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Emily E. Wilcox

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Dynamic Inheritance: Representative Works and the Authoring of Tradition in Chinese Dance

ABSTRACT: This article examines the creative process through which particular dance techniques and aesthetic styles originally derived from folk forms are transformed and integrated into the conservatory dance tradition in the People’s Republic of China. I propose the term “dynamic inheritance” to describe this officially prescribed sequence of activities, which was first formalized during the period of early socialist culture (1937–1965) and continues to be the dominant creative method followed by state-sponsored Chinese dance artists today. The most common phrase used to describe this process is “to inherit and develop” (*jicheng yu fazhan*). It suggests that individual artists act as agents or stewards in the handing down of tradition, by following a process whose success is measured not by how strictly existing forms are preserved, but, rather, by how well they are made to speak to and be appreciated by contemporary audiences. In this process, the “representative work” (*daibiaozuo*) becomes the crucial medium through which artists carry out this process of dynamic inheritance and authorship of tradition.

THINKING THROUGH THE relationship between artists and traditions in contemporary China requires considering the ways in which socialist modernity—a force that shaped China for much of the twentieth century—fostered new notions of heritage and culture. In his oft-cited “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in 1942, Mao Zedong famously called on China’s socialist writers and artists to make art serve politics. He also proposed a new approach to creating art; by studying the everyday lives of the common people, Mao proclaimed,

artists would create new artistic works that not only promoted new political ideals but also drew heavily on folk culture.

The expectation that revolutionary artists would study, adapt, and promote folk forms was a central tenet of Chinese socialist culture. In his 1942 talks, Mao referred to folk forms as “the rich, lively language of the masses,” and he believed that folk forms could most effectively communicate new political ideas to the common people (Mao 1996, 461). This idea of combining new political ideals with folk forms was expressed in the phrase “socialist in content and national in form.” First articulated by Joseph Stalin in 1925, and adopted by Mao in the late 1930s, this was the key structure of Chinese revolutionary culture during the period between 1937 and 1965.¹ Although the imperative to employ national forms was challenged during the last decade of Maoist rule from 1966 to 1976—reflected through the dominance of ballet over national dance forms during this period—the emphasis on national forms reemerged in the post-1976 era and continues today. The process of constructing Chinese dance as a “national form” (*minzu xingshi*), which was first popularized during the socialist period, still shapes the creation of Chinese dance in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) today.

The term “Chinese dance” refers to a form of modern concert dance developed in the twentieth century that claims to have a basis in performance forms indigenous to the geographical regions included in modern-day China. Examples of indigenous performance forms that have inspired Chinese dance include religious rituals, social dance, local opera theater, martial arts, and historical court dance. Most styles of Chinese dance have undergone a three-part evolution: First, professional dancers conducted field research with folk artists and adapted elements of the folk forms they learned and observed into modern stage productions. Second, movements from successful stage productions were integrated into conservatory training curricula, where they became the basic techniques used to train new generations of professional dancers. Third, the popularization of these stage productions and training curricula led to their imitation by amateurs, spawning often simpler versions practiced in parks, primary schools, and community centers. This article is concerned primarily with the first part of this evolution: the process through which folk forms, which are embedded in community life and vary incredibly across space and time, are transformed into professionalized Chinese dance styles that are standardized across the country and performed

in modern stage contexts. It thus seeks to understand how the relatively unified form of Chinese dance evolves, in an ongoing process, out of a seemingly endless variety of diverse folk forms.

To discuss Chinese dance, it is necessary to have a grasp of some basic vocabulary. One of the most confusing terms in this context is “folk dance” (*minjian wu*), because it can mean both indigenous folk performance—especially social dances performed by rural communities—and the professionalized styles of Chinese concert dance created from folk forms. Among Chinese dancers and dance scholars, there have been many attempts to clarify this language, for example by using the term “nationalized folk dance” (*minzu minjianwu*) or “academy folk dance” (*xueyuanpai minjianwu*) to refer to professionalized Chinese dance styles and “original-environment folk dance” (*yuanshengtai wudao*) to refer to indigenous folk performance. The problem is complex because the term “folk” has multiple different meanings in the context of Chinese dance: it can mean popular as opposed to elite, amateur as opposed to professional, or unofficial as opposed to official. Depending on which meaning is being used, the term “folk dance” may have a different connotation in each different context (Xu R. 2010; Jin 2012).

When the modern concept of “Chinese dance” (*Zhongguo wudao*) first emerged, it was defined mainly in opposition to Western dance styles, specifically ballet and Euro-American modern dance. Since the early 1950s, Chinese dance has included three main categories: 1) “Han folk dance” (*Hanzu minjian wu*) refers to regional dances of the majority Han ethnicity, such as Northeast yangge (*Dongbei yangge*), Anhui flower drum lamp (*Anhui huagudeng*), and Yunnan flower lamp (*Yunnan huadeng*); 2) “Minority dance” (*shaoshu minzu wudao*), first conceived of in the late 1940s as “frontier dance” (*bianjiangwu*), refers to regional dances of non-Han ethnic communities, such as Uyghur dance (*Weiwu'erzuwu*), Mongol dance (*Mengguwu*), and Tibetan dance (*Zangzuwu*); and 3) “Chinese classical dance” (*Zhongguo gudianwu*) originally referred to dances derived from Chinese indigenous theater (*xiqu*) forms, especially Peking opera (*Jingju*) and Kun opera (*Kunqu*). Today, Chinese classical dance also includes newer schools of technique developed from research on historical court performance and religious artifacts. Two of the most prominent of these are the Han-Tang and Dunhuang schools.

Other types of professional concert dance have also developed in China during the twentieth century that are not typically included in

the category of Chinese dance. These include “new dance” (*xinxing wudao*), “Oriental dance” (*dongfangwu*), “Chinese ballet” (*Zhongguo balei*), “modern dance” (*xiandaiwu*), “dancesport” (*guobiaowu*), and “hip hop/street dance” (*jiewu*). The main reason these dance forms are not included in the category of Chinese dance is that they are believed to derive their primary movement vocabularies from nonnative performance practices. The core feature that has historically defined Chinese dance in contrast to these other dance styles is its presumed basis in movement vocabularies and techniques derived from performance practices native to the geographic regions of contemporary China.

Chinese dance presents a conceptual challenge to many common ways that scholars and laypeople in Western Europe and North America think about dance. This is because Chinese dance confounds the common Euro-American idea that dance forms that encourage the continuation of indigenous practices are “traditional,” while dances that encourage individual innovation are “modern.” This modern/traditional dichotomy is virtually useless in the Chinese dance context because Chinese dance pursues both of these things simultaneously. In other words, Chinese dance is a recent invention that aims to express new experiences and ideas while also placing great value on studying and learning from dance practices of the past. The first widely recognized examples of Chinese dance choreography date to the late 1930s and early 1940s, making Chinese dance as an artistic phenomenon slightly younger than Euro-American modern dance. Furthermore, Chinese dance practitioners have always placed a high value on the importance of individual interpretation as an essential component of cultural continuity. For these reasons, a new vocabulary is necessary for moving beyond the traditional/modern dyad when thinking about creative practices in Chinese dance.

Dynamic inheritance, the idea put forth in this article, offers one way of avoiding some of the traps of the traditional/modern dichotomy when thinking about relationships between past and present and between individual innovations and shared cultural legacies in contemporary dance making. Inspired by the work of Chinese dance scholars, this concept seeks to translate and theorize basic assumptions about dance creation and criticism that undergird much of the current scholarship produced by dance scholars working in China. Because the work of Chinese scholars is not often read by scholars working in North America and Western Europe, there exists a disconnect in the way the two groups envision and discuss ideas of culture,

identity, and innovation in dance. This article seeks to close this gap and to generate possibilities for more exchange of ideas between these different groups.

Apart from questions pertaining to dance, this essay also addresses broader ideas about relationships between individual invention and cultural inheritance across the arts. In the conceptual framework of dynamic inheritance, individual artists play an important role in the production of Chinese culture, and their contributions are understood as simultaneously innovative and preservationist. Thus dynamic inheritance, as a way of thinking about and doing art, makes it possible to see individual creativity as necessary to the continuation of cultural heritage rather than opposed to it. For artists who wish to draw on existing cultural traditions and at the same time develop their own independent creative voice, dynamic inheritance can provide a method of articulating and carrying out such work that offers a fresh perspective on existing categories.

Dynamic Inheritance: Early Articulations

It is difficult to locate a precise historical moment when dynamic inheritance emerged as the dominant paradigm for artistic creation in China. Many identify 1937–1938 as the time when the idea of “national forms” came to the fore in Yan’an (Holm 1991; MacDougall and Louie 1997; H. Wang 2011). Others, however, note earlier interest in the collection and modernization of folk forms, beginning as early as the turn of the twentieth century (Hung 1985; C. Liu 2010; L. Liu 2012; S. Liu 2013). Regardless of how the formation of this paradigm is dated, it is clear that by the 1940s, it had become compulsory for artists and intellectuals affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party to study and adapt folk culture in their work. As Brian DeMare argues, the use of folk forms—what he calls “concessions to local cultural traditions”—was the only way communist-directed artists and intellectuals, consisting largely of foreign-educated urbanites, could attract and communicate with rural audiences (2015, 8).

Apart from its practical uses as a tool of political education, leftist artists and intellectuals in 1940s China viewed the study and creative adaptation of folk art as necessary for building a modern Chinese national culture. Xiaobing Tang describes this process as part of “the imperative of cultural transformation that was at the core of China’s search for modernity” (2015, 19). Thus, in China, as elsewhere, the

growth of interest in folk forms was closely tied to modern nationalism. Although China was never fully colonized like other parts of Asia, the combination of Western and Japanese imperialism also led to the formation of a postcolonial sensibility (Wilcox 2018). Soviet models played an important role in this process, since Lenin and Stalin both conceptualized the promotion of national culture as progressive and anti-imperialist (Duara 2004). However, dynamic inheritance, as a way of transforming folk forms into national culture, was not a purely Soviet transplant. It was forged through domestic processes and took on qualities and patterns specific to China's local conditions.

In the field of dance, one of these local conditions included the diverse backgrounds of the individuals who developed China's socialist dance culture. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, a significant portion of the artists recruited to participate in the new PRC cultural fields had not been working in Communist-occupied areas during the wartime period of 1937 to 1949 (DeMare 2015). This was also true in the field of dance. Dai Ailian (1916–2006), the first president of the China Dancers Association established in 1949, was born and raised outside China and spent most of the wartime years in Chongqing, Shanghai, and the United States (Glasstone 2007). Similarly, Liang Lun (b. 1921), who headed major PRC dance institutions in the Guangdong area after 1949, spent the wartime years in Kunming, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia (Liang 2011). Although Dai and Liang had not been directly involved in the Communist cultural movement prior to 1949, their ideas played a key role in shaping the trajectory of Chinese dance in the PRC due to the leadership positions they held in important early PRC dance institutions. In this sense, their work was just as central to the development of Chinese dance as that of figures such as Wu Xiaobang (1906–1995), the first vice president of the China Dancers Association, who had a longer history of Chinese Communist Party affiliation.²

One of the first publications that envisioned the creation of Chinese dance on a dynamic inheritance model was Dai Ailian's essay "The First Step in Developing Chinese Dance," published in the Nationalist Party newspaper *Central Daily* in Chongqing in 1946. The essay set out Dai's vision for the construction of a new dance style—what she called both "Chinese dance" (*Zhongguo wudao*) and "Chinese modern dance" (*Zhongguo xiandai wu*)—on the basis of indigenous and folk performance (Dai 1946, 8). According to Dai, China had a rich dance history and a plethora of living indigenous

dance traditions, among which she included theatrical dance, religious dance, and popular folk dance. What China lacked, Dai argued, was modern concert dance. Born in Trinidad as a third-generation Chinese and later trained in ballet and modern dance in England, Dai had received most of her own dance training abroad, before she moved to China in 1941. During her time abroad, Dai had seen modernized versions of Indian, Japanese, and Javanese classical and folk dances, and she wondered why she had not seen Chinese dance (Glasstone 2007). In her own words, Dai came to China in order to “learn currently existing Chinese dance” and help contribute to the creation of a new, modern Chinese dance form (Dai 1946, 8).

In her essay, Dai put forth her plan for creating this new dance form. An important part of Dai’s plan was rejecting the use of dance techniques she called “foreign” (*waiquo de*). Dai writes:

For the past three years the Chinese Dance Art Society worked hard to create Chinese dance dramas. The narrative content was Chinese, and the performers were Chinese; yet, we cannot say that this was truly Chinese dance drama. We used foreign technique and footwork to tell the story—like using a foreign language to tell a Chinese tale—and this was quite obvious to the audience. We can say that the work of the past three years took the first step in establishing dance as an independent art [in China]. But, as for creating “Chinese dance,” that was a mistaken direction. It was because of a lack of knowledge about Chinese dance customs that we followed this method.³ (1946, 8)

As this passage suggests, Dai viewed the study and understanding of local dance culture, especially native dance techniques and forms, as a necessary condition for the creation of Chinese dance. The use of Chinese content and performers alone, she argued, was not sufficient if the movement techniques were still foreign. Thus, Dai argued that the only way to create Chinese dance correctly was to first go about conducting research on native performance practices, then to use these practices as the basis for new choreography.

Dai’s plan for creating Chinese dance also included ideas about what counted as native performance practices. For her, it was important that Han and non-Han sources be considered equally. “If we want to develop Chinese dance,” Dai writes, “as the first step we must collect dance materials from all nationalities around the country, then broadly synthesize them and add development” (1946, 8). The initial

result of Dai's vision can be seen in the 1946 performance she staged in Chongqing together with Peng Song (b. 1916), local Tibetan and Xinjiang compatriot associations, and students and teachers at Tao Xingzhi's Chongqing-based Yucai Art School (*Zhongyang ribao* 1946; Dong and Long 2008, 8–11, 579–86; Tong 2012, 73, 87–88). The essay cited above doubled as Dai's welcome speech during this show. Titled *Frontier Music and Dance Meeting* (*Bianjiang yinyue wudao dahui*), the program included dance works inspired by Tibetan, Qiang, Jiarong, Yao, Han, Luoluo (Yi), and Uyghur performance practices. Most Chinese dance historians consider this performance the first production of modern "Chinese dance" featuring both Han and minority styles.

Inherent to Dai's vision of Chinese dance was that indigenous performance practices must undergo change to make them appealing to new audiences. Describing the approach used to create the works in the *Frontier Music and Dance Meeting*, Dai writes:

Introducing [original folk] dances onto the stage would be too simple, [so] out of consideration for formal organization, some have undergone various levels of revision. A few of the works are performed following the originals, while others have been developed and adapted according to either direct or indirect material. (1946, 8)

With this explanation, Dai made it clear to her audience that what they were about to see was not purely "authentic" folk dance, in the sense that it was not a perfect replication of dances as they might have existed in their original contexts. Rather, these were folk dances that had been revised and reinterpreted to suit the specific needs of this event.

The newspaper spread in which Dai's essay appeared contained photos and descriptions from the performance program that also indicated the adaptive and creative processes that separated these works from authentic folk dance. The description of the piece "Mute Carries the Cripple," for example, one of Dai's solo dances, begins: "This dance *takes and adapts* elements from Guangxi-style theater" (*Zhongyang ribao* 1946; emphasis added). The description for another piece performed by Dai states that it was "choreographed *according to*" a popular folk song (*Zhongyang ribao* 1946; emphasis added). In each case, the words "takes and adapts" and "according to" signal processes of revision and change on the part of the adaptor or the performer, in this case Dai. In an ideal world, Dai hoped that all indigenous dances

across China could be studied and adapted so that one day they could be performed on modern dance stages. She writes:

Due to economic constraints, dance researchers have limited time to travel extensively and carry out comprehensive research exploring the origins of every type of dance material. In the future, it is hoped that people with an interest in dance work will receive the necessary support to complete a full study of all forms of dance in China and use these materials to establish a new Chinese modern dance for the stage. (1946, 8)

From this description, it is clear that Dai envisioned the making of Chinese dance as an ongoing process that would take the work of teams of dance researchers and significant financial support over a long period of time. Chinese dance, for her, was something that did not inherently exist in Chinese culture but had to be created through the sustained and conscious effort of numerous dance scholars and artists.

Just one year after Dai's publication, Liang Lun outlined a similar project in an essay titled "The Problem of Making Dance Chinese" (1947), which he published in a newsletter of the China Song and Dance Drama Art Society (*Zhongguo gewuju yishe*) while on tour in Southeast Asia. Liang had conducted field research among minority groups in China's southwest and had staged a collaborative production of adapted folk dances in 1946 in Kunming (Tong 2012, 86–87). Liang's essay, like Dai's, places high importance on the use of native dance technique. Specifically, Liang calls for the rejection of "Western" (*Xiyang de*) dance styles in the making of Chinese dance. "Previous dance was just using Western technique to express Chinese content. To unearth the dance of the Chinese folk, to create a dance form possessing a truly Chinese air and style is the correct path of today's Chinese new dance movement," Liang writes (1947, 13). Liang also linked the creation of Chinese dance explicitly to nationalism. "Only when Chinese dance art has become Chinese at base," he writes, "capable of fully expressing the citizen spirit of China, will it have its own status in the world" (1947, 13). Liang's statement offers a direct challenge to those who believed that learning European art was the only way to gain cultural recognition in the global arena. In this sense, although they were working outside Communist-occupied areas, both Liang and Dai closely aligned with Mao Zedong's principle that new Chinese culture should be "national in form."

The performance program notes that accompany Liang's essay show that, like Dai, he had put these principles into action in his own works. The notes describe Liang's "Marco Polo Bridge Call and Answer Dance" as being "*adapted from the folk image of a herdsman, with much folk local color*" (1947, 13; emphasis added). Two other dances, described as narrative dance-dramas, are said to be "*based on Yunnan flower drum forms,*" with content set in the past ten years (1947, 13; emphasis added). The notes conclude:

All of these dances take folk dance as their foundation. After researching its spirit and patterns, and doing one's best to preserve its authentic style and originality, they then imbue it with a new theme, re-organize it, and re-create it. Whether this method is correct or not must depend on the feedback of the audience. (1947, 13)

The problem of method to which Liang alludes here became a driving question for China's professional dancers after the founding of the PRC in 1949. How would artists working in the socialist state carry out the process of studying and adapting folk forms? It is this question that led to the construction of dynamic inheritance as a methodology.

Dynamic Inheritance: An Artistic Methodology

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the prescriptive to develop national forms that could express new socialist ideals, promote a diverse native culture, and appeal to a broad public took on heightened importance (Hung 2011; Wilcox 2016b). To facilitate this process, as part of the institutionalization of art in New China, there emerged an almost scientific methodology for creating Chinese dance based on folk forms. By following a set of steps, cultural workers in the dance field could identify and document folk forms, analyze and organize their findings, and use this knowledge to produce new artistic works.

Based on a survey of dance writings from 1949 to 1966, the following chart (Table 1) schematizes the methodology of dynamic inheritance that was conceived and put into practice by professional dancers, including Dai, Liang, and others who worked with them in state-sponsored PRC dance institutions, during this time.⁴ This methodology was applied in all three subfields of Chinese dance—including Han folk dance, minority dance, and Chinese classical dance—and it continues to inform research, teaching, creation, and criticism in

TABLE 1

Dynamic Inheritance as a Methodology: Key terms used in Chinese texts describing how to create new works of Chinese dance. These terms reflect parts of the dynamic inheritance methodology.

| | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Activities | <i>wajue</i> (to excavate) | <i>shequ/paoqi</i> (to absorb/to abandon) | <i>zhengli</i> (to organize) | <i>chuangzao</i> (to create) |
| Objects | <i>sucai</i> (basic materials) | <i>fengge/weidao</i> (style/flavor) | <i>tese/texting</i> (distinctive characteristics) | <i>dianxing/ dianxingxing</i> (type/typicality) |
| Goals | <i>baohu</i> (to protect) | <i>fazhan</i> (to develop) | <i>jicheng</i> (to inherit) | <i>fangyang</i> (to promote) |

all three subfields of Chinese dance in the PRC today. The dynamic inheritance methodology was designed to ensure three principles: 1) that indigenous performance practices would serve as the foundation upon which new dances were built; 2) that artists would be systematic and thorough in their study of indigenous performance; and 3) that artists would be innovative in their adaptation of indigenous sources to serve the tastes and needs of contemporary audiences. As a method for creating dance, dynamic inheritance placed research at the center while at the same time giving significant interpretative responsibility to dance artists.⁵

As outlined in Table 1, dynamic inheritance methodology has three major components: activities, objects, and goals. Examining these sections one by one shows the process that dance artists follow to create Chinese dance works. Starting with “activities,” the first step in the dynamic inheritance process is “to excavate” (*wajue*). This term borrows an image from archaeology in which the researcher digs into the ground, literally unearthing precious artifacts. In the context of Chinese dance, excavation refers to a process of field research known as “collecting customs” (*caifeng*), in which the artist acts as a kind of ethnographer: the artist visits a community, observes dances in the local context, learns parts of the technique, interviews expert practitioners, all while documenting the entire process.⁶ The process of excavation thus includes several subprocesses, including documentation and what is broadly known as “collection” (*shouji*). This can include activities such as taking notes or doing sketches, conducting video or audio recordings, and learning to perform certain movement sequences. In the excavation process, researchers attend not only to movements

framed as formal performances but also to everyday activities, such as manual labor, cooking, or interacting with friends. Any of these could be legitimate subjects of study for the dance ethnographer.

After excavation, the next step is “to absorb/to abandon” (*shequ/paoqi*). This is the stage in which dancers make decisions about what to include and what not to include when they document and collect folk forms. In his autobiography, Wu Xiaobang describes this process as follows:

When you go down [to conduct field research] you must observe and listen to everything. Within that, there will be dregs (*zaopo*) and there will be cream (*jinghua*). The dregs and the cream are always mixed together, masquerading like pearls mixed with fish eyes. We must pick out the pearls among the fish eyes. (1982, 98)

Here, this process refers to the collection of minority dances in 1952, when Wu was assigned the position as founding head of the cultural work troupe attached to the Central Institute of Nationalities, predecessor to the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble.

The language of selection and discernment was also applied in the creation of Chinese classical dance. Choe Seung-hui (a.k.a. Sai Shōki/Choi Seunghee, 1911–1969), a world-renowned Korean dancer who led the construction of Chinese classical dance in the early PRC, makes the following statement in her article “The Future of Chinese Dance Art,” published in the *People’s Daily* in 1951:

Regarding the work of organizing Chinese classical dance, it can broadly be divided and carried out in two stages.... Thus, the first stage should be focused on absorbing (*shequ*) the most typical, beautiful, martial, and uniquely representative movements and positions from within classical dance. This work of absorbing should on the one hand strive to preserve its original distinctiveness, and on the other to abandon (*paoqi*) some unnecessary movements. (Cui 1951, 5)

As these two passages show, the absorb/abandon dyad introduces an active and self-conscious process of selection into the dance artist’s role in relation to indigenous performance materials. While the precise guidelines for what should be absorbed and what should be abandoned at any given time might be different—depending on changing cultural policies, audience expectations, and professional preferences—the act of deciding what elements to include and what to expel was normalized as a necessary part of the dynamic inheritance

process. As a methodology, dynamic inheritance instructs individual artists to preserve only what they see fit from the indigenous performance activities they observe and study.

The third phase of activities is “to organize” (*zhengli*). This is one of the most ubiquitous concepts in the history of modern Chinese dance, and it continues to be used regularly in textbooks, scholarly writing, and everyday language among Chinese dance professionals. Etymologically, the term combines the characters “zheng,” meaning wholeness or neatness, with “li,” meaning reason or principle. The character “li” occurs frequently in terms related to management, philosophy, and the natural sciences, and it suggests the internal rules or patterns that give something order. In the context of dance, “to organize” thus means to find the internal logic of a set of movements gathered through field research and then to arrange them in an orderly fashion according to this logic, so that they form a comprehensible whole. One of the most common ways to “organize” dance movements is to break them down according to body part: hand movements in one list, arm movements in another, foot movements in another, and so on. Organization has a number of practical uses: it allows different folk forms to be compared and used interchangeably; it allows dancers unfamiliar with the forms to more clearly understand and learn them; and, perhaps most importantly, it helps to transform the folk performances from social and cultural complexes to formalized artistic vocabularies. Regardless of the structuring principle used, “organizing” inevitably introduces changes to the folk forms. The regularization and rationalization that occurs in this process can cause folk forms to lose their idiosyncratic or synthetic character, since components that do not fit into the new structure are often left out or transformed. Although organization is a necessary part of the dynamic inheritance process, dancers are typically warned not to go too far. The Chinese proverb “cutting the foot to fit the shoe” is sometimes used to describe overzealous organization (Li, Gao, and Zhu 2004).

The final component of activities is “to create” (*chuangzao*). This is the stage at which the dance artist’s role as innovator is most apparent, since it requires him or her to generate a new, original dance work using the materials acquired from research into folk forms. In this context, “creation” also implies authorship, in the sense that dance artists have usually been listed by name as the choreographers of new works they have devised.⁷ The main goal of the creation process is to make folk forms appealing to new audiences. The idea

is that because people's ways of life are in flux, and audiences are experiencing dance in new social contexts and conditions, performance practices must constantly adapt to remain current with the times. Reflecting on works presented by the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe in 1949, Troupe director Bu He explains how his choreographers approached the problem of creation in their work:

Initially, [our choreographers] took untouched folk dances and placed them on stage. Yet, average people did not like it, because once those dances that were normally performed in squares and on the grassland were put on stage, their form became limited, and they weren't as good as the originals. It is important to point out that Mongol people [in the new society] require things with new content and new forms. The old ones already can no longer satisfy them. Therefore, [our choreographers and musicians] created contemporary song and dance stories, and these have been welcomed by the majority of Mongol people. (Fang M. 1949b, 4)

Here, Bu He notes two main factors driving new creation: 1) changes in the spaces in which dances are presented; and 2) changes in people's preferences for new cultural experiences. By making innovations to existing folk forms, dance artists help these forms adapt to new spaces and new preferences, ensuring that they continue to be appreciated.

Apart from activities, the dynamic inheritance methodology also specifies the objects of study that are to be used in the creation of new Chinese dance works. The first and most important of these are "basic materials" (*sucai/yuansu*), generally thought of as the ingredients of a dance choreography. In theory, each subgenre of Chinese dance has an almost unlimited number of basic materials that could be used to create new dance works. Thus, when going out to conduct fieldwork, the dancer expects and hopes to find new basic materials each time. These might be large, such as a ritual frame, a story, or a rhythmic sequence, or they might be small, such as a prop, a technical trick, or a way of holding a specific body part. Special occasions like weddings and festivals are considered to be the best times to find basic materials for use in dance works; however, many choreographers have also made ingenious use of basic materials drawn from everyday life, such as food preparation, transportation, or children's games. Part of the challenge of "excavation" is being constantly alert to activities or behaviors that could be basic materials for a new dance work, and the limits of what could become basic material for a dance piece is really limited only by the dancer's creativity. New materials are constantly

appearing in the world all the time as contemporary communities adopt new technologies, habits, and ways of living. Even in the case of historical dance, the discovery of new archaeological sites and artifacts makes possible the ongoing emergence of new basic materials.

Whereas “basic materials” are concrete and identifiable, “style” and “flavor” (*jengge/weidao*) are more abstract. Often, dancers talk about “style” and “flavor” in relation to regional or ethnic categories of Chinese dance—Shandong Jiaozhou-style yangge or Uyghur dolan, for example—and they serve as the broader aesthetic qualities that identify works within a group as belonging together. In theory, style and flavor should be shared among works that belong to the same category, while basic materials will differ from one work to the next even in the same category. When the process of creation has led a choreographer too far from authentic folk forms, the phrases “lacking in style” or “weak in flavor” will be applied by critics to express disapproval. This indicates that the piece has not been successful in reinterpreting the original material, because it has lost the identifying characteristics of the indigenous form it is supposed to be inheriting. Style and flavor are considered to be the most difficult aspects of Chinese dance to fully master. Because it is difficult to find the right balance between learning from folk forms and enacting personal innovations, displaying a firm grasp of flavor and style while also being creative is considered the mark of a true expert.

“Distinctive characteristics” (*tese/texing*) and “type/typicality” (*dianxing/dianxingxing*) are also qualities that distinguish categories within Chinese dance. However, they refer to more specific and identifiable qualities than style and flavor. Furthermore, while style and flavor are considered to be relatively continuous through time, distinctive characteristics and type/typicality have more potential for change. In the process of dynamic inheritance, it is common for the creation of new dance works to expand and at times alter what are considered to be the “distinctive characteristics” and “typical” elements of a given dance style. In the case of Chinese classical dance, the dance dramas *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* (*Silu hua yu*), premiered in 1979, and *Dancers of the Tongque Stage* (*Tongque ji*), premiered in 1985, fundamentally changed what was considered “typical” for Chinese classical dance. Their popularity introduced two new schools within Chinese classical dance, the “Dunhuang” school and the “Han-Tang” school, respectively (Zhao 1980; Jin 2012; Wilcox 2012). Similarly, the work *Yellow River* (*Huanghe*), premiered in 1988, challenged what

was considered “typical” and “distinctive” for Chinese classical dance across gender lines. Summarizing the impact of this piece, Chinese dance critic Jin Hao writes, “[*Yellow River*] changed the previously existing gendered contrast between soft and hard movement in the movement vocabulary, making the male and female dancers both move more toward a middle gender in the form of their movement language” (Jia 2006, 302). Although they broke with existing practices when they first appeared, the popularity of these works meant that they were ultimately accepted as “distinctive” and “typical.” Today, students of Chinese classical dance regularly study these works, and critics consider them canonical examples within the style.

The final part of the dynamic inheritance methodology—labeled “goals” in Table 1—refers to the broader aims that artists are said to be carrying out. These goals are almost always described in pairs, such as “protect and develop” (*baohu yu fazhan*) or “inherit and promote” (*jicheng yu fayang*). Thus, they indicate the dual nature of dynamic inheritance from a conceptual perspective; protection requires development, and inheritance requires promotion. Thinking about these processes as mutually interdependent is what makes the dynamic inheritance approach rather revolutionary. These dualisms insist that the preservation of tradition is an ongoing process of new iterations, like biological reproduction in living organisms. Just as living things produce offspring that are related to but not exact copies of themselves, so cultural traditions are thought to produce related but new practices that change slightly with each new generation. The metaphor can be expanded as follows: objects (basic materials, style/flavor, special characteristics, typicality, etc.) correspond to genetic material; activities (collection, absorption/abandonment, organization, creation) correspond to genetic recombination; and goals (protect and develop, inherit and promote) correspond to the broader act of generational reproduction. Thinking about cultural inheritance in this way opens up the possibility for viewing artistic innovation not in opposition to the continuity of tradition, but instead as a necessary component of it.

Representative Works: The Authorship of Tradition

The ideas and methodologies of dynamic inheritance were so formative in China’s socialist period that they brought about new understandings of tradition that are in many ways different from ideas in

the Western world. Conventional understandings of tradition in North America and Europe emphasize continuity and sameness over time as a key quality. In the Western contexts, how long something has existed without change is often a measure of how traditional it is, and individual interpretation that might lead to change is seen as dangerous to the preservation of tradition. By contrast, the idea of tradition that developed out of socialist China's dynamic inheritance approach is one in which change is seen as a necessary feature of tradition. In this view, tradition is understood as the product of the cumulative contributions of individuals over time. Therefore, to ensure that tradition remains vital in the future requires having individuals who continue to make their own interpretations. When individual interpretations get incorporated into the larger body of tradition and shape its form in the future, an "authoring of tradition" occurs.

In the past, scholars based in Europe and North America tended to resist China's socialist culture of dynamic inheritance and its resultant ideas about tradition, arguing that the encouragement of creativity and change damages tradition's authenticity. A historic debate between the two views took place at the 1979 Durham Oriental Music Festival in England, when a group of British and American ethnomusicologists accused the China Central Conservatory National Music Ensemble of misrepresenting Chinese musical tradition. According to firsthand accounts, the Western scholars challenged the historical authenticity of several items on the Ensemble's program. Fang Kun, then the director of the Ensemble, defended the Ensemble's program, generating a useful documentation of his understanding of musical tradition. Accounts of the debate were later published in English and Chinese, and the event became a touchstone for reflections on Chinese music and concepts of tradition in contemporary China (Fang K. 1980, 1981; see also Blum 1991; Harris 2004; Trebinjac 2000).

The primary issue that divided the two groups was whether change fosters or harms the continuation of tradition. Robert Provine, an American ethnomusicologist who participated in the event, summarizes the difference as follows:

Much of the discussion dwelt on varying understandings of "traditional music" (*chuantong yinyue*). Mr. Fang clearly felt that development and change are inherent and essential to the Chinese musical tradition, while the western scholars put forth authenticity and preservation (or at least the absence of destructive modification) as aspects of a reliable tradition. (Fang K. 1981, 2)

In their published comments on the discussion, a point that stood out in the Western musicologists' arguments was the importance of preserving tradition in its original form. Making an analogy to art, Provine writes, "The existence of new types of bright and appealing paints is not reason to cover over the drab colors of the Mona Lisa, but rather a reason to create new paintings" (Fang K. 1981, 12). Here, Provine makes a distinction between the Mona Lisa, which he considers an example of a tradition that should be preserved, and new paintings, which he considers valuable on their own but not a substitute for tradition.

In his written summary of his position, Fang challenged the ideas of his Western colleagues on two accounts: first, he challenged the idea that age is a defining feature of tradition; and, second, he argued that because tradition is always changing, it is problematic to identify any single example as the original or authentic version of tradition. Addressing the first point about age, Fang explains, "The classification of traditional music cannot be made on the basis of age. What period must music date from before it can be called traditional? 500 years ago? 1,000 years ago? Or even earlier, [say] 2,000 years ago?" (1981, 5–6). For Fang, it is problematic to define a date before which music is traditional and after which music is modern. To him, any such date would necessarily be arbitrary. Instead, he prefers to see the creativity of current musicians as continuing a process of tradition that extends both into the past and the future.

When addressing his second point about the problem of defining an authentic version of tradition, Fang used one of the pieces on his Ensemble's program, the pipa solo "Ambush on All Sides," as an example. He writes:

At least several hundred years passed between the first writing down of this ancient piece and the definition of its score in 1818, and in any number of periods it must have undergone reconstruction by artists among the people, as apprentices often surpassed their teachers and one generation was more prolific than another. So is it the teachers or the pupils who are traditional? (1981, 6)

Here, Fang makes clear his view that traditions are made up of individuals. The implication of this point is that because individuals have always made slight changes to traditions over time, there is no reason this process should stop in the present. As Provine writes, summarizing Fang's view, "holding a tradition in suspension is tantamount to

destroying it” (Fang K. 1981, 11). Therefore, in his final assessment, Fang argues that preservation and development are equally important when considering the continuation of musical traditions in the present. He writes:

This really shows that tradition itself is in [a state of] development. The more excellent it is the more vitality it has, and it is certainly not in the static state that some scholars imagine. . . . What matters is not any concept about the changing of form, but whether or not we preserve and develop the mood of the original piece. This [in itself] may be regarded as a sort of development! Thus, most of the evidence from East and West testifies that “tradition does develop.” (1981, 6–7; additions in original)

Concluding his argument, Fang states that the most important factor for artists practicing traditional music is making sure that it continues to be relevant to contemporary audiences. This, Fang argues, can occur through new research, new adaptations, and new compositions that draw inspiration from classical or folk tunes. Such new interpretations and even new creations serve in Fang’s view not to replace or destroy traditional music, but, rather, to maintain its vitality and expand its richness for future generations.

In the field of Chinese music studies, views of Western scholars have over time become more sympathetic to Fang’s views. Work by Jonathan Stock (1996), for example, and the other articles in this special issue show that, increasingly, music scholars are viewing individual creativity as an essential component of the development of traditional music in modern China. As a whole, however, Western-trained scholars approaching Chinese dance have shown less openness to this idea. In his account of a typical encounter between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars approaching Chinese dance in the early 2000s, David Y. H. Wu writes:

The local [Chinese] scholars . . . present the emergence of national dance as a triumph of scientific research, ethnological documentation, and conservation of natural cultural traditions. . . . Foreign or non-Chinese anthropologists, on the other hand, see the national dances as newly invented or reconstructed art forms. (2004, 198)

As in the earlier discussions about music, contemporary cross-cultural discussions about Chinese dance often center on problems of authenticity and preservation. As Wu’s example implies, it is often difficult to reconcile Chinese scholars’ conceptions of an essentially dynamic

notion of traditional continuity with foreign scholars' desire for a more absolute distinction between the old and the new.

A similar tension can be found in contemporary scholarship on Chinese dance published by western-trained scholars in the dance studies field. Chen Ya-ping, a Taiwanese dance scholar who received her PhD in the United States, was one of the first scholars to publish on Chinese dance in English. Chen uses the term "invented tradition" to describe *minzu wudao*, a form of Chinese dance that developed in Taiwan but also out of Dai Ailian's Chongqing experiments. Discussing one of Dai's early Xinjiang-style dances, Chen writes, "It was neither a reproduction nor a reinterpretation of any existing dance in Xinjiang; instead, it was essentially Dai's own choreography based on some dance movements typical of the Uighur tribe in Chinese Turkestan" (2008, 43). Chen's main concern is with the reception of Chinese dance in Taiwan, where it was used as a political tool in Nationalist Party (KMT) nationalism and thus developed along different lines from that in the PRC. However, to make her point, Chen upholds the firm opposition between individual creation and authenticity that has been a hallmark of Western ideas of tradition in the past. Referring to Dai's approach, she writes, "From the very beginning, authenticity in representation had rarely been a serious concern for the advocates of *bianjiang wu*" (2008, 44). In Taiwan, she explains, these dances are "endowed [...] with a presumed 'authenticity,'" even though, in her words, they are "entirely fictional" (2008, 45). Chen is correct in pointing out that Dai's *bianjiangwu* choreography did not all closely reproduce existing dance forms and thus should not be understood as "traditional" in a conventional Western sense. At the same time, the absolute distinction she employs between invention and authenticity leaves little room for other conceptions of tradition, such as that employed by Dai and her contemporaries in early formulations of the dynamic inheritance approach.

The idea of dynamic inheritance attempts to shift the conversation about Chinese dance in Anglophone scholarship away from the issue of whether Chinese dance is authentic or invented and toward questions about how Chinese dance operates in China as both an essentially creative endeavor and a form of research that contributes to the continuation of cultural traditions. In contrast to the formulation of "invented tradition," dynamic inheritance suggests the idea of "authoring tradition." Whereas the former emphasizes a break in continuity and implied lack of authenticity, the latter emphasizes the creative role

of individual artists in shaping how cultural traditions develop. In the context of Chinese dance specifically, the idea of authoring tradition helps to recognize and legitimate the contributions of members of groups typically underrepresented in research on modern Chinese culture, namely, women and ethnic minorities. Historically, women and ethnic minorities have made enormous contributions to the development of Chinese dance in the PRC, whether as performers, choreographers, teachers, or scholars. A dynamic inheritance approach focused on the authoring of tradition helps to understand and value these contributions as impactful work that has meaningfully shaped the trajectory of contemporary Chinese culture. At the same time, it engages local ideas about the nature of artistic traditions, rather than imposing external definitions and expectations of them.

A key medium through which individual artists author tradition in Chinese dance is the “representative work” (*daibiaozuo*). A representative work is a dance piece that starts out as the original creation of an individual artist, and, due to its popularity and influence, achieves the status of “traditional” among later generations. All of the major styles of Chinese dance that exist today were developed through the accumulation of such representative works. In Uyghur dance, for example, works by past Uyghur dance artists such as Kangba'erhan⁸ (1914⁹–1994) and Ayitula (b. 1940) are now seen as “traditional,” and works by younger Uyghur dancers such as Yumiti (b. 1987) may soon take on this status (Wilcox 2011). In Chinese classical dance, the examples given above of *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, *Dancers of the Tongque Stage*, and *Yellow River* are also representative works. In each case, the term “representative” has two meanings: on the one hand, the work represents the individual artist or group of artists who created it and whose names remain attached to it in records of Chinese dance history; on the other hand, the work represents the broader cultural tradition with which it comes to be associated, and of which it may be regarded as an embodiment independent of its individual creators.

To understand the processes through which an ordinary dance work becomes a representative work, it is helpful to review a case study. A good example for this purpose is “Cup and Bowl Dance” (*Zhong wan wu*), a Mongol dance solo officially premiered by the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Ensemble in 1961 (see Figure 1).¹⁰ Cup and Bowl Dance first appeared at a regional performance festival held in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia. After receiving “unanimous praise” at the festival, it was reviewed in *Wudao*, China’s

national dance journal and was featured in a color photo on the journal's front page (Xu E. 1962, 7, cover). According to the *Wudao* reporter, "Cup and Bowl Dance" was one of one hundred twenty new music and dance works presented at the festival, which apparently fell into two types, both based on the dynamic inheritance methodology:

In some, the authors used basic materials (*sucai*) of folk dance to express new life and new characters ... others were folk dances created on the basis of collection (*shouji*) and putting in order (*zhengli*), with a relatively large amount of additional development (*fazhan*). (Xu E. 1962, 6)

The author placed "Cup and Bowl Dance" in the latter category, meaning that it was relatively innovative compared to other works in the festival. At the same time, the author praised it and other works for their capacity to represent the local culture of the region: "These works, while diverse in theme and form, show a pronounced national style (*fengge*) and the special character (*tese*) of the region" (Xu E. 1962, 6). This report indicates that "Cup and Bowl Dance" achieved a quality common to all representative works; it struck a perfect balance between old and new. On the one hand, "Cup and Bowl Dance" was eminently recognizable as an authentic reflection of local culture; on the other hand, it stood out and was appealing because of its exceptional innovation.

The individual most responsible for the creation of "Cup and Bowl Dance" was Siqintariha (b. 1932), a woman of Khorchin Mongol descent who joined the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Ensemble (then the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Team) in 1948. Originally from an aristocratic family in what is today eastern Inner Mongolia, Siqintariha was an active participant in the construction of Chinese dance during the early Maoist period. She was one of the first minority dancers to perform at the 1949 Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress in Beiping (later Beijing), and she had the distinction of representing China abroad twice at the semi-annual World Festivals of Youth and Students, first in Budapest in 1949, and then in Warsaw in 1955 (Neimenggu 1986; Wulanjie 2008). Although Siqintariha had no professional dance training when she entered the Ensemble, she later studied at the top professional dance programs in the PRC: in 1951–1952, she participated in the national Chinese dance research program taught by Choe Seung-hui at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing; then, in 1954–1956, she was in the inaugural class of the Beijing Dance School (later Beijing Dance Academy) (Wulanjie 2008). The *Wudao* issue that featured "Cup and Bowl Dance" on its



FIGURE 1

“Cup and Bowl Dance,” premiered in 1961 by the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Ensemble. Performed here by Siqintariha. Photo courtesy of Siqintariha.

cover in 1962 also included an article on the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Ensemble Dance Team coauthored by Siqintariha, who by that time had been appointed the Ensemble’s Vice Director in charge of dance (Siqintariha and Baoyinbatu 1962; Neimenggu 1986). All of

these experiences gave Siqintariha familiarity with the dynamic inheritance methodology. At the same time, they gave her the necessary status and influence to have an impact on how Mongol dance was practiced in China.

The creative process Siqintariha followed in the making of “Cup and Bowl Dance” is recounted in detail in her autobiographical essay “From ‘Lamp Dance’ to ‘Cup and Bowl’ Solo Dance” (Siqintariha 2008) and in personal interviews with the author (Siqintariha 2012–2015). Below is a condensed version of her accounts:¹¹

In early 1961, the Inner Mongolia Song and Dance Troupe split into groups and went to the countryside to perform. The program included “Lamp Dance,” a solo dance choreographed by Jia Zuoguang and performed by the young performer Modegema (b. 1941). When the performances ended, we invited local audiences to give feedback. They had several critiques of “Lamp Dance”: the lighting was too dark; the stage mood was depressing and gloomy; and the environment resembled an ancient imperial temple, rather than modern life. In the work, the dancer balanced a lamp on her head, and the tongue of the flame moved as she danced, flickering and floating. This created an eerie feeling, and some felt that she resembled a female spirit or a ghost, rather than a real person. At the end of the tour, we returned to the Troupe headquarters and had a long discussion about the audience feedback. Finally, I was assigned the job of revising the piece. I worked with Modegema, rehearsing rigorously every day. At last, I made the following revisions: the lamp on the dancer’s head was replaced with a stack of three porcelain bowls, and in her hands she now held pairs of porcelain drink cups. Instead of starting kneeling on stage, she now emerged from the right side, and the lights were made strong and bright. The idea to replace the lamps with cups and bowls came from my research on the folk dances of Ordos, an area in Western Inner Mongolia. There is a type of dance in which folk artists balance a bowl on their heads and fill it with alcohol, like a drinking game—whoever spills has to take a drink. In the adapted piece, Modegema balanced a whole stack of bowls, and the drinking game component was removed. Replacing the lamp with the bowls changed the visual image of the dance, but it allowed the piece to still inherit some aspects of traditional folk dance. The basic movement vocabulary of “Cup and Bowl Dance” also comes from the Ordos drink bowl dance—the posture and the use of the arms and hands especially—and I added some new ones too. For example, the rapid “*cuibu*” step used at the beginning of the piece comes from Chinese classical dance. In addition to increasing the technical difficulty of the piece, this gives the work a faster tempo and adds an elegant and upright quality to the

female dancer's image. As a whole, we can say that these revisions maintained the original work's structures, while they incorporated elements from folk dance and made its visual impact and mood more suitable to the tastes of new audiences.

Siqintariha's account makes clear that the creation of "Cup and Bowl Dance" involved several layers of source materials: the "Lamp Dance" solo choreographed by Jia Zuoguang; the suggestions from the rural audiences; the techniques learned from Ordos folk artists; and, finally, Siqintariha's own innovations. In Siqintariha's collected essay volume, a photograph of Siqintariha studying with a male folk dancer identified as Nashunhutu shows her learning a posture with drink cups that looks identical to those employed in "Cup and Bowl Dance" (Figure 2) (Wulanjie 2008, 390; *Caidie fenfei* 1963). In our interviews, Siqintariha explained that this was the very technique that inspired her to use the drink cups in this work. One of the motivations in adapting this piece, according to Siqintariha, was to create an elegant image of Mongol women, in contrast to the coy or more playful images found in other dance works of the time. When discussing "Cup and Bowl Dance," Siqintariha repeatedly used the word "*duanzhuang*," or "dignified," to describe the female image it depicted. It is interesting to consider the path she took to generate this image: adapting elements of a drinking game; learning from a male folk artist; introducing steps from Chinese classical dance; and changing the tone from somber and spiritual to upbeat and bright. It is these subtle choices of blending, selection, and adaptation that constitute Siqintariha's authorship and creativity. Such decisions mark the presence of her individual artistic interpretation.

The success of Siqintariha's innovations and Modegema's performances made the work highly popular. Soon after its debut in Hohhot, "Cup and Bowl Dance" was selected to represent China abroad at the World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Helsinki in July 1962, where it took the Gold Prize. Modegema was promoted to a national-level ensemble in Beijing, raising her to the status of China's premier performer of Mongol dance (Feng et al. 2006, 376). Film further expanded the impact of "Cup and Bowl Dance" in 1963, when it was included in *Butterflies Fluttering About* (*Caidie fenfei*), a dance film shown around the country and exported internationally (Z. Wang 2014; *Renmin ribao* 1964). In 1964, it appeared in a modified form in *The East is Red*, a major production that was also



FIGURE 2

Siqintariha learning a drink cup dance from folk artist Nashunhutu in Hohhot, early 1960s. Photo courtesy of Siqintariha.

made into a widely circulated film the following year (*Dongfang hong* 1965; Feng et al. 2006, 376). Although “Cup and Bowl Dance,” like other works of Chinese dance, was condemned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), it was revived immediately afterward. In 1978, Modegema performed “Cup and Bowl Dance” on a major tour in the United States (Wilcox 2016a). By the early twenty-first century, Chinese dance scholars were counting “Cup and Bowl Dance” as one of the most important and influential works of Chinese dance ever produced (Jia 2006). Scholar of Mongol dance Wang Jingzhi called it “the origin of a varied series of cup and bowl dance works that have



FIGURE 3

Siqintariha teaching bowl dance technique to a new generation of students at the Dedema Art School in Inner Mongolia, early 2000s. Photo courtesy of Siqintariha.

canonical and trademark significance” (2009, 416). Indeed, adaptations of this piece are ubiquitous in female Mongol dance productions in China. Recently, the Opening Ceremonies of the Fourth National Minorities Arts and Culture Festival held in Beijing in 2012 included a large Mongolian group dance section titled *Cup-Bowl-Chopstick* that was clearly an extension of this earlier work (*Shengshi* 2012; *Di si jie* 2012).¹²

What is most significant about “Cup and Bowl Dance” in relation to the idea of tradition has been its impact on dance training. In China, to be a professional in the field of Chinese dance means to have undergone training in a dance conservatory, where each sub-category of Chinese dance has its own distinct curriculum (Wilcox 2011). It is at the level of training that traditions get defined and formalized, since this is the process through which dancers learn to recognize, differentiate, and, most importantly, perform a variety of different dance styles. In the case of female-style Mongol dance, the props employed in “Cup and Bowl Dance”—stacks of porcelain bowls and pairs of small drink cups—have been incorporated as basic elements of the curriculum of Mongol dance. This means that learning

Mongol dance in China today requires embodying the movements and techniques used in “Cup and Bowl Dance.” At the Inner Mongolia University Art Institute, the premier school for studying Mongolian dance in China, female students of all levels learn to manipulate cups and bowls, and the movements they learn correspond directly to those found in the “Cup and Bowl Dance” choreography.¹³ This technique is also included in a widely used Mongolian dance DVD training series coauthored by Siqintariha (Siqintariha and Zhao 2007). By serving directly as a teacher and mentor to new generations of dancers, Siqintariha has thus ensured the continued “representativeness” of “Cup and Bowl Dance” over the years.

Conclusion: Faces of Tradition

The metaphor of inheritance is key to understanding the relationships between present and past, individual and group, and innovation and tradition in Chinese dance. Creators of Chinese dance are said to “inherit” Chinese tradition through their works, and the stuff that constitutes tradition is often given physiological metaphors such as “blood,” “marrow,” or “essence.” While this discourse can encourage troubling forms of cultural essentialism, it also enables flexibility and change in the interpretation of what constitutes Chinese culture over time. Because Chinese tradition is viewed as an inheritance, each new generation has the obligation to embody this tradition in its own way. With each new representative, like a new phenotype from a shared gene pool, a new line of inheritance develops, which shapes the possibilities for the future generations.

In China, this idea that cultural traditions should be continuously reinterpreted, and that individual artists play pivotal roles in this process, is a legacy of the socialist era. As David Holm (1991) argues, even at its most divided, one of the few points that united the Yan’an “national forms” movement was that folk culture, in order to become national culture, would have to undergo change. Thus, in his 1942 “Talks,” Mao Zedong compared existing folk forms to the seeds and sprouts of national forms, calling them “literature and art in a budding state” (Holm 1991, 94). In the field of dance, this idea that national culture was “budding” but not yet fully formed afforded tremendous space for dance artists to leverage their own creativity in the development of new Chinese dance works. Over time, works that were successful became incorporated into Chinese dance tradition.

Future research may consider to what extent the dynamic inheritance concept and artistic methodology is specific to socialist China, or whether it also pertains to dance practices in other parts of the world. The comparative work of US-based dance scholar Anthony Shay (2002) has demonstrated similar processes in the creation of national folk dance in the Soviet Union, Mexico, Croatia, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey. Shay demonstrates that in all of these cases, dances that came to represent the shared culture of a nation or ethnic group were artistic products of creative and innovative individuals. As has been the case in Chinese dance, the national dance companies Shay discusses also offer “the representation of the nation . . . produced through a single, unique artistic vision” (2002, 39). Thus, the authoring of tradition seems to have happened similarly in these cases.

What may make the Chinese context somewhat different is that individual artists continue to be associated with Chinese dance works even after those works become “representative.” That is, in the case of “Cup and Bowl Dance,” the work is still dated to 1962, and *Siqintariha* is still seen as a primary creative force in its adaptation, at least among Chinese dance scholars. Similarly, with the Han-Tang work, *Dancers of the Tongque Stage*, Sun Ying is still recognized as the individual who created this piece and the larger Han-Tang school, even though this school is now also regarded as part of the Chinese classical dance tradition. Shay suggests that in the cases he analyzes, at least among lay audiences, the role of the individual creator is not as widely recognized:

Because the dances purportedly originate with “the people,” the characters of the founder-artistic directors and choreographers are often more muted. Many individuals among the public largely believe the fiction that the choreographies they view on stage reflect actual dances as they would be experienced in a traditional field setting. (2002, 39)

It would require a great deal more fieldwork among Chinese audiences and lay practitioners to determine whether Chinese dance is or ever has been widely regarded among the general public as something that would be experienced in a traditional field setting. When the National Folk Dance Ensemble of the Soviet Union, one of the groups Shay analyzes, visited China in the 1950s, the role of the Ensemble’s lead choreographer Igor Moiseyev was far from muted. Chinese programs featured a large portrait of Moiseyev on the first page, followed by a biographical statement and essays about

Moiseyev's "creative principles" for making folk dance works (*Sulian*, n.d.). Does this mean that Chinese audiences viewed these dances more as Moiseyev's choreography than as representations of Soviet dance traditions? One contribution of the dynamic inheritance approach is the suggestion that this may be a false opposition with which to begin.

As I have argued here, professionals and scholars of Chinese dance in the PRC have historically regarded Chinese dance as the cumulative product of individuals, who conduct research on existing folk dances or cultural artifacts and then create new works from them, often interpreting them in new ways. The phrase "to inherit and develop," often used to describe this larger process, expresses the idea behind this method and approach, which I call dynamic inheritance. Among the many new creations, only some get incorporated into Chinese dance tradition. These are those that become "representative works." By conceptualizing tradition as inherently in flux, this understanding of dance creation challenges the conventional Western dichotomy between tradition and innovation. It expresses an approach to the construction of national culture developed in China's early socialist period that remains in use today.

University of Michigan
Ann Arbor

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Notes

1. For an account of this concept in the Soviet context, see George Luckyj (1990).
2. A longer discussion of this, including ample documentation, appears in my book manuscript in progress on the history of PRC dance.
3. This and all translations in this article are by the author of this article unless otherwise noted.
4. Primary print sources reviewed include articles about dance published in major newspapers and periodicals, such as *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*), and *China Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*), as well as articles published in specialized dance publications including *Dance Study Materials* (*Wudao xuexi ziliao*), *Dance News* (*Wudao tongxun*), and *Dance* (*Wudao*). In addition, I consulted memoirs and biographies and conducted personal interviews with dozens of the leading figures of Chinese dance during this period.
5. Throughout this essay, I use the English term “dance artist” to describe professional dancers who work in PRC state-sponsored dance institutions. The term “dance art” (*wudao yishu*) has been a standard term for concert dance in Maoist and post-Maoist China. Thus, the term “dance artist” encapsulates the Maoist terms “dance worker” and “dance art worker” (*wudao yishu gongzuozhe*), as well as the post-Maoist terms “dancer” (*wuzhe*) and “dance artist” (*wudaojia*).
6. This concept has a long history that dates back to the folksong collection practices of early China. For a discussion of changes in this practice over time, see Lydia Liu (2012).
7. For example, in 1949, when the Huabei University Dance Team performed dances from Dai Ailian’s repertoire at the All-China Literature and Arts Worker Representative Congress, newspapers described these works as “Madame Dai Ailian’s dances” (Fang M. 1949a).
8. Names of ethnic minority dancers are transcribed in Pinyin to reflect their spellings in Chinese print sources.
9. Kangba'erhan's birthdate is disputed. The official date is 1922, but recent scholarship suggests the actual date is 1914.
10. A video of this work can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TT_eIDYEo4.
11. The following is a condensed summary based on the contents of Siqintariha's essay (2008) and several interviews I conducted with her (2012–2015). It is not a direct quotation but is drawn from her accounts.
12. I observed the original live performance of this work at the Olympic Stadium in Beijing on June 12, 2012.
13. This is based on my observations of the final exams in Mongol dance held at this school in 2012 and 2014. While studying at the Beijing Dance Academy in 2008–2009, I also observed students learning these techniques as part of their Mongol dance courses.

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EMILY E. WILCOX is Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese Studies in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor. Her articles on Chinese dance and theater appear in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Asian Theatre Journal*, *TDR: The Drama Review*, *Wudao Pinglun* [The dance review], and other venues. (eewilcox@umich.edu)