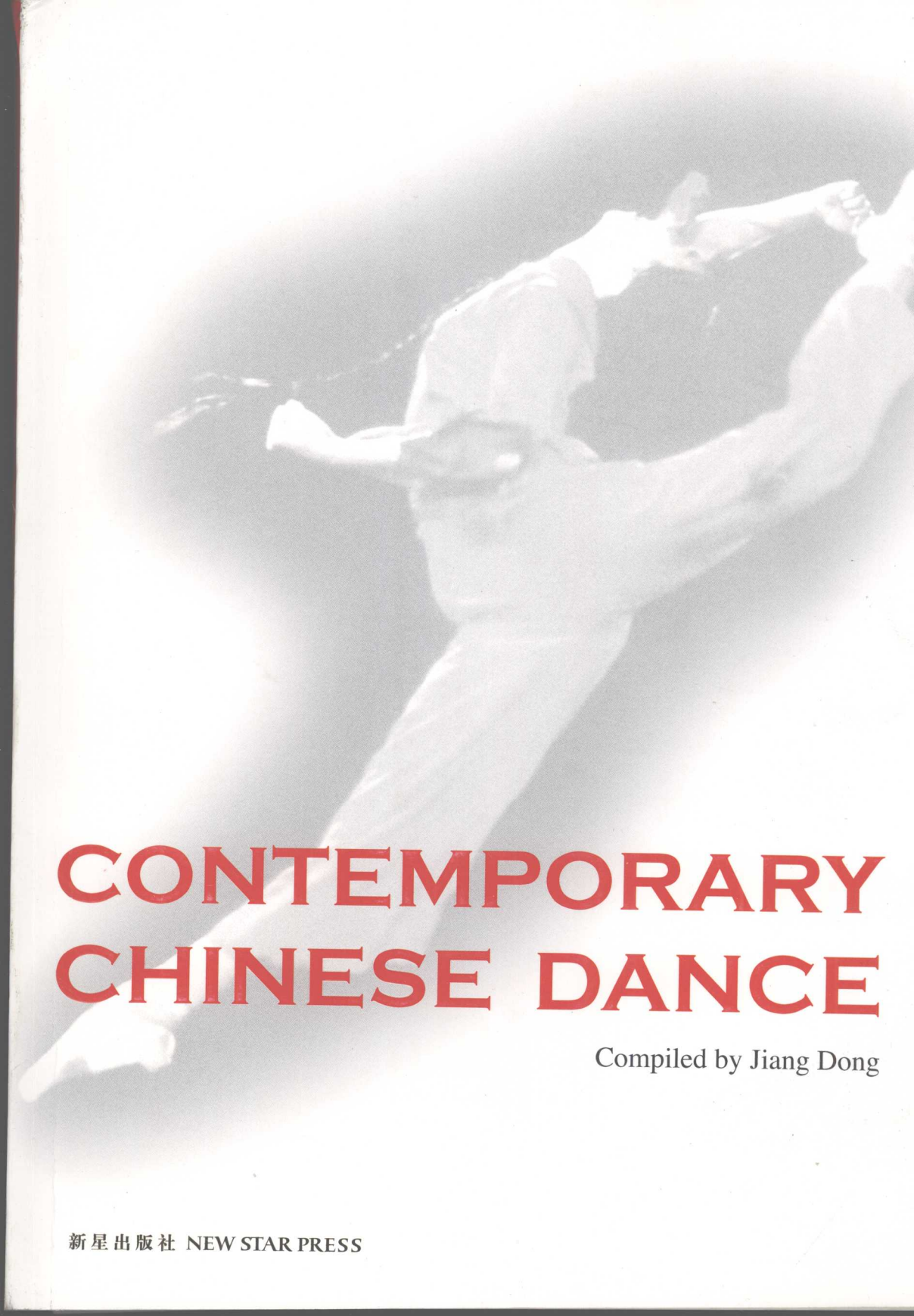




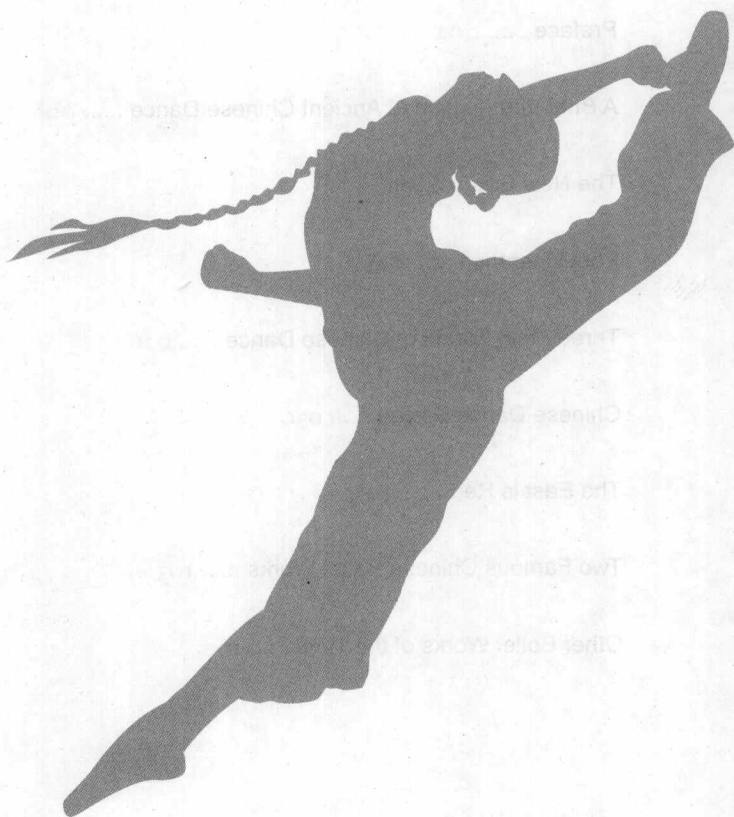
CONTEMPORARY CHINESE DANCE

Compiled by Jiang Dong

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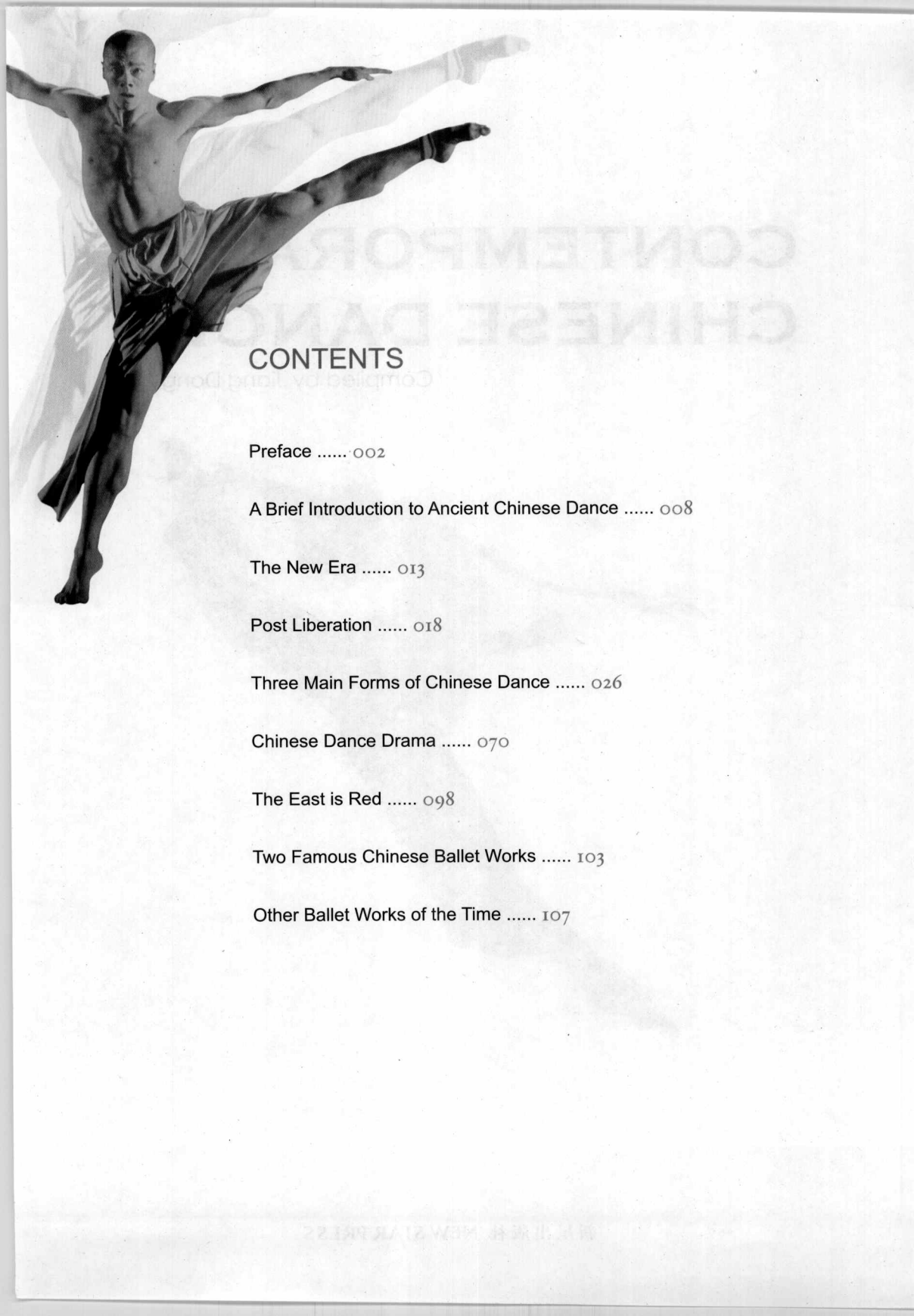
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Dance, a main component of Chinese national culture, has reached the extraordinary stage of development in contemporary China.



A Pottery Bowl of dancing found in Qinghai, China



A Sculpture of Mme. Dai Ailian

Preface

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 bigger cities, and ball-room 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 effective-



Statue of Wu Xiaobang

ly 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-



Tibetan Dance

Mongolian Dance



act dance drama; *Lotus Lantern*, a six-act drama; *The Story of Kindhearted 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 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



Uyghur Dance

A Chinese Classical Dance

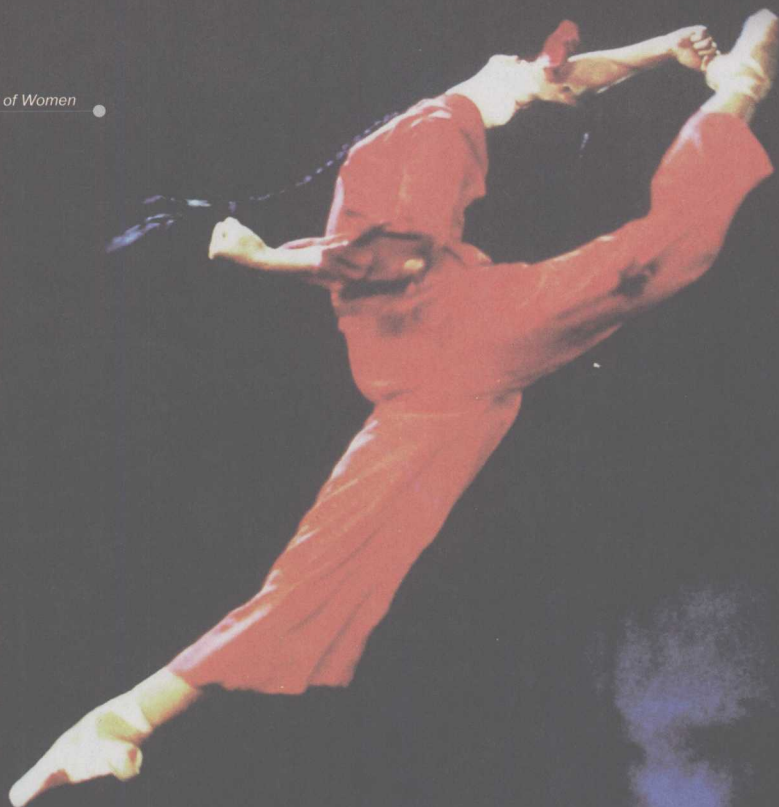


Tibetan Dance



Korean 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.



Tang Dynasty dancing figures

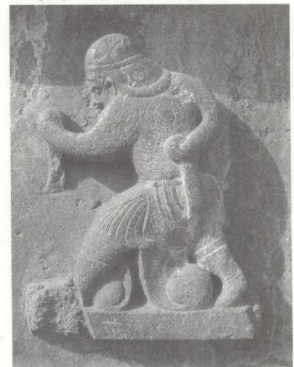
A Brief Introduction to Ancient Chinese Dance

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, also feature 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 reflections of work and life, but also a form of totemism. To the participating masses they were also a pleasurable pastime.

As talented dance protagonists emerged during the Hsia Dynasty (21st – 16th Century BC) slave society and the succeeding Shang Dynasty (16th-10th Century

Sung Dynasty dance image



Han Dynasty dance picture



BC), dance gradually became a performance art. It is said that one Hsia Dynasty emperor so enjoyed the grand spectacle created by a dancing scenario that his female slave dance performers numbered 30,000.

Under the Shang Dynasty thearchy, nothing could be done without first consulting the oracle. With the ascendancy of shamanism, *Wu dances* 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 dances* 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* during the Sung Dynasty (960-1127 AD).

It was during the Eastern Chow Dynasty (770-221 BC) 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 Chow 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



Chinese ancient *Nuo Dance* mask

dance). As *Yayue* was a fundamentally religious rite it was stiff and lacking in artistic appeal. By the Spring and Autumn Annals (770-476 BC) and the Warring States (476-221 BC) 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 the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). 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 (618-907 AD). 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 Sung and Yuan Dynasties (1271-1368 AD) through the Ming (1368-1644 AD) and Qing Dynasties (1644-1911 AD), having been supplanted by Chinese Traditional Opera. It survived through being absorbed into opera. The four main components of Chinese 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.



Yuan Dynasty dance image ●



● Traditional Chinese Opera

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 he-



● Chinese folk dance

roes, 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.



● Qing Dynasty dance image



A contemporary dance ●