved for it a permanent niche within Chinese and international performance arts.