

Rethinking Dance

History

Issues and Methodologies

Geraldine Morris and
Lorraine Nicholas

When place matters

Provincializing the 'global'

EMILY E. WILCOX

Introduction

IN THE FIRST EDITION of *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*, Alexandra Carter discussed the need for new stories in dance history. In particular, she highlighted the importance of moving beyond linear narratives with clear endpoints in the present. '[O]ur histories can accommodate activities which do not seem to contribute in any obvious ways to the "development" of the art form but, in their time, were a vital part of it' (Carter 2004: 13; also this volume). As dance historians, Carter's critique helps us recognize that writing about dance history is important even when it does not validate today's artistic tastes and ideas. It suggests that such scholarship may be even more urgent, since it may help us overcome the biases of our own time.

Building on Carter's insights, I would like to suggest that it is not only temporal but also spatial and formal prejudices that call for new stories in dance history. Whereas Carter's concerns are with the problems of presentism – making dance history serve values and practices of the present – the concerns addressed in this essay are with problems of placeism – making dance history serve the values and practices of particular places or communities. Like time, place is entangled with issues of culture, and it is the organic combination of *where*, *how*, and *with whom* people dance that constitutes place in the context of dance history.¹ As I use it in this essay, 'place' is not limited to physical location, but includes translocal networks of dance communities defined by shared dance activities. To combat placeism in this sense means telling stories that are varied not just geographically but also in the types of dance spaces, practices, and communities they engage.

As a scholar of dance history specializing in China, my concerns about placeism are prompted by observations about the scholarly prejudices at work in my own

field. Since the early 2000s, there has been an exciting growth in Anglophone scholarship dealing with dance history in China and the broader Sinophone world, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora. Thematically, however, this scholarship has been uneven in the spaces and communities with which it has engaged. Taken as a whole, its focus has been disproportionately on practitioners working within the broad category of modern and postmodern dance. Ensembles such as Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan and City Contemporary Dance Company of Hong Kong and individuals such as Ts'ai Jueh-yüeh, Wu Xiaobang, H.T. Chen, Jin Xing, and Shen Wei have been privileged at the expense of companies and artists working in other media (e.g. Chen 2003, 2009; Kwan 2003, 2009, 2013; Lin 2004, 2010, 2016; Minarty 2005; Gerdes 2010; Seetoo 2013; Ma 2015, 2016). This has produced a placeist perspective in the field, which has limited the types of stories dance historians tell about the Sinophone world.²

In this essay, I consider how the concept of the 'global' has contributed to this kind of placeism in the writing of dance history. Since their popularization in the 1990s, the concepts of the 'global' and 'globalization' have been methodologically very productive. By mapping cultural flows through transnational exchange and diaspora, these ideas challenged earlier approaches that emphasized bounded communities and place-based identities (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Furgeson 1997b). Later, by highlighting the agency of people and places outside the global North, they also helped complicate core-periphery models (Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Ong and Collier 2005). While the benefits of these approaches are clear, there is also a need for critical reflection on new prejudices they have introduced. In the field of dance scholarship, one such prejudice is the tendency to privilege practitioners of modern and postmodern dance in the writing of dance history most often described as 'global'. Such an approach is particularly troubling for dance historians, because it obscures alternative subjects and limits our understanding of dance practices present and past. In this sense, limited perceptions of what counts as 'global' promote placeism in the writing of dance history.

The tendency to equate modern and postmodern dance with the 'global' is not accidental. It reflects specific cultural, economic, and political conditions that define the historical phenomenon of globalization and discourses about the global in Anglophone academia. The English term 'globalization' first emerged in the 1960s and became commonplace in academic discussions from the 1990s onward (Dalby 2008). Although many features of late twentieth-century globalization appeared before the 1990s, the rise in popularity of globalization discourse, as well as the specific historical changes it has come to describe, dates to this period. Specifically, many aspects of what is now called 'globalization' and the 'global' relate directly to the new economic, political, and cultural conditions that emerged after the Cold War, in a new period marked by the merging of world markets and the unprecedented ascendance of US hegemony (Klein 2003).

The spread of US culture to places that had previously rejected it in favour of other transnational affiliations was an important feature of the 'global' moment of the 1990s. This was made possible, in part, by the enforcement of neoliberal economic doctrines – prepared for in the Cold War but realized during the Reagan-Thatcher era – which became an essential, if not defining, feature of globalization. Because the United States was their main promoter, these doctrines are also called 'the Washington consensus' (Dalby 2008: 430). Along with these economic changes came the widespread acceptance, even naturalization, of US ideology – a thought system hinged on values such as 'freedom' and 'individualism'. Perhaps the greatest impact of globalization in the sphere of culture has been the increasing impossibility of thinking outside these values, making it more difficult to reflect on their limitations.³

Dance history is not politically, economically, or culturally neutral and, therefore, cannot be separated from these broader historical events. Throughout the Cold War, the US State Department actively promoted modern and postmodern dance as embodiments of US culture, to 'contain' the spread of communism and promote US interests abroad (Kowal 2010; Croft 2015). By the 1990s, the advent of globalization made possible an even greater international spread of these dance forms, particularly in places like China that had once resisted them as embodiments of US imperialism (Ou 1995). Meanwhile, in dance scholarship the term 'global' increasingly came to refer to experiments that emerged from this new expansion of modern and postmodern dance around the world. The surge in research on modern and postmodern dance in the Sinophone sphere reflects both the historical phenomenon of globalization during the 1990s and the rise of the 'global' as a theme in dance studies.

Because of its historic importance during the Cold War as one of the most prominent ideological critics and opponents of US expansionism, China was one of the places where globalization had its greatest impact. Its history was different from that of Taiwan and Hong Kong, which had been allies of the United States during the Cold War. In China, there is a direct connection between globalization, US influence, and the spread of modern and postmodern dance. China's surge in modern and postmodern dance activities began in 1987, when the American Dance Festival and US-based Asian Cultural Council sent teachers to Guangdong, the area of China that was the first to enact economic liberalization policies and court foreign investment in the early stages of globalization. These efforts led to the founding of China's first officially recognized modern dance company, the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, in 1992 – just one year after the end of the Cold War. They also facilitated the training of China's first generation of modern and postmodern dance practitioners, including influential figures such as Jin Xing, Shen Wei, Wang Mei, Xing Liang, Ma Shouze, Yang Qiao, and others (Solomon and Solomon 1995). The explosion of companies specializing in modern and postmodern dance across

China during the 1990s and early 2000s was a direct result of increased exchange between dancers in China and the United States, which coincided with the expanding impact of US culture in China in nearly all other fields.

For the term 'global' to be used critically in the writing of dance history, it is essential that we move beyond the idea that modern dance and postmodern dance are culturally universal, neutral, or exempt from place-based identities and political histories. Building on the work of dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, and my own research on the history of dance in China, I argue that modern dance and postmodern dance are not neutral universals, but, rather, represent specific, place-based agendas that benefit from a myth of universalism. Before an effective reconceptualization of the 'global' can occur in dance history scholarship, modern and postmodern dance must be critically examined as place-based forms that promote culturally specific values.

One way of doing this critical work is by looking to moments in dance history when communities engaged in active resistance against the spread of modern and postmodern dance and explicitly described these forms as place-based political projects with non-neutral cultural values. This type of critical assessment occurred, I argue, among Chinese dancers during the 1950s, when socialist culture encouraged the principled rejection of US expansionism and Eurocentric cultural hierarchies. In today's post-globalization moment, when modern dance and postmodern dance enjoy increasingly hegemonic status in dance programming and scholarship around the world, investigating such historical voices is particularly urgent. By attending to communities who resisted, refused, and created their own alternatives to modern and postmodern dance, we can disrupt forms of placeism embedded in existing definitions of the 'global' in dance scholarship. In other words, we can acknowledge the fact that treating modern and postmodern dance as neutral universals is a form of placeism in itself.

The myth of neutrality: provincializing the global

There are good reasons why the language of the 'global' gained traction in dance scholarship. For many, the 'global' overcame problems inherent in an older concept of 'world dance', which had seemed to promote a 'West and the Rest' dichotomy for investigating dance history. Concepts of the 'global' recognized hybridity and interculturalism within the category of 'the West', while also breaking down perceived barriers around 'world' dance forms. For many, the formulation of 'global' was inherently non-hierarchical and inclusive, because it treated all dance forms as part of a shared sphere of cultural flows and interconnections, with none inherently privileged.

In a recent essay, Ananya Chatterjea (2013) contests this idealized conception of the global as an inclusive, non-hierarchical arena. In practice, Chatterjea argues, performance spaces marked as 'global' exhibit clear stylistic preferences:

While the idea of the 'global' seems to offer the promise of a range of aesthetics and a range of bodies from different contexts marking widely different understandings of beauty and power, the reality of what materializes on stage seems to suggest that there are some unspoken conditions for participation on the global stage that ensure some kinds of conformity.

(Chatterjea 2013: 12)

Chatterjea identifies a key ideological problem contributing to this culture of conformity in the global stage, especially as it relates to dances by Asian practitioners. According to her, many programmers and participants believe that modern dance and postmodern dance, unlike other dance forms, are free from cultural specificity and therefore more open to new identities and expressions. For this reason, they value the techniques and choreographic modes of modern and postmodern dance, believing them to be what Chatterjea calls a 'neutral universal':

What seems to be increasingly popular in the sphere of Asian 'contemporary' dance is a kind of ventriloquism, where contemporary Asia finds its voice through the signifiers of the Euro-American modern/postmodern, the latter passing once again as the neutral universal, which is able to contain all difference.

(2013: 11)

By using the term 'ventriloquism' here, Chatterjea attributes a cultural and place-based identity to the signifiers of modern and postmodern dance. Although these signifiers claim to be universal, she argues, they are in fact Euro-American. The phrase 'once again' also signals an important reference to historical repetition in Chatterjea's analysis: claiming universality for cultural forms that originated in the West is part of a repeating pattern: it appeared in colonialism, then in multiculturalism, and now in the global. Thus, Chatterjea warns, 'we need to be vigilant that these old violences are not perpetuated under the guise of "new" global ventures' (2013: 14). In other words, it is imperative that the 'global' not become a new way of retrenching old hierarchies.

One way to cultivate the vigilance Chatterjea calls for is by reinforcing the place-based histories of Euro-American cultural forms that are treated as universal. In his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) provided a model for this type of critique, calling it 'to provincialize'. In its earliest usage, the word 'provincialize' meant to speak or write in

a provincial dialect, or to make something seem provincial, as in 'of the provinces'. It was originally a sign of cultural backwardness. When mapped on a global scale during the time of Western colonialism, the colonies were equated with the provincial, while the European and North American metropolises were considered the centres of cultural sophistication.⁴

It was in a deliberate effort to overturn such colonial hierarchies that Chakrabarty called for the provincialization of Europe. He provocatively reversed the term's traditional values, insisting that Europe was provincial too. A historian by training, Chakrabarty made his critique by challenging the use of categories and trajectories derived from European history to write histories of the global South. Because actual history always exceeds these categories and trajectories, Chakrabarty argued, translating non-European phenomena through the categories and logics of an imagined Europe was highly problematic. To provincialize Europe, then, meant to strip away European culture's claim to universality and, furthermore, to recognize that furthering such claims only helped to promote Europe's power. According to Chakrabarty, Europe was just one corner of the world that gained power over other corners of the world, and claims to universality served this process.

To 'provincialize Europe' reterritorializes cultural norms and ideas that originated in Europe, recognizing two things in them simultaneously: (1) the universal presence they have attained as a result of modern world history and (2) their place-based origins. Explaining this method in a later essay, Chakrabarty wrote, 'To provincialize Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were indeed universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity' (2008: 96). Chakrabarty's point was that even though aspects of European culture have attained the capacity of universal application – due to colonialism, imperialism, and the spread of global capitalism – they are not inherently universal. Thus, their universality derives from the history of Western power, not from any actual capacity to contain all forms of difference.

The most salient example of this in *Provincializing Europe* is what Chakrabarty describes as the inability of modern European secular history to account for the agency of gods, something that appears frequently in local histories of South Asia. Translating such histories into a narrative that will satisfy the logical requirements of modern European historical thought necessarily requires loss – stories about gods and their agency must disappear. This process is what Chakrabarty calls 'the mediation of a universal, homogenizing middle term', in this case the middle term being secular history (2000: 85). By claiming to be universal, this process of translation denies the act of loss (the gods were never there to begin with, and they were not part of the true history), thereby erasing the evidence of its own inadequacy as a translation tool.

When modern dance and postmodern dance become universalized as a tool of expression for dancers around the world, a similar act of mediation takes place,

enacting similar forms of power inequality and loss. In Anglophone dance scholarship, ballet has long been recognized as a product of European cultural values (Keali'inohomoku 1983[1969–70]). As such, the adoption of ballet by non-European dance communities has regularly been treated as a process of cultural translation (e.g. Reynoso 2014). The same has not been true, however, in most discussions of modern and postmodern dance, whose adoption by non-Western artists tends to be either normalized as a process of modernization or valued as an expression of freedom and individualism. Adopting modern and postmodern dance tends to be imagined as a departure from local constraints or 'cultural traditions' constructed variously as inauthentic, convention-bound, or otherwise limiting (e.g. Ou 1995). It is rarely characterized as submission to US hegemony or a product of neoliberalism. Such arguments actually reproduce the ideology of globalization, while de-legitimizing dancers' choices when they do not fit this model.

To adapt Chatterjea's and Chakrabarty's insights into a methodology for dance history would be to recognize that modern dance and postmodern dance are not neutral mediators, and that they have a cultural context and political history that require critical reflection. To provincialize the global in dance history is to see modern and postmodern dance as carrying specific political and cultural values and having global relevance because of place-based histories, not because of their inherent artistic neutrality. As Chakrabarty proposes for the gods silenced by secular history, we must make space for the dancers and styles disappeared by the ascendance of modern and postmodern dance.

Resisting modern dance: recovering alternative voices

Throughout the Cold War, there were many who, for different reasons, expressed critical voices challenging modern and postmodern dance's claims to universalism.⁵ One example of this challenge appeared in 1958 in the Beijing-based journal *Wudao* (*Dance*). Reflecting socialist ideals dominant in China at the time, a Chinese critic named Xia Yu made an argument against using modern dance as the basis for China's dance education.⁶ Xia was responding to a proposal published two years earlier by Guo Mingda, a Chinese dancer who had studied modern dance in the United States and wanted to bring it to China.

Xia outlined several reasons for rejecting Guo's proposal. First, Xia argued that introducing modern dance would divert attention from creating new native dance forms, which was the focus of activity among Chinese choreographers at the time. 'Excuse me, but where does native dance stand in this scenario?' Xia asked (1958: 10).⁷ Second, promoting modern dance would, according to Xia, support an ideological view that was fundamentally at odds with China's socialist values. Modern dance claimed to be, in Xia's words, 'beyond class and beyond ethnicity'

(Xia 1958: 10). Yet, class and ethnic identity were considered essential to socialist notions of progressive politics. This point led directly to the last problem, in which Xia identified modern dance as essentially foreign. Xia likened Guo's proposed adoption of modern dance in China to a type of 'cultural invasion' (Xia 1958: 10). Rather than seeing modern dance as neutral or universal, Xia viewed it as a threat to local culture that was potentially invasive.

Although the exponents of modern dance imagined that it could transcend cultural and political differences, critics like Xia did not accept this claim. Rather, Xia interpreted this argument as part of the ideology of American cultural imperialism, which attempted to obscure the cultural specificity of modern dance and promote the idea that US culture was good for everyone. Conveying scepticism about the cultural neutrality of modern dance, Xia wrote, 'Guo says "all roads lead to Beijing", but this is not true. Some people want their roads to lead to New York, London, or Paris; for them this is a well-travelled and familiar old path' (1958: 10). By calling roads that lead to New York, London, and Paris as a 'familiar old path', Xia indexed the colonial consciousness in which subjects of European and US colonialism idealized the culture of the Western metropolises and viewed it as more advanced or appealing than their own culture. Here, Xia suggests that Guo holds a naïve view that dismisses these historical inequalities, since Guo believes that adopting modern dance can lead to a spatial consciousness in which 'all roads lead to Beijing'. Adopting an anti-colonial logic, Xia argues that the only way to combat the 'familiar old path' is to actively revolt against it. Thus, for Xia China's resistance to modern dance is part of breaking a much larger pattern of historical inertia, one in which US and Western European metropolises like New York, London, and Paris continue to be treated as centres of cultural knowledge. Xia wanted to end this pattern, and he saw resistance to modern dance as one method to do so.

The personal biography of Guo Mingda helps to explain his knowledge of modern dance and his eagerness to introduce it to China. Guo was born in Sichuan, China, and graduated from National Central University, an institution affiliated with the Nationalist Party, the political group that the United States backed during China's civil war. In 1947, Guo travelled to the United States, where he pursued a master's degree at the University of Iowa and then spent seven years studying modern dance in New York, working largely with Alwin Nikolais (Feng 2006: 400).

When Guo returned to China in 1956, he encountered a new environment: the People's Republic of China, founded in 1949, had already established a large system of dance institutions and its own new dance styles adapted from indigenous performance (Wilcox 2011, 2012, 2016). The global network in which Chinese dancers participated was linked not to the United States and Western Europe, with which Guo was familiar, but to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the postcolonial Third World (Wilcox forthcoming). As a result, Guo's ideas about dance were very unfamiliar to the majority of Chinese dancers, as theirs were to Guo. Moreover, rather than seeing US culture as a source of artistic inspiration, most of Guo's

Chinese colleagues viewed the United States as an ideologically backwards country with little to offer in terms of progressive culture (Liu 2015: 12).

Guo's lack of knowledge about the new forms of Chinese dance was apparent in his proposal. With the exception of Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky, the major figures informing Guo's proposal were Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Rudolf von Laban, neither of whom were considered important in China's dance circles at the time (Guo 1956: 12). Even more problematic was Guo's suggestion that the new styles of Chinese classical and folk dance be categorized as 'traditional' and US modern dance as 'modern' (Guo 1956: 14). The dance forms that Guo labelled 'traditional' had been created during the nine years that he was studying in Iowa and New York and were actually newer than the ones Guo was proposing to import from abroad. Thus, this categorization made little sense to Chinese readers, who saw the new Chinese dance styles as expressions of a new, revolutionary society. As the product of a different place-based dance community – namely US modern dance circles – Guo's ideas failed to translate into the new context of socialist China. Hence, Xia wrote, '[Guo] is far too unfamiliar with his own national arts. I really wish he would go to the countryside and take a look around' (1958: 11). Rather than uncritically adopting Guo's teachings on US modern dance simply because they came from a Euro-American metropole, Xia turned Guo's proposal around, inviting Guo instead to learn from the new dance developments in socialist China.

When looking back on this historical moment, many today sympathize with Guo, viewing him as a righteous underdog who championed the 'freedom' of modern dance in the face of the 'tyranny' of socialist culture. This is the narrative that best serves the common US-centric perspective promoted during the Cold War, and it is increasingly one also adopted among Chinese scholars eager to criticize China's socialist past and embrace the post-Cold War world. For dance historians concerned with overcoming placeism and other problematic effects of globalization in dance scholarship, however, Xia's perspective is important to recover and consider. In the post-globalization moment, it is the voices of resistance and the once very real alternatives they presented that are increasingly obscured in historical memory, in addition to being too often dismissed politically, artistically, and ideologically. When viewed from today's perspective, Xia's voice may sound grating or even irrelevant. Yet, I argue that it is precisely this quality that makes Xia's voice important. In Chatterjea's words, it offers 'non-alignment/ mistranslation/contamination' to 'create productive frictions and tensions' (2013: 19).

Conclusion

'Global' is not a neutral concept; it too has political and ideological implications. As Arif Dirlik writes, '[G]lobalization discourse is of obvious ideological utility in sugar-coating an unprecedented US corporate domination of the world' (2010: 5).

When using the term 'global' in dance history, it is important to be aware of these political and ideological implications and to avoid reproducing them uncritically. Promoting a form of 'global' dance history that focuses disproportionately on spaces and communities of modern and postmodern dance risks re-inscribing the agendas of globalization and their attendant place-based prejudices. It also risks obscuring the alternative global networks and challenges to US capitalist culture that thrived during the Cold War but ultimately disappeared in the new era of globalization. These networks are often obscured in dance historical work that ties the 'global' to connections to modern and postmodern dance.⁸

Far from being neutral, modern dance and postmodern dance advance place-based cultural agendas, and their universalization came with place-based costs. Asia is one of the places where the exercising of US power was felt most keenly in the decades of the Cold War. As Amy Kaplan points out, the markets of Asia were 'long the chief prize sought by advocates of [US] expansionism' (1993: 14). During the twentieth century Asia became the literal place in which US wars of influence were waged, often with extreme human, material, and cultural consequences (Klein 2003). Through colonization of the Philippines, nuclear bombing and occupation of Japan, support for martial law in Taiwan, engagement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and support for anti-government uprisings in China and Indonesia, US intervention in Asia was consistent, intensive, and often violent. When we write about dance history in Asia, it is important that we engage with these issues. Rather than being isolated from geopolitics, the history of modern and postmodern dance, in particular, is directly entwined with it.

In the post-globalization moment, it is especially important to recover spaces and communities that represent resistance to the current dominant geographical imaginaries and their related dance values. Examining these alternatives will help to undo the ideological work of globalization. It will open up new conversations about the costs of 'freedom', the limitations of the 'individual', and the violence of the 'universal'.

Notes

- 1 Here, I am drawing on the extensive anthropological literature on place-making. See for example Gupta and Furgeson (1997a).
- 2 There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern. What I am identifying here is a broader trend of the field as a whole.
- 3 For more on the culture of neoliberalism, see Brown (2015).
- 4 This definition is based on the entries for 'provincialize' and 'provincial' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., published by Oxford University Press in 1996.

- 5 Although ballet also claimed universal relevance in some contexts as a symbol of European elite culture, because ballet was promoted by both the United States and the Soviet Union, it was not as directly associated with Western capitalism. See Ezrahi (2012), Giersdorf (2013), and Croft (2015).
- 6 At the time, China's dance education included a blend of Soviet-style ballet and European character dance, Chinese opera training, and the newly created native dance styles of Chinese classical, folk, and ethnic dance.
- 7 Translations from Chinese are the author's own.
- 8 An example of this is the dance festivals hosted by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, which were widely attended by artists from the socialist and Third World countries. Chinese dancers regularly attended these festivals between 1949 and 1962, and they defined a form of 'global' aesthetics for Chinese dancers at this time.

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