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Women Dancing Otherwise

THE QUEER FEMINISM OF GU JIANI'S
RIGHT & LEFT

Emily E. Wilcox

▶ Right & Left

▶ in conversation with Gu Jiani/Emily Wilcox

Despite the fact that one of China's most prominent contemporary choreographers is a publically transsexual woman,¹ and that indigenous theater in China has a long and well-known history of homoerotic spectatorship and patronage,² the idea of “queer dance”—or public reflection on queer identities and experiences more generally—is almost nonexistent in twenty-first-century urban Chinese professional dance circles.³ Out queer choreographers are few and far between in major domestic dance festivals in China, as are dance productions or academic works that explicitly draw attention to non-normative genders and sexualities through dance. For women, this is even more pronounced, due to a more circumscribed set of possibilities of what constitutes “normal” and “appropriate” for women's performed subjectivities and dancing bodies.⁴

The fifty-minute contemporary dance duet *Right & Left* 右—左— (2014) by Beijing-based female choreographer Gu Jiani,⁵ danced by Gu and Li Nan with projections by media artist Li Ah Ping, presents an important and unusual departure from this larger trend. When approached for inclusion in this anthology, Gu said that she does not consider *Right & Left* a work of queer dance. Thus, the following reading represents my interpretation of the work



FIGURE 3.1 Gu Jiani's *Right & Left*. Photograph by Fan Xi (范西).

and not Gu's overt intention in creating it.⁶ For me, the exploration of human relationships and embodiments enacted in *Right & Left* challenges normative conceptions of women, feminine gender, and female sexuality as typically presented in dance works by Chinese choreographers in twenty-first-century urban China. The term "queer feminism" best describes this intervention because it engages a complex nexus of social norms that engender women's dance movement, including heteronormativity, patriarchy, and gendered constructs of ethno-national identity.⁷

In this essay, I focus primarily on choreography—the ways in which bodies move, on their own, in relation to one another, and in relation to theater space and stage properties. Through this analysis of choreography, I examine two areas in which *Right & Left* draws attention to and in some cases successfully disrupts typical portrayals of women in past works by twenty-first-century urban Chinese choreographers. First, through a comparison with the highly acclaimed contemporary dance piece *Thunder and Rain* 雷和雨 (2002) by Beijing-based female choreographer Wang Mei, I argue that *Right & Left* challenges a common pattern in which female subjectivity and relationships between women are depicted as a product of women's unequal, even abusive, heterosexual relationships with men. I argue that *Right & Left* challenges these portrayals by exploring alternative modes of female subjectivity produced through relationships between women—including homoerotic ones—and by drawing attention to the

violence against women perpetuated through works such as *Thunder and Rain*. Second, through an analysis of the presence and absence of culturally marked movement vocabulary in *Right & Left*, I examine Gu's choreographic choices around movement form in relation to her prior training in Chinese classical dance. Proposing the phrase "queer tai chi remix" to describe Gu's use of Chinese classical dance movement in this work, I suggest that while expanding the space for queer female subjectivity within ethno-national politics, Gu nevertheless avoids the issue of gender normativity as it relates to technique conventions and ethno-national identity in dance styles marked as ethnically "Chinese."

Apart from choreography, choices in costuming, hair, sound, lighting, and stage design also contribute to the queer feminism of Gu Jian's *Right & Left*. While I will not address all of these elements here, two details should be mentioned, as they are important to the development of the choreographic meanings discussed below. *Right & Left* takes place in a white stage space set with one rectangular table and two stools. This choice is significant in relation to the history of Chinese theater, since "a table and two chairs" comprised the traditional stage set for Peking opera and other forms of indigenous theater in China. Here, the use of the table and stools places the dancers and their activities within a social frame, identifying them as dramatic figures rather than abstract bodies in space. In terms of costuming, it is also significant that the two female performers wear nearly identical costumes (long-sleeved knit shirts and gray leggings) yet have very different hairstyles. One of the dancers wears her hair in a short cut that would be recognized as "boyish" to Chinese audiences.⁸ In contrast, the other dancer wears her hair in bangs and a medium-length braid, a conventionally "feminine" hairstyle common for young women in Chinese dance works. This difference in hairstyle sets up a situation in which one dancer can be read as gender conforming and the other as gender non-conforming, or the two together as a butch-femme/T-P couple.⁹ To avoid imposing a single interpretation on this hairstyle choice, while also marking the important differences it connotes at certain places in the choreography, I use the names "Short-hair" and "Braid" to refer to the two performers.

Young women living in contemporary China face significant pressure to conform to the intersecting social expectations of heterosexuality, patriarchy, and gender normativity—pressures that are reflected in the predominant modes of representing women in dance works by twenty-first-century urban Chinese choreographers. By drawing attention to these practices and providing alternatives to them, Gu Jian's *Right & Left* makes an important contribution to a new field of queer feminist dance in China.

Sexuality, Subjectivity, and Women

Wang Mei 王玫 (b. 1958), a prolific choreographer and professor at the Beijing Dance Academy (BDA), is one of the leading figures in twenty-first-century Chinese contemporary dance. Wang began her career as a performer and later choreographer of Chinese ethnic, folk, and classical dance.¹⁰ Then, in the late 1980s, she was part of the inaugural group of students in an experimental modern dance program led by Yang Meiqi at the Guangdong Dance Academy, what led to the formation of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company.¹¹ Since 1990, Wang has taught modern dance and choreography at BDA, serving as the most important promoter of modern dance within China's conservatory system. When I studied at BDA in 2008–2009, Wang's classes were regularly over-enrolled, and choreographers trained in what many then called the "Wang Mei style" populated nearly every major dance ensemble in China.

Among Chinese dance scholars, Wang's 2002 contemporary dance drama *Thunder and Rain* is considered one of the most canonical works of twenty-first-century Chinese dance, and it is viewed by many as a breakthrough in portrayals of women's subjectivity, sexuality, and feminist perspectives.¹² The authors of a recent study argue that in *Thunder and Rain* Wang Mei "takes woman as her subject . . . works from a feminist viewpoint . . . [and] makes visible a complete woman's psychology."¹³ *Thunder and Rain* is an adaptation of one of China's most famous modern plays, Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* (1934), which recounts the demise of a Chinese family plagued by incest, jealousy, and an autocratic patriarch. Wang's version focuses on the story's three female characters, in particular, the middle-aged second wife, Fanyi.¹⁴ In the play Fanyi's husband forces her to take "medicine" for what he calls her "mental illness." Meanwhile, Fanyi is involved in a failing love affair with Ping, her husband's son from a previous marriage.¹⁵ Like *Right & Left*, *Thunder and Rain* uses minimalistic stage sets and everyday clothing (except in one group scene), and the movement vocabulary is a blend of vernacular movement and contemporary dance.

Although *Thunder and Rain* makes an important contribution to feminist choreography by foregrounding female experiences and emotions, it does so in a way that pits women against one another and portrays their agency and self-value as dependent upon heterosexual relationships to men. A sequence of interconnected duets reveals the relationships between the three female characters. In the first segment, Fanyi has just been rejected by Ping and is intensely upset. She meets Sifeng, the younger woman with whom Ping is now romantically involved, and Sifeng at first comforts her with a moving embrace. This act of care is revealed to be insincere, however, when Sifeng

suddenly pushes Fanyi away, lets out a ridiculing laugh, and then removes her coat to taunt Fanyi with her younger, presumably more sexually appealing body. A group of young women dressed similarly to Sifeng swarms onto the stage and chases Fanyi, a manifestation of the latter's inner anguish. Then, an older woman—the former lover of Fanyi's husband—appears. Like Sifeng, she laughs condescendingly, then performs a long soliloquy in which she criticizes Fanyi for believing she can still compete with younger women for the attention of men. “Think about it, who would want a woman like you?” she shouts. The key to everlasting beauty and youth, the older woman counsels, is learning to give up: “If you go away now, you will remain in his heart forever.” The scene ends with the three women dancing side-by-side to tango music, basked in red light with expressions of ecstasy, enjoying what appears to be a shared fantasy of everlasting appeal achieved through self-sacrifice.¹⁶

In *Thunder and Rain*, the audience gets to know Fanyi through her violent subjugation to the various male characters, and her subjectivity seems to be produced by these encounters. In one sequence, she stands inclined on her tiptoes, her body making a forty-five degree angle to the floor, as her husband grips her head under one arm and appears to drag her along the stage by her neck. Immediately following this, she repeatedly runs after and throws herself at her husband, grasping and clinging onto him. A similar dynamic emerges in Fanyi's relationship to Ping—the romantic affair around which the plot largely centers—even to the extent that Fanyi's sexual enjoyment appears to be a product of, or least compatible with, Ping's mistreatment of her. The long duet that characterizes the pair's relationship begins with Fanyi attempting to back away from Ping, suggesting that she does not want a romantic encounter. Ping nevertheless grabs her tightly by the wrist and does not let her go. He pulls her toward him and twists her arms around her body until she cannot move. Then, Ping's manipulation of Fanyi's body increases in intensity: he thrusts her head back and forth, grips her by the waist, and rubs his hand along her face, neck, and chest. At this point, Fanyi's resistance fades. As Ping grabs her breast with his hand, she thrusts her head back in apparent enjoyment. Then, she turns and embraces Ping tenderly. A long sequence ensues that seems to portray mutually consenting sex, including a “flying” pose with Fanyi outstretched and suspending in the air atop Ping's extended legs. This scene suggests that Fanyi derives extreme pleasure from her encounter with Ping, so much so that his rejection of her for a younger women becomes the primary defining feature of her character in the remainder of the production.

While there is, of course, great variation in how women are depicted in twenty-first-century urban Chinese concert dance, and it is impossible to generalize based on one work alone, the rejected heterosexual woman is an

extremely common trope. Moreover, women's sexuality is often portrayed as being linked to this experience of rejection, and this produces a kind of gendered violence in which men are expected and permitted to determine women's fates, including what they can and cannot enjoy. A variety of processes lead to the reproduction of this vision in new choreography. For example, a female contemporary dance choreographer I knew while living in Beijing told me that she had entered a duet into a local dance competition, but, after the first round of judging, was advised to make changes because of what was described as the "inappropriateness" of the work's theme: an amicable heterosexual one-night stand. The work was changed to instead portray a man and woman who sleep together, after which the man rejects the woman, and the remainder focuses on the woman's sadness. This was seen as more "appropriate" than a couple enjoying a sexual encounter on equal and mutually unattached terms.

In contrast to the older and more established Wang Mei, Gu Jiani 古佳妮 (b. 1988) is a young, independent choreographer in the early stages of her career. Like Wang, Gu works primarily in the medium of contemporary dance. In 2008–2012, Gu was a dancer with the Beijing Modern Dance Company, and in 2013, she and Li Nan 李楠 set up their own Beijing-based arts collective, N SPACE, which became the creative platform for *Right & Left*.¹⁷ Gu and Li devised *Right & Left* between April and August, 2014, at the Jiaotang 焦堂/Sofun gallery space in Beijing.¹⁸ It was then presented in the Guangdong Dance Festival, China's most important international contemporary dance festival, that November.¹⁹ In 2015–16, *Right & Left* toured abroad to the United States, Australia, and Hong Kong, and in 2016 Gu was commissioned by the Shanghai International Arts Festival to create a new work.²⁰ Although *Right & Left* has not yet received the attention of major Chinese dance critics, Gu's work has generally been well received in China's contemporary dance community. In 2011 and 2013, Gu won "Best Young Choreographer" and Bronze Medal in Choreography awards at the Beijing International Ballet and Choreography Competition. The 2013 work, a short duet titled "By My Side" 身边 performed by Gu and Li, could also be read as a work of queer dance.²¹

Gu's work *Right & Left* departs from portrayals of women found in *Thunder and Rain*. First, not only are men not physically present, but the relationship that develops between the two female dancers appears in no way to depend upon male desire. Instead, a form of intimacy and care emerges between the two women. When the work begins, the dancers move in unison, performing a relationship of equality that lacks obvious signs of competition or self-comparison like those found in *Thunder and Rain*. Next, the dancers interact in a way that suggests romantic intimacy, while also maintaining parity in

the relative power of each over the other. Playing with two stools, the women exchange roles sharing weight, lowering to the floor with their bodies in parallel, and allowing their feet and legs to brush against one another. The most explicit sequence occurs when a tangled set of inversions brings Braid's face between Short-hair's thighs, then her body seated backward on Short-hair's lap, legs wrapping around in a reverse embrace. As they roll to the floor, their torsos press against one another and their faces nearly meet. Although there is little overtly sexual contact, a sense of queer intimacy develops. This happens in part from the use of the stools, which suggest a domestic space, and in part because of the clothing and haircuts, which suggest a blurring between gender sameness and gender complementarity.

While the sequence described in *Right & Left* presents an alternative to the unequal, competitive, and abusive relationships presented in *Thunder and Rain*, the one that immediately follows mimics them in order to generate critique. A change in music signals a break between the two scenes: a playful piano melody is replaced by a heavy electronic static. Short-hair turns toward the audience, staring intensely, as she slowly takes a seat on one of the stools. Throughout the next scene, Short-hair is completely passive, while Braid manipulates her body, evoking the way that Ping engaged with Fanyi in *Thunder and Rain*. The difference, however, is that Short-hair does not resist. With her palm on the side of Short-hair's head, Braid gives a hard push and sends Short-hair's torso bobbing back and forth like a metronome. Then, Braid rolls Short-hair's head between her hands and presses her hand along Short-hair's face. Short-hair's neck and arms are limp, allowing her body to flail with each push or pull. Then, the flurry of motion is interrupted by a sudden stillness, as Short-Hair's body falls limp and motionless over the top of the stool. A direct comparison can be made between this scene and Fanyi and Ping's duet, with the difference that, here, Short-hair does not respond to Braid's manipulations. Throughout the interaction, Short-hair's sustained inertness acts as a foil to Fanyi's initial resistance and then enjoyment, both of which had implied that Fanyi's subjectivity emerged in response to, or was sustained by, Ping's actions. By portraying Short-hair as completely without subjectivity in this sequence, *Right & Left* challenges the broader idea perpetuated in *Thunder and Rain*, namely, that the woman is an equal participant in, and even complicit in or welcoming of, abusive treatment by her male partner.

In the next sequence, Gu pushes this theme further, questioning whether such violent interactions are so commonplace as to engender the perception of femininity. At this point Short-hair is sitting upright on the stool and facing the audience, while Braid's arm is wrapped around her neck like a stranglehold. This resembles the position of Fanyi when her husband dragged her

in *Thunder and Rain*. Braid's arm squeezes around Short-hair's face, guiding it into a forward tilt into the audience. Short-hair's eyes suddenly appear enlarged, her chin narrowed, and her face white against Braid's dark gray shirt, all while her eyes look forward and slightly upward. The position eerily resembles the familiar pose of so many "cute" selfies, and she suddenly appears conventionally feminine for the first time. The neck of her shirt hangs loose from the previous actions and falls to expose her shoulders and upper chest. The viewer suddenly wonders: is it the changes to her clothing and how the lighting is landing on her face that has shifted her gendered appearance—or is it how her body is being moved?

If the sequences above offer a critical intervention into *Thunder and Rain's* portrayal of heterosexual relationships, then the following one speaks to that among the three females. Performing the alteration of one woman's appearance by another, it suggests adornment or "beautification" in the form of a gesture that could simultaneously be read as violent. First, Short-hair stands caught with her arms twisted around her waist, as Braid proceeds to hang the two stools from Short-hair's body, one from the back like a backpack and the other from the front like an oversized belt. As if Short-hair were a paper doll and the stools a set of push-pins, Braid presses the legs of the stools into convenient crevices: over the shoulders, under the armpits, under the crotch, around the hips. In a scene as absurd as it is poignant, Braid then guides Short-hair's arms to hold the two stools in place on her own body. Finally, holding onto the legs of the stools, Braid leads Short-hair into a series of twirls, as if the two were social dancing. Darkness slowly closes in on the stage, causing Short-hair's silhouette to be cast in shadow against the back wall. With the stools still hanging on her, their round tops add curves to Short-hair's hips and chest, while the eight stool legs appear in the shadow image like so many rods or spines sticking out of her torso. Finally, Braid steps away and, as if controlled by the momentum, Short-hair continues to twirl.

When read alongside Wang Me's *Thunder and Rain*, Gu Jian's *Right & Left* presents a new set of possibilities for performing women in Chinese contemporary dance. On the one hand, by presenting two women in a non-antagonistic, even intimate, relationship that is not mediated by male desire, *Right & Left* dislocates women's psychological and sexual subjectivity from its dependence upon and subordination to male desire. On the other hand, by embodying gendered violence through a female couple, in which the Tomboy appears to be subjected to the manipulations and adornments by her Femme partner—and made somehow strangely more "feminine" in the process—this invites the audience to reflect on multiple issues related to gender normativity and the ways in which women are typically portrayed in intimate

relationships. In *Right & Left* queer and feminist critique intersect to rethink (or re-perform) representations of women on multiple levels.

“Queer Tai Chi Remix,” or De-gendering the Nation

Since the early twentieth century, the image of the suffering woman has often been an allegory for the ailing nation in Chinese performance culture; yet while woman’s bodies and experiences stand in for the nation metaphorically, women are rarely depicted as the primary agents of national salvation or development.²² With this in mind, the next section of *Right & Left* is interesting for the way it challenges conventional understandings of women’s relationship to national culture, first by staging these conventions and then by undoing and complicating them.

If, following the manipulation sequence, Braid plays a social role marked as “masculine” and Short-hair one marked as “feminine,” the next scene can be read as a clear enactment, followed by critique, of conventional ideas about the respective roles of men and women in the national political sphere. After Short-hair’s spinning is engulfed by shadow, the lights come on again to reveal Braid standing tall at the front of the stage and staring into the audience, while Short-hair, the two stools still encumbering her body, stands at the back, hunched forward with her eyes cast toward her own feet. As if in separate worlds, the two perform different actions simultaneously. Braid performs a manic sequence in which she repeatedly brushes the top of her head with both hands while staring into the audience, causing her hair to become increasingly disheveled. Meanwhile, Short-hair, still hunched over, carefully and quietly balances one stool atop the other’s feet, constructing a small rectangular space between them. As Braid’s head-brushing motions intensify in speed and range, Short-hair crouches down and shrinks her body to fit into the space between the two chairs. This scene is abstract and minimalistic, and it would be a mistake to read it too literally. However, the image of Short-hair, as “woman/feminine,” contorting herself to fit a metaphorically domestic space, while Braid, as “man/masculine,” admonishes herself in an act that could be read as public, even intellectual, self-reflection provokes clear resonances with habits of modern Chinese nationalist discourse, in which gender difference is mapped onto a constructed distinction between private and public spheres.²³

Evidence that this scene references the theme of the gendered nation becomes clearer as it unfolds. After Short-hair quietly disappears from the stage, taking the stools with her, Braid is left alone on the space of the white

surface and table with which the work began. Staring into the audience, Braid takes a wide step to the side and sinks into a lowered stance with weight distributed evenly between both feet. Her hand slowly floats to one side, and she begins a sequence of movements clearly based on the Chinese martial arts form *taijiquan*, also known as “tai chi.” The link between this movement sequence and Chinese national and cultural identity is unmistakable—it appears in multiple forms of globalized popular culture associated with China, from martial arts films to wushu performance to a variety of contemporary dance styles that aim in different ways to embody “Chinese” (or in some cases “Taiwanese”) culture, such as the Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan and the Beijing Dance Academy’s Chinese classical dance curriculum. As Braid performs the movement, her body shows visible marks of the relationships and experiences that have already transpired on stage over the course of the performance—her hair is disheveled, her shirt stretched and loosened, and marks from contact with the white dusted floor still hang on her knees and shoulders. Thus, in her performance of the tai chi movements, Braid inserts an already established queer female subjectivity into the national or cultural imaginary of “China.”

Placing a queer female subject at the center of the national imaginary is not the extent of this sequence’s intervention. What happens next does something potentially even more drastic to normative discourses about how gender constructs and is constructed through national space: after performing several movements in a standard tai chi mode, Braid then seamlessly intertwines these actions with movements that break from it, which are unrecognizable as part of any established “Chinese” movement aesthetic. Allowing her left hand to drop and then rise up across her body like a clock hand, then arching her upper body and head back into a reverse arc, she is no longer performing tai chi. However, just as smoothly, she then drops back down to the low sinking stance, lowers her hands to waist level, and continues the previous sequence. With this intermingling of movement vocabulary, some marked as Chinese and some not, Braid does more than place a new body within the existing national form; she constructs her own version of the form, thereby redefining what is meant by “China” through her inhabiting of it. Here, play is central to Gu’s intervention. Much as the two women played with the stools as a way of rethinking sexual intimacy, in this scene Braid plays with national form as a way of rethinking national space.

When Short-hair rejoins Braid, performing her same movements in a different orientation, this suggests the replicability, and thus inheritability, of a queered national culture. Drawing on the literature of postcolonial gender and sexuality studies, cultural critic Gayatri Gopinath has argued that queer

sexuality tends to be excluded from national imaginaries because it is presumed to endanger the possibility of genealogical lineage at the center of biological and patrilineal notions of national identity.²⁴ Thus, when Short-hair doubles Braid's altered version of the national movement form, this suggests a queering of the conventional nation, in at least two ways: first, it proposes a model of reproduction based on a pairing of two women, in which patrilineal relations are unnecessary and irrelevant; and, second, it suggests that national culture is open to remolding and proliferation through the unrestrained bodily agency of women, something usually thought to endanger it.²⁵ The entire next duet is carried out in this hybrid movement style, a kind of queer tai chi remix. Pulsing rhythms add syncopation to the familiar floating hands; tilted torsos and angular arm lines break up the quintessential roundness of the movements. Here, nationalized form is no longer a guide for how a Chinese woman "should" move. Instead, it becomes a resource to be mined and transformed through her productive creativity.

Despite the fact that modern Chinese movement vocabularies like PRC Chinese classical dance were formed through processes of constant change and reformulation, many dance practitioners in China today find them highly restrictive when it comes to developing individual expressive styles.²⁶ Over years of conducting ethnographic fieldwork among professional dancers in China, I found that most dancers who rejected dance styles coded as "Chinese" did so because of what they described as the perceived lack of stylistic freedom these forms imposed. Gu Jian's professional bio narrates a similar process of her own artistic development. After being trained in both ballet and Chinese classical dance, it states, Gu was "dissatisfied with the monotony of conventional training, [and] she embarked on a path of meditative self-discovery."²⁷ Such a story suggests, following what has become a standard narrative for modern and contemporary dancers and choreographers around the world, that conventional or classical technique and self-discovery are somehow mutually exclusive.²⁸

Gu's creative use of movement marked as conventionally "Chinese" in *Right & Left* troubles this notion. By staging a reinvention and appropriation, rather than a complete rejection, of conventional forms, Gu performs something similar to what Gopinath identifies in her work as a queering of the nation from within, one that does not rely on a flight to an imagined "elsewhere." Gopinath writes,

Given that leaving, escaping, and traveling to a presumably freer 'elsewhere' is not an option or even necessarily desirable for many subaltern subjects, we must take seriously the myriad strategies through

which those who remain (out of choice or necessity) conspire to rework the oppressive structures in which they find themselves.²⁹

In Gu's case, fleeing to an "elsewhere" is certainly possible: the entire rest of the production is composed using movement languages that do not use movement forms marked as "Chinese." Thus, by inserting the tai chi movements in this sequence, Gu suggests a concerted effort to find ways of performing as a queer female within the space of the nation, rather than outside it. Like the women in Gopinath's texts, Gu suggests through this sequence that the rejection of conventional or culturally coded spaces is not a prerequisite for queer existence or self-expression.

What Gu does not engage with directly in this scene, however, is the aesthetic definition of gendered bodies that is also a strong component of many "Chinese"-coded movement forms. Chinese classical dance, one of the forms Gu studied in her conservatory training, is composed of "male" and "female" movement vocabularies that differ from one another. These movement styles grew out of the history of Chinese indigenous theater, in which male and female characters traditionally moved differently.³⁰ Since cross-gender performance was a central component of Chinese indigenous theater from at least the late eighteenth century, gender difference became something separated from the sex of the actor—something to be created and performed through artistic skill.³¹ While this denaturalized the connection between gender performance and the actor's sex, it also led to a firm codification of normative gendered embodiment, as actors (until the 1920s primarily men) were trained to play characters recognizable as "men" or "women" on stage.³² Within the PRC Chinese classical dance curriculum, tai chi movement is one of the few forms conventionally performed by both men and women. In the entirety of *Right & Left*, there is no use of movements from the Chinese classical dance vocabulary coded specifically as "female" or "male." Thus, by avoiding gender-specific movement actions in her citation of the Chinese classical dance repertoire, Gu avoids engaging fully with the problem of how gender-queer expression can exist or be explored within the national form as it is defined in PRC dance.

The Risks of Dancing Queer

What does it mean to talk about queer dance in a context in which "queer dance" as a concept does not exist? For Chinese citizens in twenty-first-century urban China, identifying publically as homosexual can bring serious negative social consequences, such as being fired from one's job, being harassed by

police, lacking access to regular medical care, and being shunned by friends and family.³³ Even though homosexuality was formally decriminalized and depathologized in China in 1997 and 2001, respectively, there continue to be no legal protections for homosexuals, and in 2008 representations of homosexuality were banned from public media.³⁴ Thus, when I asked Gu Jiani whether she considered *Right & Left* a work of queer dance, her first answer was “no,” but then she asked, “What is queer dance?” Part of writing about queer dance is thus starting these conversations, opening up the possibility for dance-making and dance-viewing to become a hearth for queer activism and community building.

Speaking openly about sexuality is not easy in China. While conducting fieldwork among Chinese dancers in 2008–2014, I audiotaped over two hundred interviews that dealt with sensitive topics ranging from political violence during the Cultural Revolution to corruption and bribe-taking in today’s dance schools. There was only one time, however, that an interviewee asked me to stop a recording midway so that something could be shared off record. When I turned off the tape, the twenty-year-old male contemporary dancer who sat across from me in the corner of a nearly empty restaurant in Beijing said in a hushed voice, “Actually, I’m gay.” If expressing one individual’s private identity in this context was so sensitive, how can queer identities be performed publically on a stage, in dance performances that require the collaborative support (and thus risk-taking) of many entities, institutions, and bodies?

In twenty-first-century urban China, as in many places around the world, people who do not conform to social expectations about gender—whether because they are homosexual or simply do not embody social norms about how “women” or “men” should behave—face discrimination and, often, violence. Queer dance is about challenging such social expectations about gender in all their forms. It is only by challenging these expectations and showing alternative possibilities that damaging and discriminating habits can ultimately be made visible and overturned.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Clare Croft for inviting me to participate in this anthology and for her insightful and supportive feedback throughout the writing and revision process. I am also grateful to Gu Jiani for sharing a complete video of her performance in Beijing, which served as the subject of this analysis. Tremendous thanks go to Alison Friedman of Ping-Pong Productions for introducing me to Gu Jiani’s work and for facilitating Gu’s 2015 visit to the University of

Michigan. This project benefited from generous funding and support from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Richard H. Rogel Center for Chinese Studies, and the Confucius Institute at the University of Michigan.

Notes

1. Andrew Kimbrough and Jin Xing, "Jin Xing in the New China: Redefining the Mainstream," *Drama Review* 48, no. 1 (T181) (Spring 2004): 106–23.
2. Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
3. My use of "China" here designates the People's Republic of China. It does not include Taiwan or diasporic communities.
4. These observations are based on ten years of experience as an ethnographer and historian of Chinese dance, a former student at the Beijing Dance Academy, and a producer of dance exchanges between China and the United States.
5. Family names come first in China. Gu (rhymes with "you" with a hard "g") is her family name and Jiani (pronounced "jeeah-nee") is her given name.
6. More on Gu's thoughts about the work can be found in the video interview that accompanies this book.
7. By using the terms "queer" and "feminist" together, I am drawing on a tradition of scholarship that recognizes the potential for shared concerns and intersections between queer and feminist critique. I follow Mimi Marinucci, one proponent of a specifically "queer feminist" analytic, when she writes, "this solidarity [between queer and feminist critique] seems born of a deep understanding that the oppression of women and the suppression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender existence are deeply intertwined." Mimi Marinucci, *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminism* (London: Zed, 2010), 106. While I would add that this is not always the case, and that LGBTQ individuals often experience different and/or greater forms of oppression even than women do in highly patriarchal societies, I contend that the alliance is a useful one in this case and for dealing in general with situations in which heteronormativity, gender normativity, and patriarchy operate as intersecting forms of social violence.
8. The 2005 controversy over the "tomboy" aesthetic of Li Yuchun, the short-haired female performer who won first place in a Chinese television singing contest *Supergirl*, suggests that this type of gender performance would be read as non-conforming among popular Chinese audiences. See Xin Huang, "From 'Hyper-feminine' to Androgyny: Changing Notions of Femininity in Contemporary China," in *Asian Popular Culture In Transition*, ed. Lorna Fitzsimmons and John Lent (London: Routledge, 2013), 133–55.

9. “T-P” refers to the concept of “Tomboy-Po” (Po refers here to the Mandarin word “*laopo*,” a colloquial term for “wife”), used among many lesbians in urban twenty-first-century China. It is sometimes compared to the butch-femme concept, though it is not entirely the same. See Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014). On the contested, variable, and changing meanings of “butch-femme” among queer females in North America, see Esther D. Rothblum, “The Complexity of Butch and Femme among Sexual Minority Women in the 21st Century,” *Psychology of Sexualities Review* 1, no. 1 (2010): 29–42.
10. Feng Shuangbai 冯双白 et al., *Zhongguo wudaojia da cidian* 中国舞蹈家大词典 (*Dictionary of Chinese dance artists*) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban she, 2006), 18–19.
11. For more on this program and Wang’s role in it, see Ruth Solomon and John Solomon, eds., *East Meets West in Dance: Voices in a Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, [1995] 2011).
12. Jin Hao 金浩, *Xin shiji Zhongguo wudao wenhua de liubian* 新世纪中国舞蹈文化的流变 (*New century Chinese dance culture and transformation*) (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2007).
13. Dong Yinghao 董英豪 and Wang Jing 王婧, “Wudao zhong de nüxing biao shu” 舞蹈中的女性表述 (Women’s expression in dance), *Minzu Tribune* 民族论坛 8 (2012): 108–9.
14. For a comparative analysis, see Tang Xumei 汤旭梅, “Wuju ‘Lei he yu’ dui ‘Leiyu’ de jiegou yu chuangsheng” 舞剧‘雷和雨’对‘雷雨’的解构与创生 (*Dance drama Thunder and Rain’s deconstruction and recreation of Thunderstorm*), *Journal of the Beijing Dance Academy* 北京舞蹈学院学报 (2007/3): 107–12.
15. For a complete English translation of the play and a discussion of it in historical context, see Xiaomei Chen, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
16. *Thunder and Rain* video recording, performed by the 2002 Modern Dance graduating class of the Beijing Dance Academy’s Choreography Department, author’s collection.
17. “Right & Left promotional materials,” Jiumai Cultural Promotion Corporation, <http://cama.cc/goods/show-417.html>.
18. For social media documentation of the creative process, see “GO_NSPACE 身体计划,” Beijing Weibo Internet Technology Corporation, http://www.x-weibo.net/u/5032902718/p_4.html. The analysis provided in this essay is based on a video recording of the work taken in this space in 2014. The same recording is included in the video database that accompanies this book.
19. “Eleventh Guangdong Dance Festival Online Program, 2014,” Guangdong Dance Festival, <http://www.gdfestival.com/en/programme.php>.
20. “Choreographer Gu Jiani,” Ping Pong Productions, <http://www.pingpongarts.org/projects/56/>.

21. “By My Side” 身边, Wudao.com, <http://q.dance365.com/topic/10032004?ordertype=desc>.
22. Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002); Shuqin Cui, *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003); Rosemary Roberts, *Maoist Model Theater: The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
23. Wendy Larson, *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
24. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
25. Doris Croissant et al., eds., *Performing “Nation”: Gender Politics in Literature, Theater, and the Visual Arts of China And Japan, 1880–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
26. On the history of change and individual voice in PRC Chinese classical dance, see Emily Wilcox, “Han-Tang *Zhongguo Gudianwu* and the Problem of Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Dance: Sixty Years of Controversy,” *Asian Theater Journal* 29, no. 1 (2012): 206–32.
27. Gu Jiani promotional materials. Supplied by Gu Jiani and Ping Pong Productions, March 2015.
28. For a critique of this narrative, see Ananya Chatterjea, “On the Value of Mistranslations and Contaminations: The Category of ‘Contemporary Choreography’ in Asian Dance,” *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (2013): 4–21.
29. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 91.
30. Li Zhengyi 李正一 et al., *Zhongguo gudianwu jiaoxue tixi chuangjian fazhan shi* 中国古典舞教学体系创建发展史 (History of the development of the teaching system of Chinese classical dance) (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2004).
31. Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
32. The ban on women in Peking opera lasted from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. On the reintegration of female actors into Chinese theater and their impact on gender performance, see Siyuan Liu, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On a genre of Chinese theater in which women traditionally play the roles of both male and female characters, see Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).
33. Lisa Rofel, “Grassroots Activism: Non-Normative Sexual Politics in Post-Socialist China,” in *Unequal China: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Inequality*, ed. Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo (New York: Routledge, 2013), 154–66.
34. Rofel, “Grassroots Activism,” 155.