

Emily E. Wilcox Talk – Nov 1 UC Berkeley Symposium: “The Butterfly Lovers, the Cultural Revolution and the Arts in China”

"Chinese in Content and Socialist in Form: Chinese Ballet and the Cultural Revolution's Reversal of a National Culture Movement"

In Professor Chen’s talk, we learned of China’s century-long love affair with ballet. Like many European classical art forms that entered the Chinese cultural sphere in the early 20th century, ballet found admirers in China during the nineteen-teens and twenties, especially among the urban elites and foreign-educated artists and intellectuals. Also, through the work of Dai Ailian, ballet was used in the 1950 dance drama *Doves of Peace*. It was under the Cultural Revolution launched in 1966 that ballet first gained mass popularization in China, the impact of which can be seen in the form’s lasting appeal in the post-Mao era. In the restaging of red classics and the emergence of new ballet works like *The Butterfly Lovers*, ballet persists as a central component of dance creation and performance in China, through regional ballet companies such as the Shanghai Ballet, Central Ballet of China, Liaoning Ballet Company, and Guangzhou Ballet. Although domesticated through adaptation to Chinese stories, sets, costumes, and music, ballet remains viewed largely as a foreign art in China. The recognized arbiter of ballet technique remains located in the West, as demonstrated by frequent invitations of European and American teachers and choreographers to China’s top dance schools and ballet companies. Indeed, the patina of Western sophistication and eliteness remains a significant appeal, for audiences as well as for amateur dancers and hobbyists.

Because of the popularity that ballet achieved in China during the Cultural Revolution, and its lasting appeal in the post-Mao era, we often forget that for most of the early socialist period in China ballet was in fact not the preferred mode for creating new dance works. Likewise, in our post-Cultural Revolution amnesiac state, we often

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inaccurately believe that the turn to Chinese folk literature is something new, brought about by the reforms of the post-Mao period. The title of my talk, “Chinese in Content and Socialist in Form,” question mark, invokes conventional post-Cultural Revolution understanding of Chinese ballet works such as *The Butterfly Lovers*. Taking its content from Chinese folk literature, and its form from European ballet, *The Butterfly Lovers* appears, from the post-CR vantage point, to take a socialist form – ballet – and combine it with traditional Chinese content ostensibly not found in socialist dance works. It is this perception of contemporary Chinese ballets, I argue, that is a legacy of the Cultural Revolution in the contemporary Chinese arts. The goal of my talk today, therefore, is to complicate these associations, as well as the view of Chinese socialist culture that is constructed through them.

Historical research on dance during the twenty-six year period from 1938 to 1964, what many identify as the consolidation of a distinctively socialist modern culture in China, shows that indigenous Chinese dance aesthetics, rather than ballet, dominated dance creation under Mao. Likewise, what is often thought of as a post-Mao trend to bring back traditional themes and folk literature, which are often thought to have been excluded in the socialist realist productions of the Mao era, in fact are found to themselves be a revival of a Mao era legacy. From a historical perspective that questions the ability of the Cultural Revolution to represent Mao era culture in China, one sees works of Chinese ballet such as *The Butterfly Lovers* in a new relationship to socialist Chinese culture. It is the ballet form that goes against the indigenous impulse of dance creation in the Mao era, while the content continues clear legacies of early Chinese socialist culture.

[S] The three decades from the beginning of the Yan’an Period in the mid-1930s to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s can be understood as the period of formation and consolidation of a distinctive Mao-era Chinese socialist culture.

[S] Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie, in their 1997 survey of modern Chinese literature, divide twentieth-century Chinese literary production into three periods: 1900-1937 “Towards a New Culture”; 1938-1965 “Return to Tradition,” and 1966-1989 “The Reassertion of Modernity.” While problematic in its failure to adequately capture the modernizing aspirations of the socialist period, which I would argue represent a period of global leftist anti-colonial modernization, this periodization is innovative and useful in that it breaks with the previous convention of marking 1949 and 1979 as the beginning and end dates for a distinct socialist period. Recent scholarship has increasingly found value in this approach. Paul Clark’s 2008 *The Cultural Revolution: A History*, for example, argues that the Cultural Revolution laid the groundwork for the internationalization and pop culture trends of the 1980s. Krista Von Fleit Hang’s 2013 *Literature the People Love* argues that literary and visual culture in 1949-1965, what she calls “the Early Mao Period,” differed significantly from that produced in the Cultural Revolution.

[S] In the history of dance, the period from 1938 to 1965 is characterized by a strong investment in the search for “national forms” or *minzu xingshi*. While there were variations within this movement, the basic idea of the search for national forms is that Chinese socialist culture should be a new culture created through the study of indigenous movement traditions. [S] The first major articulation of “national forms” as the goal of socialist culture occurred with Mao Zedong’s famous Sixth Plenum speech on the

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Sinification of Marxism delivered in October 1938. Here, Mao called on artists and intellectuals to develop “a fresh and lively Chinese style and Chinese manner pleasing to the ear and to the eye of the Chinese common people” (cited in Holm 1991: 50). This idea of national forms, as David Holm, Wang Hui, and others have argued, was in direct opposition to approaches of the May Fourth New Culture movement begun in 1919, which tended to promote Euro-American tastes, knowledge, and techniques in the creation of modern Chinese literary and artistic culture. As Cyril Birch writes in his book *Chinese Communist Literature*, published in 1963, “the addiction to foreign modes of expression was precisely what drew the heaviest fire of the Communist critics” (75).

During the war periods lasting from 1938 to 1949, most Chinese dance artists turned their attention away from ballet, focusing either on Chinese folk forms or the creation of new, patriotic national dance styles. [S] Dai Ailian, who had studied ballet in her home of Trinidad and later in Great Britain before moving to China in 1940, spent much of the early 1940s conducting field research on Chinese folk dance and ethnic minority dance. In 1946 she staged the “Borderlands Music and Dance” production in Chongqing, which featured new creations based on ethnic minority and folk dance. [S] Wu Xiaobang, a celebrated figure in the early socialist dance movement, spent the late 1930s and early 1940s staging patriotic dances about the lives of Chinese refugees, soldiers, and peasants, including a series of new Mongolian-themed works [S]. For the artists based in [S] Yan’an, folk dance forms like *huagu* and *yangge* were the main focus of study and new creation. *The White-Haired Girl*, which was made into a ballet during the Cultural Revolution, appeared in dance form for the first time during this period.

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Rather than a ballet, it was created in the style of “new *yangge* opera” (新秧歌剧), a combination of folk opera, popular song, and folk dance.

The founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 briefly saw the emergence of an attempt to create new works in the ballet style, as exemplified by the 1950 anti-imperialist ballet *Dove of Peace*. This experiment, however, was short-lived. The following year, in 1951, the Ministry of Culture established a professionalization program for dance artists called the “Dance Cadre Training Classes,” held at the Central Drama School. The program’s curriculum, led by Wu Xiaobang and the Korean dance artist Choe Sung-hui, focused on Chinese operatic theatre (*xiqu*) and new patriotic dance. In September, 1953, Dai Ailian made a speech at the Second National Congress of Literature and Art Workers in which she criticized the path of 1949-1951, which she argued, “ignored national tradition.” From then onward, the slogan “national in form and socialist in content” became ubiquitous in Chinese dance publications, referring to the idea that new dance creation should be based on Chinese folk forms, not on ballet or other European dance styles. [S] In April, 1954, the China Dance Art Research Association published a series of “internal documents” called 舞蹈学习资料, in which the creation of a new national dance based on the study of Chinese folk forms is stated to be “the most important project facing China’s dance artists today” (CDARA 1). [S] Dai’s 1953 speech serves as the series’ opening essay.

[S] From the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, the majority of China’s professional dance artists focused their energy on the creation of national dance, through the creation of new training curriculum and new choreographic works known as “national dance dramas” or 民族舞剧. While often modeled on structures of ballet,

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these new creations were heavily inspired by Chinese indigenous performance forms, especially regional operatic theatre or 戏曲, folk and ethnic minority dance, and Chinese martial arts. [S] China established its first state-sponsored professional dance conservatory in 1954, the Beijing Dance School. In anticipation of its opening, teachers worked intensively for five months to create a [S] training curriculum for Chinese dance that could be used alongside the ballet and European character dance curriculum led by the Soviet ballet teachers. A two-part curriculum emerged, which forms the foundation for the Chinese dance curricula used in Chinese dance schools today. [S] The first part, called “Chinese classical dance” or 中国古典舞, [S] used movement patterns drawn largely from [S] Chinese regional operatic theatre and martial arts. Like classical ballet, [S] it was designed to train dancers technically and to [S] provide a dominant choreographic vocabulary; the second was called [S] “Chinese folk dance” or 中国民间舞. In it, students [S] learned movement patterns drawn [S] from Chinese regional folk dances such as [S] *yangge* and *huagu* and [S] ethnic minority performance. For the first few classes of students at the Beijing Dance School, courses in national or Chinese dance made up fifty percent of the curriculum, the other half of which was occupied by ballet and European character dance. Over time, the School split into two departments, one dedicated to the creation of new dance works using the national dance style, and the other dedicated to the training of students to stage foreign ballets.

[S] During this same period, the Central Experimental Opera Troupe established a “dance drama research group” which was dedicated to developing full-length narrative dance dramas in the national dance style. Like the dance curriculum

designers, they drew inspiration from the structure of Soviet ballet; the idea of dance drama without singing or speaking was a foreign import. However, they were determined to adapt this form to Chinese styles, drawing largely on *xiqu*, folk dance, and martial arts. [S] Between 1954 and 1956 the dance drama research group produced a series of three short-form dance dramas, the so-called “*tou san jiao*.” [S] [S] The first work, premiered in Beijing in May, 1955, is 盜仙草, based on the *Legend of the White Snake*, [S] a story about a female snake demon that circulated in Chinese folk literature from [S] at least the sixteenth century (Idema 2009: xii). [S] *Shore of Jade Lotus Pond* (碧莲池畔), adapted from the folktale *The Cowherd and the Weaving Girl*, and *Woodcutter Liu Hai* (刘海戏蟾), adapted from a popular story performed in regional operas, both premiered in 1956. [S] All three works used costuming and movement [S] vocabularies drawn from Chinese indigenous performing arts.

The pattern established in 1954 drove dance creation and training in China for the next nine years. [S] In 1957, a joint effort of the Beijing Dance School and the Central Experimental Opera Troupe led to the creation of the first full-length national dance drama, *Precious Lotus Lantern*, [S] which became an important model for Chinese dance drama up until the [S] creation of the first revolutionary ballets in 1964. [S] In 1959, *Precious Lotus Lantern* was made into a dance film. Here, we see a short clip from the wedding scene in *Precious Lotus Lantern*, from the work’s 1959 film version

[Clip1].....
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..... as you can see here, the technique and movement repertoire used in *Precious Lotus Lantern* was drawn not from ballet but from *xiqu* movement styles. Unlike *Dove of Peace* or the later revolutionary ballets, we see no use of pointe shoes or other aspects of ballet technique in this work.

[Clip2].....

..... Here, in a scene of Chen Xiang studying with his teacher in the mountains, we see how acrobatic elements from *xiqu* were combined with aspects of martial arts to create a unique Chinese dance drama style.

[S] In 1958, China Dance Art Research Association founded the dance journal *Wudao* to document activities in China’s dance world. [S] Between [S] 1958 and 1963, [S] China’s *Wudao (Dance)* magazine, the official publication [S] of the reported on the [S] creation and performance of [S] forty new full-length dance dramas in the [S] national dance style, all of which used national dance, rather than ballet, as the primary movement technique and aesthetic style. [S] These works were created by [S] nineteen different [S] performance troupes spread [S] across 13 different provinces, [S] autonomous regions, and municipalities across the country [S- S]. During this time, a few stagings of full-length foreign ballets took place at the Beijing Dance School. Also, [S] in 1959 teachers and students at the Beijing Dance School created the ballet and national dance fusion work *The Mermaid*. This was the only newly created work using ballet technique that appeared between 1950 and 1964.

[S] It was in this context that we see the first major dance adaptation of *The Butterfly Lovers*, created by the China Opera and Dance Theatre in 1962. Its creators were the same artists who had produced “*tou san jiao*” and *Precious Lotus Lantern* in

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the mid-1950s, and the performer who played the female lead role of Zhu Yingtai, Zhao Qing, was the same dancer who had performed the lead role of San Shengmu in *Precious Lotus Lantern*. Using the music of the *Butterfly Lovers* violin concerto, composed in 1959, it followed the *xiqu*-based aesthetic typical of national dance dramas of this period.

As we can see from the list of national dance dramas created between 1958 and 1962, Chinese popular literature and folklore formed an important content for new dance creations in the early Mao period. This was true not only in dance, but also in film, live theatre, and literature. As recent scholarship such as the 2010 *Opera Quarterly* special issue on Chinese opera film, edited by Paola Iovene and Judith T. Zeitlin, and Jin Jiang’s 2008 book *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in 20th Century Shanghai*, have shown, the early socialist period saw an immense investment in the adaptation of Chinese folk literature, through regional folk performance forms, to the official stage and the screen. [S] While the most well known film adaptation of *The Butterfly Lovers* is the 1963 Hong Kong production by the Shaw Brothers Studio, [S] an earlier and equally important production appeared in 1953 in China. The first color film of the PRC period, it helped popularize women’s Yue opera productions based on traditional *xiqu* repertoire, a genre that, according to Jin Jiang, reached a peak of popularity and activity in the 1950s and early 60s.

As Jiang explains in her book, *The Butterfly Lovers* was considered ideal content for new opera productions in the early socialist period. Not only was it popular among the non-elite urban and rural classes, its story had the potential to convey themes of gender equality, self-determination, and free marriage. The story begins with a young woman,

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Zhu Yingtai, who decides to cross-dress as a man in order to pursue education and personal ambition. When she falls in love with one of her classmates, a scholar named Liang Shanbo, Zhu actively communicates her love for Liang by leaving him a gift on her departure, then she invites him to her home to meet her supposed “sister.” Although the story ends tragically, the tragic ending serves as a criticism of the problem of arranged marriage, and a celebration of the progressive ideal of freedom in the pursuit of love. *The Butterfly Lovers* was not without its problematic content, especially in earlier forms that emphasized Buddhist and Daoist themes and fatalism, as well as its emphasis on love over collective sentiment and revolution. However, in the context of the promotion of popular culture and national forms of the 1950s and early 1960s, *The Butterfly Lovers* and other works of folk literature came to play a large role in new socialist culture of this period. A large part of the “socialism” of these works, Jiang notes, was their popular, rather than elite nature. Unlike literati music, local operatic theatre like women’s Yue opera was largely seen as a “low class” art form. Thus, it fit the idea of promoting the culture of the masses and the use of indigenous and popular, rather than European and elite artistic forms and contents.

[S] The creation of revolutionary ballets, beginning in 1964, marks a new era in the creation of Chinese dance. While national elements remained present in the Model operas and revolutionary ballets, the historical costume-drama style was largely rejected, along with most of the folk literature repertoire, which was now labeled as feudal and counter-revolutionary.

As I have argued in this paper, an important legacy of the Cultural Revolution in China today is a persistent forgetting about the legacies of early Mao era dance culture

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that preceded the appearance of the revolutionary ballets in the mid-1960s. Nevertheless, these styles still represent the dominant style of new dance creation in China today. I would like to end my talk by showing segments of two recent production of *The Butterfly Lovers*. The first is from the Shanghai Ballet version, which we will see tonight, and the second is from a Chinese classical dance version, a segment of which was performed in San Francisco in 2010 as part of a tour by the Beijing Dance Academy Youth Dance Troupe.