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Performing Bandung: China's dance diplomacy with India, Indonesia, and Burma, 1953–1962

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ABSTRACT

While dance was a common element of international diplomacy activities around the world during the 1950s and early 1960s, scholars have only recently begun to focus attention on this topic, especially as it concerns relationships forged beyond those of the Cold War superpowers. Using previously unexamined historical materials such as rare photographs and performance programs, dancer biographies, autobiographies and personal interviews, unpublished institutional histories, and contemporary periodicals, this article demonstrates not only that dance was an integral part of China's inter-Asian cultural exchange between 1953 and 1962, but also that the PRC developed a distinct approach to dance diplomacy. Through a series of exchanges with India, Indonesia and Burma, China's foreign ministers and dancers developed and refined a method of dance diplomacy in which the primary goal was to learn from, rather than export to, these neighboring countries. This approach harnessed the affective power of embodied aesthetic culture to literally "perform" Bandung ideals, namely, cooperation and mutual respect among Asian nations and an anti-imperialist cultural stance. Through the establishment in 1962 of the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, the PRC institutionalized this model of dance diplomacy, expanding it to include the entire Third World. Bandung-era dance diplomacy initiatives of the 1950s and early 1960s not only supported important new international alliances and political movements, but also asserted China's self-identity as part of the East in the way that challenged Eurocentric ideals previously entrenched in China's domestic dance field.

KEYWORDS

Dance diplomacy; Bandung; China; India; Indonesia; Burma; performance; cultural exchange

Introduction

In the 1982 Chinese documentary film, *Flowers of the East* (*Dongfang zhi hua*), a ten-second clip of archival footage, taken likely in 1962, offers a brief glimpse into the world of PRC Bandung-era cultural diplomacy (Wang 1982). The shot first shows a stage, where six dancers clad in Balinese-style wrap skirts and backed by the live accompaniment of a gamelan orchestra perform the *pendet*, a Balinese welcome dance. A male dancer, dressed as a village priest, traverses the shot from left to right in a comical sideways skip, elbows out, holding a small offering. Then, six elegant women wearing flowers in their hair and performing barefoot in unison take center stage. In their right hands, the women hold silver alms bowls containing flower petals up at eye level. Stepping quickly in place, they swish and rotate their left hands back and forth, also at eye-level, while tilting their heads side to side and

compressing their ankles, knees, and hips to form s-shaped body lines. The camera cuts to the audience, where four Chinese dignitaries – Foreign Minister Chen Yi, Chairman Liu Shaoqi, Liu’s wife Wang Guangmei, and Premier Zhou Enlai – sit flanking a foreign guest: Hartini, the fourth wife of President Sukarno of Indonesia. Hartini sends a smile toward the camera, as Wang and Liu lean in toward her, apparently chuckling at a joke made by Zhou, who is seated on her other side. Behind them, a sea of people watch the show from round banquet tables scattered with napkins and used dining ware. Their eyes are intently fixed on the stage and looks of delight fill their faces. The mood is jovial, relaxed and friendly.¹

While dance was a common element of international diplomacy activities around the world during the 1950s and early 1960s, scholars have only recently begun to focus attention on this topic, especially as it concerns relationships forged beyond those of the Cold War superpowers.² Jennifer Lindsay and Maya Liem’s volume on Indonesian cultural activities between 1950 and 1965 was the first to examine dance diplomacy in the context of inter-Asian relations, and it demonstrates the central role that dance played as a medium for establishing ties among Asian countries during this period (Lindsay and Liem 2012).³ Challenging the common misperception of Mao-era China as culturally isolated, scholars of PRC studies have recently turned increased attention to Chinese internationalism and cultural exchange during the Mao era, with a special focus on the previously understudied pre-Cultural Revolution period of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁴ While performance-related cultural exchange between China and other Asian countries has begun to be explored in this newly emerging field of scholarship, existing studies deal with theater and film, not dance.⁵ As a whole, dance remains an understudied area within Chinese and Sinophone studies, especially as compared with other subfields of Asian studies.⁶ Nevertheless, as in other places across the world, in the PRC dance has been one important medium through which transnational relationships and aspirations have been constructed and negotiated in the cultural sphere.⁷ Thus, dance offers an important vantage point through which to understand the history of cultural diplomacy, and the Chinese situation is no exception.

Using previously unexamined historical materials such as rare photographs and performance programs, dancer biographies, autobiographies and personal interviews, unpublished institutional histories and contemporary periodicals, this article demonstrates not only that dance was an integral part of China’s inter-Asian cultural exchange between 1953 and 1962, but also that the PRC developed a distinct approach to dance diplomacy during the same period. Building on the ideological principles of the Bandung movement, China’s dance diplomacy with other Asian countries during the 1950s and early 1960s emphasized equality and exchange, employing a structure of interaction that foregrounded mutual learning over self-presentation. Through a series of exchanges, with India from 1953 to 1957, with Indonesia from 1954 to 1958, and finally with Burma from 1955 to 1961, China’s foreign ministers developed and refined a method of dance diplomacy in which the primary goal was to learn from, rather than export to, these neighboring countries. This approach harnessed the affective power of embodied aesthetic culture to literally “perform” Bandung ideals, namely, cooperation and mutual respect among Asian nations and an anti-imperialist cultural stance that sought to contrast itself from the expansionist aims of the Cold War superpowers.

The scene described above offers a typical example of the distinctive model of dance exchange that was pursued by the PRC in relationships with other Asian countries during the Bandung era. The dance performance occurred as part of a banquet held in Beijing during a diplomatic visit by a delegation from Indonesia in September of 1962, which included the wives of top Indonesian officials, such as Hartini Sukarno. The dancers who performed the Balinese *pendet* and played the gamelan orchestra during the banquet, however, were not members of the visiting delegation. Rather, they

were Chinese performers, part of a special group that had been training in non-Chinese Asian performance styles, with a focus on dance for diplomatic purposes, since 1954. In January of 1962, the group had been organized into a national-level ensemble sponsored by the PRC Ministry of Culture, known as the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble (*Dongfang gewutuan*, hereafter OSDE).⁸ OSDE's mission, according to public statements issued at the time, was to "study and perform music and dance of the people of Asia, Africa, Latin America" ("Study and perform" 1962).⁹ A product of its specific global historical moment, the ensemble offered an aesthetic embodiment of the anti-colonial internationalism that emerged during the Bandung era, what Young (2003) calls "tricontinentalism" and Prashad (2007) calls the "Third World movement."¹⁰ The ensemble operated for only four years before it was temporarily disbanded in 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution (Nan 1997). Although it was revived in 1977 and continues to operate today, the ensemble no longer promotes the political and cultural ideals it did during the early 1960s. This article thus focuses only on the early history of this ensemble, specifically what it can tell us about PRC cultural diplomacy during a critical time of changing international relationships and identity formations within Asia.

The foreign dances enacted by Chinese performers at diplomatic events held in China and other parts of Asia during the 1950s and early 1960s were both the tools and the products of international exchange. To learn to perform foreign dance styles, Chinese artists trained directly with foreign teachers, through interactions that themselves constituted a form of diplomatic contact. To learn the Balinese *pendet* and gamelan accompaniment performed at the banquet, for example, Chinese artists had studied for a year with four Balinese performance experts from Indonesia, who were specially sent by the Indonesian government, along with a gamelan set gifted by Sukarno himself, to teach Balinese dance and music at the Beijing Dance School (*Beijing wudao xuexiao*). While other works were learned through less formal methods – by having Chinese dancers tour with a foreign ensemble while it was performing in China, or by arranging for performers to take intensive classes with local artists while they were on tour abroad – they all required the same process, namely, extended submission of Chinese bodies to the tutelage of foreign instructors. This practice of training, even more than the performances themselves, became the primary site in which Bandung ideals about cooperation and respect played out through the movements of human bodies. The staged performances were moving, and thus useful for generating affective connections between state leaders and their representatives, because they materialized visibly the results of this training process. As the dancers themselves often recount in their personal reflections on these experiences, it was the sweat and pain they endured in the classroom that made it possible for them to become indispensable tools for China's state-level diplomatic activities. Individual dancers' bodies thus came to represent the dedication China as a nation espoused toward ideals such as working together, valuing diverse Asian cultural traditions, and learning from one another.

This article is primarily concerned with China's inter-Asian dance diplomacy between 1953 and 1961, a critical, yet often elided, moment in the historiography of cultural exchange between China and each of the three countries examined here: India, Indonesia and Burma. The year 1962 marks an important turning point in China's relationship to each of these nations. With the eruption of the Tibetan uprising in 1959 and the subsequent Sino-Indian border war, PRC relations with India had deeply soured by the time OSDE was established in January of 1962. The rise of the PKI in Indonesia and China's military and political involvements in Burma ultimately ended in a violent backlash and mass killings in Indonesia in 1965–1966 and the establishment of a military junta in Burma in 1962. Thus, ironically, the nature of China's relationship to the Bandung movement and the later non-alignment project fundamentally changed at the very moment that China's Bandung-era dance diplomacy became institutionalized through the founding and tours of the OSDE. By focusing on the

specific period of 1953 to 1961, this article seeks to reconsider China's relationships with India, Indonesia, and Burma during a period that turned out to be short-lived when viewed within a longer temporal span, especially from conventional narratives of Cold War history. The complex geopolitical factors that ultimately led to a breaking down of the alliances forged during the Bandung movement have been the subject of numerous historical studies and are not of primary interest here. Rather, this essay seeks to understand how the Bandung moment itself – defined here as the period from 1953 to 1961 – can contribute to better understandings of global dance history and, specifically, to the operations of dance-in-diplomacy that emerged among Asian nations, beyond the already well-studied realm of Soviet and US dance exchange.

“Do not just introduce our culture; you must also study their culture”

Establishing diplomatic ties with other Asian countries was of vital importance to the PRC during the 1950s, and among these China's relationship with India was especially significant. After the Chinese Civil War ended with the Communist Party victory in 1949, many countries, particularly the United States, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the newly established Communist Party-led People's Republic of China (PRC), instead recognizing the losing Nationalist Party-led Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. Sino-US tensions heightened during the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, when the United States further blocked PRC admission to the United Nations, imposed a debilitating trade embargo, and threatened nuclear attacks on Beijing. As part of its Cold War agenda to “contain communism,” the US developed new or strengthened existing alliances with many of China's neighbors, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan and Ceylon, while supporting the Dutch claim to West Papua and helping France hold onto its colonies in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Amidst these US efforts to isolate China, Asian countries not affiliated with the socialist sphere, such as India, became China's important strategic allies. On 1 April 1950, India was the first non-socialist country to establish diplomatic relations with the new PRC government, followed soon after by Burma (Mark 2012). India was a particularly important ally because Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru publically advocated for the PRC's inclusion in the UN and other important international organizations, directly opposing the US position (Nanda 2003, 150).

China's special relationship with India was reflected in performing arts exchange. Between 1949 and 1952, the only countries to send official arts delegations to the PRC were those that belonged to the socialist sphere: the USSR, North Korea, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Romania. This pattern continued during the first half of 1953, with China hosting further performing arts delegations from North Korea, Mongolia and Poland. However, in the summer of 1953, a historic event occurred with the arrival of the Indian Art Delegation – the first performing arts delegation from a non-socialist country to visit the PRC.¹¹ The 29-member delegation stayed in China from 20 July to 25 August, visiting five major Chinese cities: Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (Song 1994, 226). Dancers played a significant part in this visit, with the group including several performers of Indian classical dance, such as noted Bharatanatyam dancer Chandralekha Patel, a Kathakali troupe led by the renowned poet Vallathol Narayana Menon, and the famous Kathak dancer Damayanti Joshi (Qi and Qian 1953; Zhao 1953; “The Social Whirl” 1953). There is no evidence that Chinese dancers learned or performed Indian dance during this tour. However, Chinese media coverage of the Indian delegation's performances laid the groundwork for such engagement, by taking an elevated, educational tone and conveying detailed information about the performers, the dances they performed, and the artistic and cultural significance of each work (Qi and Qian 1953; Zhao 1953; Zheng 1953).

It was through two subsequent performing arts exchanges with India in 1954 and 1955 that the PRC first developed and applied its distinctive method of Bandung-era dance diplomacy. On 6 December 1954, a 67-person cultural delegation arrived in New Delhi from China, the first such visit, as reported by *Times of India*, in “over a thousand years” (Song 1994, 182; “Chinese Cultural Delegation” 1954). In the delegation was a dance group led by Trinidad-born Chinese choreographer Dai Ailian (also known as Tai Ai-lien) and made up primarily of young dancers from Shanghai, one of whom was the 20-year-old Zhang Jun, who would go on to be a founding member of OSDE (Wang and Long 1999, 750; Xue 2013) (Figure 1). The group had a demanding schedule during its six-week tour, which took them from New Delhi to Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, where they attended cultural events and performed their own program consisting of contemporary Chinese dance works such as Dai’s “Lotus Dance” (*Hehua wu*) (“Chinese Artistes” 1954; “Record Crowd” 1954; “Chinese Team’s Visit” 1954; “News from States” 1955; “Six-Week Tour” 1955). (Figure 2). Nevertheless, they also sought out opportunities to learn Indian dance. In her memoir, Dai Ailian recalls the instructions she received from Zhou Enlai, then China’s Foreign Minister and Premier, before they left for India. “The Premier told us: The primary purpose of this tour is to promote friendship. So, no matter where we go, we must respect the local people’s culture, and we must learn from them” (Dai 2003, 183).¹² When Zhou met with the entire delegation, he reportedly told them: “Do not just introduce our culture; you must also study their culture” (Xue 2013, 8). Zhou’s message made its way into speeches by Zhang Zhenduo, the delegation’s leader, and was reported in the Indian media during the tour. One headline, for example, read: “China Desires to Learn Other Nations’ Art: Not Narrow Nationalists, Say Delegation” (“China” 1954).¹³ The dancers were there not only to perform but also to study.

Heeding Zhou’s instructions, Dai did her best to arrange classes for herself and the young dancers under her care. In her memoir, she describes studying personally from a Kathak guru in New Delhi and a Bharatanatyam dancer in Madras, as well as using her training in Labanotation (a form of dance notation) to record a piece of Bharatanatyam dance. She required the young dancers to study Indian dance styles in each place they visited, although motivating them was apparently difficult (Dai 1956, 183–186). Zhang Jun recalled that one of the dancers Dai arranged for her to study with during this tour was the famed Uday Shankar, with whom Zhang would have the chance to work again when Shankar visited Beijing three years later (Zhang 1982, 20–22; Modegema 2011). After they departed Calcutta on 20 January 1955, the group went directly to Burma, where they



Figure 1. Dance group in 1954 Chinese Cultural Delegation to India. Dai Ailian (center); Zhang Jun (front row, first from left). Reprinted with permission from Shu Qiao and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.



Figure 2. “Lotus Dance” (*Hehua wu*) performed by Chinese Cultural Delegation during the 1954 tour in India. Reprinted with permission from Zhang Jun and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.

stayed until March of 1955 (Song 1994, 182).¹⁴ After returning to China for a few months, the same group then toured Indonesia from 2 June to 15 August 1955 (Song 1994, 183). Shu Qiao, another young dancer from Shanghai who went on these tours, recalled that they studied at least one classical and one folk dance form in each country and that they returned to China with five or six sets of local dance costumes used in later performances (Figure 3).¹⁵

India sent a return delegation to China in the summer of 1955, which arrived on 31 May and left on 8 August, making it roughly coincide with the Chinese Cultural Delegation’s trip to Indonesia (Song 1994, 227).¹⁶ Almost twice the size of the 1953 Indian delegation, with 51 people, the 1955 Indian Cultural Delegation also had a large dance presence, including Kathak dancer Anuradha Guha, a Kathakali group starring Shirin Vajifdar and Krishna Kutty, a Manipuri group featuring Suryamukhi Devi, Vinodini Devi and Premlata Devi, and Bharatanatyam dancer and former Miss India, Indrani Rahman (“Performances” 1955; Chen 1955; Wang and Long 1999, 751). Continuing the “learn from them” strategy, the Chinese hosts arranged workshops in which the Indian artists exchanged knowledge with local experts in their fields (Jin 1955). Additionally, eight Chinese dancers were assigned to travel with the Indian delegation during their tour across China, so that they could receive training in Indian dance (Figure 4) (Ding et al. 1955; Wang and Long 1999, 751). *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) reported while the group was in northeast China that the dancers were receiving intensive training in Kathakali dance and that both they and Krishna Kutty, their instructor, were making herculean efforts to ensure they gained proficiency by the end of the tour (Fu 1955). On 1 July, the Chinese dancers debuted their Indian dance skills at Huairan Hall in Beijing, when they joined the Indian delegation on stage during a performance attended by PRC and North Vietnam heads of state Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh (“Chairman Mao” 1955). An extant



Figure 3. Chinese dancer Shu Qiao learning Balinese dance during the 1955 tour to Indonesia. Reprinted with permission from Shu Qiao and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.



Figure 4. Indian Kathakali performer Krishna Kutty teaches Chinese dancers during the 1955 Indian Cultural Delegation tour in China. Reprinted with permission from *China Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*).

program from one of the 1955 Indian Cultural Delegation's Shanghai shows also includes this number, entitled "Happy dance" (*kuai le wu*) or "Kummi" and it was performed by eight Chinese dancers under the direction of Krishna Kutty (Shanghai Cultural Bureau 1955). One of the Chinese dancers listed, Cui Meishan, went on to be a founding member of OSDE (Founding public 1962).

Apparently satisfied with the results of these early experiments, Chinese leaders continued to arrange for local dancers to learn Indian, Indonesian and Burmese dance styles from foreign teachers while they were on tour in China over the coming years. Between 24 September and 20 November 1955, a 70-member Burmese Cultural Delegation toured 12 cities in China performing music and dance works (Song 1994, 228). Following the model established with the Indian Delegation a few months earlier, Chinese dancers from the Beijing-based Central Experimental Opera Theater (*Zhongyang shiyan gejuyuan*) were assigned to tour with the group, and they performed Burmese dance during the delegation's closing ceremonies in Kunming on 16 November 1955 ("The Burmese Cultural" 1955) (Figure 5).¹⁷ One year later, from 14 September to 14 November 1956, an 81-person Balinese arts delegation, which consisted mainly of dancers, visited nine major Chinese cities ("Indonesia Balinese dance ensemble arrives" 1956; Dai 1956; "Indonesia Balinese dance ensemble's performance" 1956; Song 1994, 228). Chinese dancers were again sent with the delegation to study with them on the road, this time two students from the Beijing Dance School, Zhang Jun and Yu Haiyan (Xue 2013, 7–8). Finally, in the spring and summer of 1957, two small Indian dance groups toured China and creating and taught works to be presented by Chinese performers during their



Figure 5. Chinese dancers Fang Bonian and Chen Yunfu of the Central Experimental Opera Theater perform Burmese dance, circa 1955. Reprinted with permission from Fang Bonian and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.

tours. The first group, featuring Kamala Lakshman and her younger sister Rhada, choreographed and rehearsed dances for Chinese performers in the China Youth Art Theater's large-scale production of *Shakuntala*, a drama by the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa ("India's famous" 1957; Wu 1957). A few months later, the Uday Shanker Dance Company toured China, and Uday Shankar himself choreographed and taught an Indian solo "Dance with Ball" (*Paiqiu wu*) to Zhang Jun ("Elegant and unforgettable" 1957; Modegema 2011, 12) (Figure 6). This dance became one of Zhang's signature works and one of the first pieces to enter the repertoire of OSDE (Founding public 1962).

In the fall of 1957, Chinese leaders heightened their investment in the Bandung dance diplomacy by establishing a new "Course in Oriental Music and Dance" (*Dongfang yinyue wudao ban*) at the Beijing Dance School, China's top professional dance conservatory. Four experts in Balinese music and dance – Wayan Likes, Ni Nyoman Artha, Wayan Badon and Wayan Mudana – arrived in China from Indonesia in September to serve as the course's first teachers, and the course was opened officially in November of 1957 with 17 students, studying both music and dance.¹⁸ For the first time, teaching Chinese dancers was the main purpose of the visit, rather than an added item on a performance itinerary.¹⁹ The teachers brought with them a 15-piece gamelan set gifted by President Sukarno that was used in the classes (Modegema 2011, 52; Xue 2013, 8). This course, which planted the seed for the OSDE, is documented in the archives of the Beijing Dance Academy (*Beijing wudao xueyuan*) in a series of photographs dated 1957 that depict Chinese students learning to play the gamelan and to perform Balinese dance led by Indonesian instructors in the studios of the Beijing Dance School (Figure 7).²⁰ The Course ended with a formal staged performance of Balinese music and dance, given by the 17 students in September of 1958, which is also documented with extensive photographs in the Academy archive.²¹ This performance was attended by Chinese Minister of Culture Mao Dun and the Indonesian ambassador to China, and the latter was apparently quite moved to see non-Indonesians perform such professional renditions of Indonesian dance (Xue 2013, 8). According to Yu Haiyan, who was a member of this class along with Zhang Jun, it was during this period of training that the Chinese dancers learned the Balinese *pendet* dance later performed in OSDE (Yu 1985). In May 1961, the group performed Indonesian music and dance for Sukarno in Indonesia (Modegema 2011, 52).

The last phase of China's Bandung-era dance diplomacy involved Burma and took place in 1960–1961, setting in motion the institutionalization of this model through the founding of OSDE in 1962. Although plans had initially been to invite a group of Indian dance instructors



Figure 6. Chinese dancer Zhang Jun performs Indian dance solo "Dance with Ball" (*Paiqiu wu*) choreographed and taught to her by Uday Shankar in 1957. Reprinted with permission from Zhang Jun and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.



Figure 7. Chinese students studying Balinese dance and gamelan from Indonesian teachers at the Beijing Dance School in 1957. Reprinted with permission from Zhang Jun and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.

to succeed the Indonesian teachers at the Beijing Dance School, the breakdown of Sino-Indian amity in 1959 following the Tibetan uprising and clashes related to border disputes meant that this was never realized.²² Instead, during the summer of 1960, a Burmese dancer came to continue the training of the 17 graduates of the Beijing Dance School's Course in Oriental Music and Dance, who were now stationed at China's Central Song and Dance Ensemble (*Zhongyang gewutuan*), also located in Beijing (Xue 2013, 9). In late summer and fall of 1960, while two Burmese performing arts delegations with a combined total of 222 people were visiting China, a Burmese dance expert by the name of Daw Khin Nyunt²³ was invited by the Chinese Ministry of Culture to teach Burmese dance at the Central Song and Dance Ensemble (Xue 2013, 9).²⁴ After more than three months of intensive training, the Chinese dancers performed an evening of Burmese music and dance under Daw Khin Nyunt's direction on 12 November 1960 in Beijing, which was attended by members of the Burmese embassy, the Chinese Premier and Vice Premier Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi, and Burmese living in Beijing ("Premier Zhou" 1960).

Sino-Burmese relations had reached a critical point for a variety of reasons by the end of 1960, and the performing arts once again became an important tool for China's diplomatic efforts during this delicate period.²⁵ At the end of 1960, coinciding with a PRC military campaign against Chinese Nationalist armies stationed in Burma, China sent a 246-person cultural and art delegation to Burma, which stayed from 12 December 1960 through to 13 February 1961 (Song 1994, 186). One of the biggest success stories of China's Bandung-era dance diplomacy occurred during this trip, through extremely positive responses to Burmese dances performed by the Chinese group trained in Beijing by Daw Khin Nyunt, who were part of the delegation (Wan and Jie 1961; Wan 1961). A classical Burmese dance duet performed by Zhang Jun and her partner Zhao Shizhong, in particular, turned out to be a favorite of Burma's Premier U Nu. A journalist for the *People's*

Daily described the events in Rangoon in early January 1961, when the Chinese delegation's tour coincided with a week-long visit by a Chinese political delegation, including Premier Zhou Enlai:

Zhang Jun's and Zhao Shizhong's performance of "Classical duet dance" really impressed the Burmese "baobo" [compatriots]. Premier U Nu also very much liked this work. On the evening of 3 January [the eve of Burmese Independence Day], during the banquet held by Ambassador Li Yimang for Zhou Enlai and the Chinese Friendship Delegation to Burma, [U Nu] saw Zhang and Zhao perform the dance, and he felt great satisfaction and appreciation. On 5 January, during the opening ceremony performance by the Chinese Culture and Art Delegation, right after this work finished and the performers were bowing, Premier U Nu stood up out of his chair, leading the entire room to enthusiastically applaud. To express thanks for this deep appreciation, the performers performed their dance for a second time. On the evening of 6 January, during the gala in President Mahn Win Maung's garden, Premier U Nu again made a recommendation to Premier Zhou Enlai, inviting Zhang Jun and Zhao Shizhong to perform the dance during the gala. (Gao 1961) (Figures 8 and 9)

It was not only the Burmese dances that elicited positive responses during the visit. At a farewell dinner hosted by Zhou on 8 January, Chinese performers presented a program consisting of dances from 14 Asian countries, among them Burma, India, Pakistan, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Cambodia and Afghanistan. One historian vividly describes the scene as follows:

When the dance of a country performed, that country's ambassador would walk over and make a toast to Zhou. The deep amity among the host and guests brought the energy of the gala to a climax; sounds of music, toasts, and clinking glasses followed one another in waves, and the whole room became thick with an atmosphere of friendship and joy. (Xue 2013, 9)

The Chinese officials were apparently so pleased with the effects of the dance diplomacy on this tour that it was during their flight back to China that they decided to formally establish the OSDE. When Zhang Jun and the other dancers returned from Burma in February, they were invited to a private



Figure 8. Chinese dancers Zhang Jun and Zhao Shizhong performing a Burmese classical dance duet in Burma, 1961. Reprinted with permission from Zhang Jun and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.



Figure 9. Chinese dancers Zhang Jun and Zhao Shizhong performing a Burmese classical dance duet in Burma, 1961. Reprinted with permission from Zhang Jun and the University of Michigan Pioneers of Chinese Dance Digital Archive.

dinner hosted by Foreign Minister Chen Yi and others at Zhongnanhai, where they were given plans about the new ensemble (Modegema 2011, 55).

The politics of performance

The foreign choreographies performed by China's dancers during the 1950s and early 1960s can be read as moving portraits of China's changing international relations during this period, particularly its efforts to establish alliances with countries outside the socialist sphere. China's first set of exchanges with India, Indonesia and Burma, which occurred between 1953 and 1955, seemed designed to support China's bid for inclusion in the 1955 Asian–African Conference, also known as the Bandung Conference. Taking place from 18–24 April 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, the conference was intended to provide an opportunity for the nations of Africa and Asia, many of which had very recently gained independence from European colonial rule, to meet and discuss world issues without the interference of western powers.²⁶ The PRC wished to be invited, but it was unclear whether this would happen due to US pressure not to recognize the PRC in international fora. Thus, it is certainly no accident that the meeting at which the Bandung conference's five host nations – Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan – met to finalize their invitation list coincided with the China cultural delegation's trip to India in 1954. Just one week after the *India Times* article about China's eagerness to learn from other countries, the *Times* published another article announcing that China would be among the nations included at Bandung (Reddy 1954). It is notable that the first Indonesian cultural delegation had visited China just a few months prior to this meeting, and the Chinese delegation in India was heading to Burma soon after. The specific choice of engaging with

these three countries also makes sense given that Pakistan and Ceylon (the other two host nations) leaned toward the US.

Similar alignments can be identified with most of the post-1955 exchanges as well, with each cultural tour coinciding either with a newly formed relationship or crucial moment of diplomatic tension. Jennifer Lindsay notes this pattern in the Indonesian cultural exchanges of the same period, writing, “Cultural missions were timed to bolster political alliances, but they were also sent when Indonesia’s political relations with the destination country might be fragile” (Lindsay and Liem 2012, 205). If, as Chi-Kwan Mark suggests, the end of 1957 was the beginning of the cooling of Sino–USSR relations and an upsurge in Mao’s aspirations toward global leadership, this could be the broader political context behind the PRC’s deepened institutionalization of inter-Asian dance diplomacy as represented by the founding of the Course in Oriental Music and Dance that year and the longer and more serious investments in dancer training in these styles thereafter (Mark 2012, 41). The unusually large cultural delegations exchanged between the PRC and Burma in late 1960 and early 1961 occurred during what Hongwei Fan called “a new high” in bilateral relations between the two countries, as reflected in both parties’ signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression in 1960, followed in 1962 by the launching of a “Burmese Way to Socialism” (Fan 2012, 7–27, 19).

While it is impossible to assess the exact impact that dance diplomacy had on geopolitics during this period, it is important to consider how the artistic choices enacted in these projects conveyed specific cultural messages and engendered affective processes that furthered the political goals of the Bandung movement and China’s broader political engagements with India, Indonesia and Burma during this period. A critical aspect of this dance diplomacy was its effort to combat Eurocentrism. Because of how modern concert dance was introduced to China during the early twentieth century, many Chinese living in east coast cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, associated dance with European culture (Field 2010). Between the 1920s and 1940s, wealthy Chinese living on the urban east coast were exposed directly to western dance culture, especially ballet, through film and live performance (Tong 2013). Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the socialist period, the modern Chinese dance movement, with the support of the Chinese Communist Party and the new PRC government, brought domestic dance forms into urban and rural dance classrooms and concert stages throughout the nation (Wilcox 2016). However, while Chinese audiences had been exposed to more domestic and foreign dance styles by the early 1950s, they remained largely unfamiliar with dance traditions beyond those of Western Europe, China and socialist areas such as the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Mongolia and North Korea.

Despite China’s long history of cultural exchange with South and Southeast Asia, especially in its southern and western regions, people living in China’s urban east coast in the first half of the twentieth century tended to access the artistic expressions of these places through the often exoticizing, simplifying lens of European orientalism. A salient example of this is the performances of Wang Yuan, a child athlete-turned-celebrity who dominated China’s urban concert dance scene in the early 1940s. Wang, who grew up in northeast China, was first exposed to dance by an overseas Chinese group from Hawaii, who visited her middle school, then through physical education classes in her Methodist university, and finally through private training at dance schools established by Russian and Jewish émigrés (Wang 1943, 1944). By the mid-1940s, Wang was performing so-called “Oriental dances” labeled variously as “Persian dance,” “Arabic dance,” “South Sea dance,” “Balinese dance,” “Indian dance” and “Javanese dance,” alongside an “Occidental dance” repertoire that included “Hula dance,” “Rumba dance,” “Jitterburg dance,” “Gypsy dance,” “Tango dance” and “Modern dance” (Kang 1944, 1947; “Wang Yuan’s” 1945). Wang’s published stage photographs

show stereotyped poses with erotic costumes reminiscent of Hollywood films and cabaret, not serious attempts to represent complex and living cultural traditions.

The manner of presenting dances from other Asian countries on Chinese concert stages changed drastically with the start of the Bandung-era dance diplomacy. Through the visits of foreign cultural delegations, Chinese audiences were presented with the most current renditions of Indian, Indonesian, and Burmese dances, performed by top experts who were honored artists in their own countries and, in some cases, internationally. The publications introducing these delegations and their performances in mainstream Chinese newspapers went into significant detail to offer cultural and historical context for viewers. They explained literary and religious references in the works being performed, introduced the names and backgrounds of individual performers, and helped readers appreciate the aesthetic features of the dances, by addressing stylistic and technical issues such as rhythm, posture and differences among dance forms. Essays were often authored by recognized dance professionals, who typically compared these dance presentations on equal and positive terms with performances by other elite domestic and international dance companies.

The insistence that Chinese dancers learn and perform Indian, Indonesian and Burmese dance worked not only to impress upon foreign leaders the genuineness of China's efforts to respect other countries, but also to forcibly change the Eurocentric values of Chinese dancers. Zhang Jun, who became one of the most dedicated contributors to Bandung dance diplomacy, is an excellent example of how this process worked in practice. Like many young dancers in China during the 1950s, Zhang was uninterested in learning the dances of other Asian countries. Rather, Zhang studied dance because she hoped to become a ballerina. Both Zhang's biographer and colleague, Modegema, and her mentor, Dai Ailian, describe Zhang crying and complaining when she was told she had to study Indian, Indonesian and Burmese dance during the tours of 1954–1955 (Modegema 2011, 10–11; Dai 2003). Even in 1956, when Zhang was selected to study with the visiting Balinese dance ensemble during their tour in China, she initially hid and refused to board the bus, saying she did not want to learn this “base and strange” dance style (Xue 2013, 8). Zhang was not alone in her prejudice against South and Southeast Asian dance. Dai recalls that the entire group of students from Shanghai she led on the initial delegations showed little motivation to learn these local dance forms, instead frequently asking Dai to teach them ballet (Dai 2003, 186). When the Course in Oriental Music and Dance was established at the Beijing Dance School in 1957, the school was only able to fill 17 of the anticipated 24 student slots (Xue 2013, 8). After the OSDE was established and dancers began learning from Africa and Latin America as well, they continued to be challenged by issues of cultural prejudice, which they were forced in turn to overcome (Xue 2013, 13).

Chinese leaders understood that learning and performing mutual cultural respect, especially among non-western nations, was at the core of the anti-imperialist significance of the Bandung project and the dance diplomacy that helped support it. When speaking at the founding ceremonies of the OSDE on 13 January 1962, Foreign Minister Chen Yi explained the connection between the OSDE and China's anti-imperialist diplomacy as follows:

Among the powerful countries of the world, there is not one country that studies from [the formerly colonized nations]. Instead, they allow them to become undeveloped and discriminate against them. But the powerful country of China can study from them. (Xue 2013, 11)

The term “Oriental” in the name of OSDE was used not to promote European orientalism but, rather, as an explicit rejection of this earlier mode of thought and the cultural values it promoted. “Oriental” here was a positive self-identity with the East as a cultural and historical space. This cultural and historical identification was understood as a necessary foundation for a political alliance,

such as that represented by Bandung, which was based on the rejection of imperialism in all its forms. On 18 April 1962, 1500-person assembly was held in Beijing to celebrate the seventh anniversary of the Bandung conference. Speaking at the ceremony, Chen Yi stated, “Seven years ago, twenty-nine countries attended the Bandung Conference. For the first time in history, the restraints of imperialism were broken, and this promoted the great unity of the Asian and African people” (“Capital assembly” 1962). The OSDE was the only ensemble that performed at the event, confirming the symbolic link between it and Bandung.

Some countries reciprocated China’s efforts to show respect for the culture of other countries and to solidify political alliances with them by learning their dances. One of the Burmese delegations that visited China in 1960 included a Chinese dance, “Net weaving women” (*Zhi fang guniang*) amidst their performance repertoire. A photograph of the work published in *China Pictorial* shows dancers in costumes resembling those worn in Chinese dance works (except for their wooden sandals), with their bodies and hands imitating Chinese dance movements (Sun, Du, and Zhang 1960). The dance apparently gained positive responses from Chinese audiences, who were “very moved” by the gesture of the Burmese compatriots to learn Chinese dance (Zhao 1960). In September 1954, just a few months before the first Chinese cultural delegation to India, the USSR National Folk Dance Ensemble led by Igor Moiseyev visited China and included three movement-based Chinese works in its repertoire: two modern Chinese dances – “Red Silk Dance” (*Hongchou wu*) and “Waist Drum Dance” (*Da yaogu*) – and a Peking opera excerpt, “At the Crossroads” (*San cha kou*) (USSR National Folk Dance Ensemble n.d.; “Elegant USSR” 1954; “The USSR National” 1954). A photograph of the ensemble’s “Long Silk Dance” published in *China Pictorial* is striking in its portrayal of Caucasian women and men performing what by this point was one of the most iconic visual images of contemporary Chinese culture (Figure 10).²⁷ It is possible that the Soviet ensemble’s presentation of Chinese dances on this tour inspired the idea for this form of dance diplomacy. However, while the Moiseyev troupe performed



Figure 10. Dancers in the USSR National Folk Dance Ensemble perform Chinese choreography “Red Silk Dance” in China in 1954. Reprinted with permission from *China Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*).

only the dances of the USSR and other socialist countries, China's dance diplomacy and the OSDE that emerged from it took this idea further by extending out beyond the socialist sphere.

Conclusion

Through a distinctive form of dance diplomacy, China used dance as a medium to forge affective bonds and to build political alliances during a period when many nations across the world were seeking new ways to engage internationally at a time of national independence following the colonial era. The Bandung movement that inspired this strategy took anti-imperialism and anti-racism as core components, insisting that nations of Africa and Asia interact on equal ground without the political mediation of western powers. Eschewing the cultural trappings of Eurocentrism was an important part of this ideal that China's dance diplomacy sought to literally embody through Chinese dancers' study and performance of foreign dance forms. Ironically, to contemporary viewers, much of China's dance diplomacy strategy of this period has a visual resemblance to ethnic impersonation, a practice typically associated with power hierarchies enforced through prejudice, inequality and racial violence in western theories of cultural appropriation.²⁸ Chinese dancers in the OSDE dressed in the clothing of ethnic others, styling their make-up, hair, jewelry and, in some cases, skin tones, after the national or ethnic groups they sought to represent on stage (Li 1962).

A few factors, however, made the Chinese performances of this period different from those that occur in conventional western contexts of cultural appropriation. First, while there were real power imbalances in some of these relationships – particularly in the case of Burma, which was geographically smaller and militarily less powerful than China, while also being its immediate neighbor – in general the power imbalance between China and the countries it represented in Bandung-era dance diplomacy was negligible, at least compared with that between western countries and their racial others in the era of colonialism and, in the US case, the racial relationships involved in slavery and its aftermath. Like the reversal of the term “Oriental” in the name of the institution that grew out of this project, the use of ethnic impersonation in China's Bandung-era dance diplomacy also reversed traditional values of cultural appropriation. By turning away from Eurocentrism and calling for the serious and contextualized study of foreign dance styles, the OSDE and its formative activities modeled a new mode of intercultural exchange that, in the specific context of the Bandung moment, offered the possibility of using ethnic impersonation as an expression of respect and a medium for cultural understanding.

From early on, participants in these dance exchange projects were pushed to value authenticity in their study of foreign dance styles. They received a consistent instruction from state leaders, such as Zhou Enlai, who oversaw the activities: “Study hard and resemble the original” (*Xue hao xue xiang*). In other words, they were to engage in serious study and do their best to really learn the dance style, not just imitate it. By engaging directly with top experts in the dance forms they studied, Chinese dancers who participated in high-level dance diplomacy during this time had the opportunity to learn foreign dances in a relatively authentic environment, rather than in other ways that might lend themselves more to caricature and stereotype. It was because of this artistically rigorous approach that the combined process of study and performance not only moved audiences, but also the dancers themselves. Dancers such as Zhang Jun, who were initially prejudiced against these aesthetic forms, came to appreciate and cherish them over time as they gained greater understanding. In the 1980s, after the OSDE was revived in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Zhang returned to India to carry out intensive study in a variety of Indian dance styles, and she authored books on the subject and trained a new generation of Chinese students in these dance forms (Modegema 2011; Zhang 1982, 2004). Thus, the impact of dance diplomacy worked internally as well as externally.

Examining China's dance diplomacy during the Bandung era sheds new light on the meaningful role that performance can play in cultural exchange, especially in the context of the Mao period, when "performance" is often understood negatively as a synonym for pretending or misrepresentation. Traditionally, historians and political scientists have often taken a cynical view of the cultural exchange activities China pursued as part of its diplomatic efforts during the early Cold War, suggesting that as carefully choreographed performances they must have been insincere and designed to mislead. Paul Hollander, for example, described these efforts as "techniques of hospitality," which were "designed to influence the perception and judgment of the guests" (Hollander 1982, 347). More recently, Julia Lovell made clear that it is specifically the performance-like quality of these exchanges that, from her perspective, make them somehow troubling:

There is a certain melancholy to reading the archives on China's hosting machine: a sense of Maoist China being one vast stage-set – the Chinese playing to the foreigners, the foreigners playing back to the Chinese, and back and forth it goes. (Lovell 2015, 158)

Although Lovell is focusing on activities that are not, and likely should not be, performances – visits to model communes, tours of peasant homes, and so on – the idea that something is insincere simply because it is a performance needs to be further interrogated. Performance, as a process that requires study, rehearsal, preparation and engagement, necessarily produces effects, and these effects are not adequately assessed if the entire process is not taken into consideration (Schechner 1988).

In the case of dance diplomacy, the process involved in performance includes travel, extended person-to-person contact during training and tours, and physical changes to dancers' bodies resulting from the repetitive rehearsals and lessons that occur in dance study. There is a reason that early reporting on the dance diplomacy efforts focused on the difficulties faced by teachers and students and the sweat and exhaustion both sides endured. Learning a new dance style, even for professional dancers, is an arduous process not unlike learning a new language. While the dancers involved in these exchanges did not go through the same lifelong training that dancers normally receive for the dance styles they were learning, they nevertheless gained enough proficiency in the forms to make them recognizable, and in some cases, deeply moving, for their audiences. This achievement took serious labor on the part of both dance teachers and dance students, and if the dance diplomacy did have an effect, it was due to this work.²⁹ Regardless of how the dancers felt about the dance styles they were performing or what the PRC's intentions were toward the foreign communities for which they were performed, the work itself was real.

Notes

1. The footage fits descriptions of an event held during Hartini's visit to Beijing on 29 September 1962 (Xinhua 1962).
2. For studies of Cold War-era dance diplomacy efforts by the US and the USSR, see Prevots (2001), Shay (2002), Caute (2005), Croft (2015).
3. For a history of Indonesian dance abroad in the colonial period, see Cohen (2010).
4. See, for example, Cook (2014), Frazier (2015), Volland (2017), Romano and Zanier (2017).
5. See, for example, Liu (2013), van Fleit Hang (2013).
6. In the past ten years, at least a dozen scholarly books have appeared in English that focus on dance in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, while only three have examined dance in China and the Sino-phone world. Of these, none focuses on the socialist era (Field 2010; Kwan 2013; Chang and Frederiksen 2016).
7. For classic texts dealing with these themes in other parts of the world, beyond those already cited above, see Manning (1993), Savigliano (1995), Garafola (1998), DeFrantz (2002), O'Shea (2007).

8. At the time, China had only three other national-level professional dance ensembles, although hundreds of professional dance ensembles operated at the regional, provincial or municipal levels. This high status indicates the importance of OSDE within China's overall dance structures of the time and helps to explain the involvement of central government officials, such as Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi, in many of its operations.
9. For accounts of OSDE's early performances, see Chen et al. (1962), Jin (1962).
10. For historical contextualization of these ideas in Asia, see Duara (2007), Aydin (2007), Mishra (2012).
11. The next was from Indonesia in 1954. For more on the 1954 Indonesia tour, see Lindsay and Liem (2012, 191–220, 397–420).
12. All translations from Chinese are the author's own.
13. See also "Return Visit" (1955).
14. Dai Ailian must have departed a few days later to Indonesia, since she reportedly met the arriving India delegation in Beijing on 9 June 1955 ("Indian Cultural" 1955).
15. Shu Qiao, interview with the author in Shanghai, 13 August 2015.
16. Like the route Lindsay describes for the Indonesian delegation in 1954, the 1955 Indian delegation traveled via Guangzhou, arriving in Beijing on 8 June. See Lindsay and Liem (2012, 194); "Indian Cultural" (1955).
17. Chinese dancers, possibly the same ones, performed Burmese dance again to welcome Burma's President U Nu to Beijing in October 1956 and to greet Burmese audiences during a tour to Burma in December 1956. They also continued to study Burmese dance in Burma through early 1957 ("Sino-Burmese" 1956; "Chinese art ensemble" 1956; "The Chinese art delegation" 1957).
18. Different sources contain conflicting dates for these artists' arrival in China: Lindsay states that they stayed in China from 1956–1957, although I believe this to be a mistake. The Beijing Dance Academy records list July 1957–August 1959 as the four artists' work dates at the school, but the *People's Daily* records their arrival in China as 5 September 1957 (Lindsay and Liem 2012, 215; Beijing Dance Academy Annals Committee, 1993; "Friendly contact" 1957). The confusion over the dates may arise from the fact that it was during the Balinese performing arts delegation tour in the fall of 1956 – reportedly in a conversation between Sukarno and Zhou Enlai during a performance event – that the idea for inviting the Balinese artists to teach at the Beijing Dance School reportedly germinated. See Nan (1997, 2), Xue (2013, 8), Song (1994, 228).
19. Prior to this, the only dance experts who had visited the PRC in this capacity were from North Korea and the USSR.
20. Beijing Dance Academy (*Beijing wudao xueyuan*) archives, consulted in digitized versions at the Beijing Dance Academy, Beijing, 2015. The name "Beijing Dance Academy" was coined in 1978. During the 1950s, this institution was known as the Beijing Dance School.
21. Beijing Dance Academy archives.
22. On the breakdown in Sino-US relations from 1959, see Mark (2012, 48–52).
23. This is a guess based on the name as published in Chinese-language sources: "Du Qin Niu." In some Chinese-language references, "You Wa Di" is also given as a forename.
24. On the Burmese delegations, see Song (1994, 232), Li (1960).
25. For an analysis of one example of drama's political uses in these exchanges, see Liu (2013).
26. For primary source documentation, see Kahin (1956, 39–51). For recent studies of its historical impact, see Tan and Acharya (2008), Lee (2010).
27. "Red Silk Dance" was first performed in early 1951. PRC dancers presented it at the World Festival of Youth and Students in 1951 and 1953, and in most performance delegations sent abroad in those years.
28. See, for example, Young (2008). In dance studies, see Desmond (1997).
29. For more on dance as labor, see Srinivasan (2012).

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Special terms

Dongfang gewutuan	东方歌舞团
Hehua wu	荷花舞
Zhongyang shiyan gejuyuan	中央实验歌剧院
Dongfang yinyue wudao ban	东方音乐舞蹈班
Beijing wudao xuexiao	北京舞蹈学校
Zhongyang gewutuan	中央歌舞团
Zhi fang guniang	织纺姑娘
Hongchou wu	红绸舞
Da yaogu	大腰鼓
San cha kou	三岔口
Xue hao xue xiang	学好学像