

## CHAPTER 6

## Diasporic Moves

Sinophone Epistemology in the  
Choreography of Dai Ailian*Emily Wilcox*

Dai Ailian 戴爱莲 (also spelled Ai-lien Tai, 1916–2006) was one of twentieth-century East Asia's most influential dance leaders. During the 1940s, she launched the effort to create “Chinese Dance” (*Zhongguo wu* 中國舞), a genre of contemporary concert dance that enjoys widespread popularity today in China and around the world.<sup>1</sup> Dai also promoted ballet, Asian dance, and Labonotation in China. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Dai served as the founding head of several important PRC dance institutions, including the Chinese Dancers' Association, the Central Song and Dance Ensemble Dance Group, the Beijing Dance School, and the National Ballet of China. In 1981–1985 she served as vice president of UNESCO's International Dance Council.<sup>2</sup> On her death, China's media pronounced Dai the “Mother of Chinese dance” (*Zhongguo wudao zhi mu* 中國舞蹈之母).<sup>3</sup>

Despite her profound influence on China's dance world, Dai's relationship with China was complicated. Born and raised in Trinidad, she was a third- or fourth-generation diasporic Chinese (third on her father's side and fourth on her mother's side). Born Eileen Isaac, Dai spoke English as her native language and, like most young Chinese Trinidadians of her generation, was highly assimilated into British colonial culture.<sup>4</sup> Dai's grandfather on her father's side and great-grandparents on her mother's side were Cantonese- and Hakka-speaking immigrants from southern China who arrived in Trinidad during the nineteenth century. Dai never learned to speak either of their native tongues, although she did eventually learn Mandarin as an adult. Around the age of fourteen, Dai left Trinidad and moved with her mother and two sisters to London, where she launched her professional dance career by studying ballet and German modern dance. Nine years later, World War II broke out in Europe, and Dai left for Hong Kong, which like Trinidad was a British colony. From there, Dai moved on to China, settling in Chongqing

in 1941, in the midst of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In China, Dai was often referred to as a “*Guiqiao*” 歸僑 (short for *guiguo Huaqiao* 歸國華僑), or “returned Overseas Chinese.”<sup>5</sup> She was among hundreds of thousands of diasporic Chinese who “returned” to China from Southeast Asia, the Western Hemisphere, and other places during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Although Dai resided in China for the remainder of her life, she occupied an unusual position there. Like other returned ethnic migrants, Dai was “marked [ . . . ] as a kind of permanent ‘outsider’ whose peculiarity or ‘special features’ (*tedian* 特點) were defined by their connection to foreign worlds.”<sup>7</sup>

When speaking publicly about her own life, Dai often downplayed her intercultural upbringing and embraced an unqualified Chinese identity. For example, when she was asked in a 1983 television interview why she chose to emigrate to China, she replied, “Well, I know that I am Chinese. I mean, it’s very strong to know that you’re Chinese. And there’s a big country there. It is your motherland.”<sup>8</sup> That Dai saw herself as unequivocally Chinese, despite having grown up outside China, is consistent with a state ideology of diasporic Chineseness promoted in China since the late nineteenth century. Although emigration out of China dates back hundreds of years, it was long officially banned in China, and people of Chinese descent living abroad were often criminalized, viewed as “wanderers, fugitives, traitors and conspirators.”<sup>9</sup> Then, in the late 1870s, China’s leaders started to regard Chinese emigrants as an asset to China’s modernization, and the Qing government began actively cultivating their support, starting in places such as Singapore (then a British colony with a large Chinese diasporic population). In 1893, the Qing formally repealed its ban on emigration and decreed that henceforth all Chinese “honest merchants and common people, no matter how long they have been abroad, along with their wives and children, shall be issued passports [ . . . ] to allow them to return to China.”<sup>10</sup> The term Overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao* 華僑), which emerged at this time, meant “Chinese sojourner.” It assumed that Chinese migrants and their descendants living abroad still saw China as their home; moreover, it expected that they would remain loyal to China and one day eventually return.<sup>11</sup>

This essay builds on recent scholarship that problematizes this notion of Overseas Chinese identity, asking how such questions might change our understanding of the life and work of Dai Ailian. It draws on the work of Shu-mei Shih, a leading figure in this critical wave of scholarship, who has proposed the concept of the “Sinophone” as a new approach to what have traditionally been called Overseas Chinese communities or the Chinese diaspora. For Shih, the Sinophone concept shifts focus away from China-centric

theorizations in which China remains the imagined homeland and destination for return. It proposes an emphasis on place-based cultures, as well as an acknowledgment of the idea that many people of Chinese descent do not embrace a Chinese identity. It also considers that many ethnic minorities in China have complex relationships to Chineseness.<sup>12</sup>

Not all of Shih's theorizations of the Sinophone are relevant or applicable to Dai. The fact that Dai did not speak or read any Chinese language before she moved to China means that she was technically not "Sinophone" by Shih's definition, according to which "Sinophone culture [ . . . ] is defined not by ethnicity [ . . . ] but by language."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as cited above, Dai readily embraced the identities of "Chinese diaspora" and "Overseas Chinese." As a dancer Dai created cultural expressions that are difficult to analyze by the traditional approaches of Sinophone studies, which has tended to focus on written and spoken language.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, some aspects of Sinophone studies are useful for examining Dai's case, particularly the notion of "the Sinophone . . . as an epistemology."<sup>15</sup> As discussed further below, this concept highlights the potential of diasporic or Sinophone subjects to engage in "multiply-angulated critique," producing work that is highly local and yet transcends singular identities or affiliations. Such an approach, I argue, can enrich our understanding of Dai's work and the power of her choreography.

In this essay, I examine just two of the many locations in which Dai worked during her life: Hong Kong, a city on the southern coast of China that was a British colony from 1842 to 1997, and Chongqing, an inland city in the southwest that was China's provisional capital in 1937–1946, during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Specifically, I look at one major performance Dai gave in each locale: her September 1940 recital in Hong Kong, just six months after she arrived in Asia, and her March 1946 performance in Chongqing, after she had been residing in remote areas of China for nearly five years. By focusing on these two events, I show that Dai's choreography embodied a localized and evolving, rather than universal and static, approach to representing Chinese identity, performing a Sinophone epistemology enabled by her diasporic experiences.

#### DAI AILIAN IN HONG KONG: DANCING PATRIOTISM IN THE COLONY

When Dai landed in Hong Kong in March of 1940, the local Chinese and English-language presses responded to her arrival in different ways, indicating divergent local audiences for whom she would soon perform. *Ta Kung*

*Pao*, a Chinese-language newspaper, highlighted her patriotism by noting her participation in benefit concerts for the China Campaign Committee, a UK-based group that advocated for support for China in the war against Japan.<sup>16</sup> To emphasize her Chinese cultural roots, the article featured a photograph of Dai performing *The Concubine Beauty Dances Before the Emperor*, a solo dance in which she portrayed the famed Tang dynasty consort Yang Guifei. In the photo, Dai is dressed in an embroidered gown with long drooping sleeves, resembling paintings of Tang court ladies. Her upper body is slightly arched, head tilted to one side and eyes cast down demurely, and her fingers point upward, delicately arrayed like flower petals, similar to postures from Chinese opera.<sup>17</sup> The *South China Morning Post*, an English-language newspaper, wrote instead about the artists Dai had worked with while she was living in England and the venues where she performed, such as the Embassy and Mask Theatres, the Ernest and Lotte Berk Group, the Dance Centre, and the Ballets Jooss at Dartington Hall. In an indication of Dai's cross-cultural appeal, the article quoted a review of Dai's dance from *The New Statesman and Nation*, which stated, "To see her was to participate, for a moment, in the exaltation of good art of whatever country and century."<sup>18</sup>

Details about Dai's Hong Kong performance schedule also appeared in local newspapers, again with different information to appeal to different readers. After a June benefit concert for the Guiyang Red Cross had to be cancelled, Dai finally appeared at a private event in September, which *Ta Kung Pao* used as publicity for an upcoming public recital.<sup>19</sup> An advertisement for the recital in *South China Morning Post* indicated joint British and Chinese support for the event, while clearly labeling Dai as "Chinese":

Under the patronage of His Excellency the Acting Governor, Lt. General E. F. Norton, who has kindly consented to be present, a Dance Recital will be held in the Rose Room of the Peninsula Hotel on Friday evening, October 18th, at 9:30 PM. The performance is to be sponsored by the China Defence League, of which Madame Sun Yat-sen is Chairman; and the proceeds will be in aid of Chinese War Orphans. Star performer of the evening will be the well-known Chinese dancer, Miss Ai-Lien Tai.<sup>20</sup>

The *Da Kung Bao* advertisements for this event had a slightly different emphasis. One, for example, introduced the history of ballet to prepare audiences for Dai's presentation of excerpts from *Les Sylphides*.<sup>21</sup> Another offered a biographical essay that again lauded Dai's patriotism toward China. It read, "Ten years of difficult study made her achieve artistic success, with great

acclaim abroad. However, she sincerely misses her motherland and hopes to use her art to serve it [. . .] [S]he is an artist with a conscience.”<sup>22</sup>

A detailed program from the recital, which appears in *Ta Kung Pao*, offers a valuable historical document of Dai’s first public performance in Asia. It reflects both the Europeanized culture of British colonial Hong Kong at the time and a sense of the complex national and cultural affiliations of Dai’s local audiences:

Opening: British national anthem; national anthem of the Republic of China; 1. Chamber music: movements from Bach’s suite in D Major, arranged by J. R. M. Smith; 2. Dance: Prelude and Waltz from *Les Sylphides* 嬋娟舞, to music by Chopin, danced by Dai Ailian; 3. Solo songs: “Elegie” (Massenet), “Palisir d’Amour” (Martini), “La Calunnia” (Rossini) and “Song of the Volga Boatmen” (Russian folk song, arranged by Koenemann), sung by Y. K. Sze, bass; 4. Flute solo: “Variations on Ancient Dances” (Telemann), played by Walter Yeh; 5. Dance: *La Glaneuse* 拾穗女, to music by Debussy, danced by Dai Ailian; Intermission; 6. Chamber music: “A Sonata a Quatre” (Telemann), played by Walter Yeh (flute), Chao Pu-wei (first viola), Ho On-tung (second viola), and J. R. M. Smith (piano); 7. Dance: *The Concubine Beauty Dances Before the Emperor* 楊貴妃唐宮舞, to “Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Dress” 霓裳羽衣 (Tang composition) on Western wind, and *Willow* 垂楊舞, to “Wandering in the Garden” 遊園 (Kunqu tune) on flute, both danced by Dai Ailian; 8. Chamber music: “Handel in the Strand” (Grainger’s Clog Dance), arranged by J. R. M. Smith; 9. Dance: *Alarm!* 警醒, to drum solo, and *Guerilla March* 前進, to music by Prokofiev, both danced by Dai Ailian; Closing: British national anthem.<sup>23</sup>

The *South China Morning Post* reported on the reception of Dai’s dances as follows:

The most outstanding of the dances were two modern expressive numbers interpreting different moods of China’s struggle against Japan. The first ‘Ching Hsing’ (Alarm!), in which the artist dramatized a night alarm to the self-accompaniment of a small drum was a most realistic portrayal, with the percussion adding to the general effect of the dance. ‘Guerilla March’ proved even more popular with the audience. Wearing a striking costume symbolic of the Chinese flag, Miss Ai-Lien Tai gave a most spirited performance in which gestures of defiance and victory were predominant. ‘La Glaneuse,’ a lyrical dance on the Biblical theme of Ruth the Gleaner to music of Debussy

was in contrast in a quieter mood. The handicap of a small stage detracted from her classical numbers, two dances from *Les Sylphides*. Two dances from old opera were beautifully rendered.<sup>24</sup>

Although there are no known film recordings of these dances, published photographs and drawings offer ideas of what they looked like. A photograph of Dai in *La Glaneuse* shows her in a white blouse and a nun-like head-covering squarely facing the audience with both hands solemnly crossed over her chest.<sup>25</sup> A drawing of *Alarm!* depicts Dai dancing barefoot in rolled-up pants and a button-down-collared shirt with rolled-up sleeves, a swath of fabric tied around her head and a large drum under her left arm.<sup>26</sup> She balances on a turned-out left foot with her right knee lifted to the side, the sole of her right foot pressed against her left inner thigh. Tilting her head to the left with her gaze forward, she beats the drum with her right hand.

Only one photograph from this concert appeared in the Hong Kong newspapers. It depicted Dai standing outdoors, seemingly on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean, in a pose from *Guerilla March*.<sup>27</sup> Dai stands in a costume matching the description in her oral history: “the top a blue sky with white sun and the bottom red; on the right wrist is attached a square piece [of fabric] lined up with the bottom, to look like a flag.”<sup>28</sup> The costume only covers Dai’s torso and one arm, exposing her bare legs and feet in a style reminiscent of 1930s German modern dance, which Dai had studied in England. Dai stands in a lunge with her feet spread wide, chest and face turned upward, and arms drawing a long diagonal from front to back. Her palms face upward and fingers curl in as if grasping invisible balls. With her muscular legs firmly planted, her arms rotating dynamically upward from the shoulder sockets, and her gaze looking up toward the sky, she presents a powerful, statuesque image that exudes patriotism and hope, embodying Chinese nationalism in a time of war, invoked through movement qualities drawn from European modern dance.

*The South China Morning Post* declared Dai’s Hong Kong recital “an outstanding success, both as a concert and as a benefit performance.”<sup>29</sup> Dai and the other artists reportedly donated their performances for free, so the only expenses were for constructing the stage and printing programs. With an audience of 500, the event raised HK\$4,255.55, of which HK\$3,685.35 went to the China Defence League War Orphans’ Fund. According to the report, “So much interest was taken in the recital that numerous requests have reached the Committee for a repeat performance in a theatre in Hongkong, and at the present time this is under consideration.”<sup>30</sup>





Fig. 6.1. Dai Ailian in Hong Kong performing a dance pose from her solo dance *Guerilla March*. *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 1940. Photographer unknown. Used with permission of South China Morning Post.

A repeat performance did occur on January 22, 1941, this time with the addition of Christian hymns by the Chinese Choral Society and *East River 東江*, a new war-themed modern dance by Dai. Also organized by the China Defence League, proceeds went to the International Peace Hospital in North China and the Kunming Huidian Hospital in Yunnan.<sup>31</sup> Once again, *Guerrilla March*, which Dai performed to the third movement of Russian composer Sergey Prokofiev's modernist piano composition "The Love for Three Oranges," was an audience favorite. According to the *South China Morning Post*, "Most popular of her numbers was the stirring 'Guerrilla March,' [ . . . ] in which she so strikingly captured the spirit of China's resistance to the Japanese. The effect of the dance was heightened by her costume[ . . . ] She was forced to give this dance twice."<sup>32</sup> Dai's reputation as a powerful and patriotic dancer now solidified, she soon left Hong Kong for Chongqing, where she developed a new repertoire for new audiences.

#### DAI AILIAN IN CHONGQING: PERFORMING ETHNICITY ON THE FRONTIER

For Dai, life in Chongqing was very different from life in Hong Kong. Because Dai spoke no Chinese, she relied for interpretation on her husband (the Chinese painter Ye Qianyu 葉淺予, whom Dai met and married during her stay in Hong Kong), an arrangement that proved frustrating for them both.<sup>33</sup> Spaces equipped for dance were rare and often in poor condition, and the ongoing war meant that air raids and bombings were frequent, making everyday life unpredictable and dangerous.<sup>34</sup> Dai also experienced health problems, including a serious illness for which she had to return to Hong Kong for surgery in the fall of 1941. Dai's convalescence coincided with the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong, leading to a perilous escape that nearly cost her life.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the harsh conditions, Dai took every opportunity to study and perform in each place she visited. In April of 1941, while she and Ye were passing through Guilin, Dai joined a local benefit concert held to raise funds for an airplane donation in honor of the women's movement. Dai performed alongside a group of female actors who specialized in Gui opera (*Guiju* 桂劇), the local Han dialect theater of that area.<sup>36</sup> This led Dai to study the movements in a comic scene from Gui opera, in which one actor plays the roles of two characters—a woman holding a fan and handkerchief and a man carrying the woman on his back. She later developed this into one of her most iconic solo choreographies, *The Mute Carries the Cripple* 啞子背瘋.<sup>37</sup>



*The Mute Carries the Cripple* was just one of a series of new dances Dai created over the next several years based on similar encounters with other local communities in Chongqing and surrounding areas of southwest China. *Nostalgia* (*Sixiang qu* 思鄉曲), a solo inspired by Dai's meeting with composer Ma Sicong 馬思聰 in Chongqing in 1941, portrayed the homesickness of a wandering woman refugee, a common sight in the wartime capital during these years.<sup>38</sup> Many dances Dai created during this period had ethnic minority themes, reflecting the region's demographics. One of these, *Yao Drum* (*Yaoren zhi gu* 瑤人之鼓), was inspired by Dai's visit to a Yao mountain community in Guizhou in around 1941 or 1942.<sup>39</sup> Danced with drumsticks around a large floor drum, it was loosely based on dances she had observed, recreated for the concert stage.<sup>40</sup> Another minority-themed work, *Dance of Youth* (*Qingchun wu qu* 青春舞曲/*Qingchun zhi wu* 青春之舞), was inspired by a Uyghur dance Dai learned in 1943 from a friend in Chongqing who had recently visited Xinjiang.<sup>41</sup> In 1945, Dai traveled to Kangding, in what is now central Sichuan, where she stayed with a Tibetan trader from Batang (Ba'an) and learned several Tibetan dances. *Ba'an Xianzi* (巴安弦子) was a new choreography Dai created based on these studies.<sup>42</sup> Similar to many Tibetan-themed dances presented in China today, it was performed in a long skirt and striped apron and featured bending and straightening of the torso, lowered stamping actions with flat-bottomed boots, and curving arm actions tossing elongated sleeves.

In 1946, Dai put on a major concert in Chongqing presenting this and other new choreography she had created during the five years since she had arrived in China. Known as the *Frontier Music and Dance Plenary* (*Bianjiang yinyue wudao dahui* 邊疆音樂舞蹈大會), it opened on March 6 at the Chongqing Youth Hall. The term "frontier" (*bianjiang* 邊疆) in the show's title referred to places in the northern and western parts of China, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, and Guangxi, which have large non-Han communities.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting this theme, the program was dominated by dances associated with or thought to represent these regions and ethnic groups:

1. *Yao Drum* (trio version);
2. *Jiarong Drinking Party* 嘉戎酒會, group dance adapted from Tibetan *guozhuang* song and dance;
3. *Duan Gong Exorcises Ghosts* 端公驅鬼, duet adapted from Qiang exorcism rituals;
4. *The Mute Carries the Cripple*;
5. *Luoluo Love Song* 倮倮情歌, group dance based on court dance of the aristocratic Black Yi;
6. *Auspicious Dance* 吉祥舞, excerpt from Tibetan opera;
7. *Amitābha Dance* 彌陀舞, Buddhist-themed group dance;
8. *Ba'an xianzi* (group version);
9. *Tap Dance* 踢踏舞, Lhasa-style Tibetan dance in which the dancers' feet produce sound by hitting the floor;
10. *Goddess*

Fig 6.2. Dai Ailian performing her Tibetan dance *Ba'an xianzi*, which she premiered in Chongqing in 1946. *Yiwen huabao* 艺文画报2, no. 5, 1947, p. 6. Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949), *Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin* (CNBKSY), Shanghai Library.



*Yi Zhu* 意珠天女, excerpt from Tibetan opera; 11. *Spring Outing* 春游, dance adapted from Tibetan dance, similar in style to *Ba'an xianzi*; 12. *Kanba'erhan* 坎巴爾韓, duet inspired by Uyghur dance, set to a folk song of the same name; 13. *Xinjiang Folk Song* 新疆民歌, a solo by a female singer; 14. *Dance of Youth* (group version).<sup>44</sup>

Eight of these dances were new choreographies Dai had created since leaving Hong Kong: *Yao Drum*, *The Mute Carries the Cripple*, *Luoluo Love Song*, *Amitābha Dance*, *Ba'an Xianzi*, *Spring Outing*, *Kanba'erhan*, and *Dance of Youth*.<sup>45</sup> She performed in all of these except *Ba'an xianzi*, which was danced by a group of Tibetan students, and possibly *Spring Outing*.<sup>46</sup> Dai also performed in *Jiarong Drinking Party*, a work choreographed by Peng Song 彭松 (1916–2016), Dai's close colleague and student. The remaining items on the program were presented by visiting performers from Tibet and members of Chongqing's Tibetan and Xinjiang community organizations, making it a collaborative production by artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The participation of Han and ethnic minority artists in the same performance was a new trend in China during this period, in which this event was particularly large and influential.<sup>47</sup> Reflecting on its significance, one critic wrote, "In the wake of victory against Japan, as we are aiming for the peaceful unification of the country, the meaning of this type of event to the good terms between nationalities through artistic and cultural exchange is very great. It's really unprecedented."<sup>48</sup> Dai presented a lecture at the beginning of the performance that linked her new dances to local discussions about the future of the performing arts in China.<sup>49</sup> This launched a nationwide arts discussion, showing that Dai's ideas tapped into major concerns animating the country at this time.<sup>50</sup>

Like Dai's debut in Hong Kong, the Chongqing *Plenary* too was a resounding success. According to one report, the opening night alone attracted an audience of about 2,000, including many cultural luminaries and political leaders, marking the start of "a new epoch for the future of China's new dance."<sup>51</sup> During the next few months, a "frontier dance" (*bianji-ang wu* 边疆舞) movement spread across China, leading to a series of other performances and tours. In August, Dai performed in Shanghai, at the time China's cultural capital, and received rave reviews.<sup>52</sup> Then, after a year in the United States in 1946–1947, Dai returned to Shanghai and eventually moved to Beijing, where by 1949 she emerged as leader of the dance field in the newly established PRC.

SINOPHONE EPISTEMOLOGY:  
EMBODYING MULTIPLY-ANGULATED CRITIQUE

In one of her early formulations of Sinophone studies, Shu-mei Shih writes, “[T]he Sinophone stands as an open category that views China and Chineseness at an oblique angle in light of place-specific experiences.”<sup>53</sup> This aptly describes Dai’s dance performances in Hong Kong and Chongqing, both of which embodied China and Chineseness but did so in contrasting ways that reflected place-based concerns situated at “oblique angles” to China’s traditional cultural centers. Even though about 90 percent of the Hong Kong population was of Chinese ethnicity, many of whom were recent immigrants, the city’s status as a British colony set it apart from China proper. Similarly, although Chongqing served as the temporary wartime capital, it was an inland city in a “frontier” region long imagined to be on the nation’s cultural periphery.

In both these locations, Dai leveraged distinctive local conditions to develop her own interpretation of China and Chineseness that also drew on her experiences as a diasporic subject. In Hong Kong, she used her unusual dual identity as a London-trained dancer and a patriotic Overseas Chinese to bridge Chinese- and English-speaking communities. In choreographies such as *Guerilla March*, she used her German modern dance training to construct an image of Chinese patriotism that aroused nationalist sentiment, while still affirming the colonial preference for European art forms. In Chongqing, Dai’s diasporic background posed a challenge because of her inability to speak the local language. However, by learning from local artists and conducting her own field research, she developed a new approach to dance that quickly gained followers across China. Moreover, through the cross-ethnic collaboration of the *Plenary* performance, Dai responded to a local need for national unity following the devastating Second Sino-Japanese war.

Beyond offering new perspectives on China, Dai responded to other aspects of her intercultural experiences through these choreographies, and this is an important part of what makes the concept of a “Sinophone epistemology” useful for analyzing her work during this period. The key to Sinophone epistemology, as Shih explains, is the notion of “multiply-angulated critique,” which acknowledges multiple cultural affiliations while maintaining a critical distance from them. Outlining this idea, Shih writes,

Transcending national borders, Sinophone communities can maintain a critical position toward both the country of origin and the country of settlement.



[ . . . ] A Chinese American can be critical of China and the United States at the same time. [ . . . ] The Sinophone as a concept, then, allows for the emergence of a critical position that does not succumb to nationalist and imperialist pressures and allows for a multiply-mediated and multiply-angulated critique. In this way, Sinophone can be considered a method. Starting from being a historical and empirical category of communities, cultures, and languages, the Sinophone can also be rearticulated as an epistemology.<sup>54</sup>

Such “multiply-angulated critique” is evident in Dai Ailian’s life choices and her choreography. Dai’s decision to leave England and move to China at the peak of her dance career can be seen as a critique of British colonial values, in which London was supposed to be the world’s cultural center and thus the ideal destination for aspiring artists. Thus, Dai’s “return” to China can also be read as a rejection of British cultural superiority and a reversal of the racist notion that the colonies, by virtue of their distance from Europe, lacked sophisticated artistic life. Additionally, when Dai performed for benefit concerts in Hong Kong in 1940 and 1941, Dai introduced vivid embodiments of Chinese nationalism into programs that otherwise consisted largely of European classics. Her dances presented potent political symbols such as the Chinese national flag and moving images of Chinese resistance at a time when many colonized subjects across Asia were rebelling against their colonial overlords. Although these choreographies were designed to stir up Chinese patriotic sentiment directed against the Japanese, they could also carry a potential added effect as expressions of anticolonial Chinese nationalism directed against Hong Kong’s British rulers. From this perspective, the British national anthem at the beginning and end of this performance hardly diffused the infectious potential of Dai’s explosive bodily energy in her patriotic dances.

Dai’s “multiply-angulated critique” also targeted the ballet and modern dance culture that she experienced in 1930s London. When Dai was living in London, she, like many other artists of color, experienced racism in daily life and in her career. In her memoir, she reflected that because people of Asian descent were few, “People were always ‘paying attention’ to me, and I always found it very uncomfortable.”<sup>55</sup> London’s dance publications sometimes wrote about Dai in racist terms, and the roles she received were often typecast and portrayed negative images of Chinese people.<sup>56</sup> By performing ballet and German modern dance in her Hong Kong concerts, Dai asserted the right of non-European bodies to perform European dance forms on stage, something she was often denied in London. Moreover, by devising her own

dances that experimented with Chinese aesthetic elements and portrayed Chinese people, Dai wrested the creative agency to represent Asia away from the white choreographers she had often danced for in London.

One example of the latter case are Dai's works adapted from Tibetan dance in Chongqing, such as *Bà'n xianzi*. In 1937–1938, while Dai was working in London, she had played the role of a Tibetan girl in the Tibetan-themed stage production *Djroazanmo*, choreographed by German modern dancer Ernest Berk.<sup>57</sup> The Chinese newspapers reported approvingly on this performance when Dai arrived in Hong Kong.<sup>58</sup> However, it also displayed elements of Orientalism, common in European modern dance during this era, including having most of the Tibetan characters performed by European dancers. Because Dai was not of Tibetan ethnicity, performing the Tibetan dances was also an act of cross-ethnic representation for Dai herself. However, when viewed in relation to the *Djroazanmo* production in London, Dai's approach in Chongqing gave more agency to Tibetan communities. For example, Dai studied with Tibetan dancers to prepare the work, and she worked and performed alongside Tibetan artists in a collaborative performance process. In the final production, Dai's choreographies on Tibetan themes were presented alongside performances of Tibetan dance by Tibetan artists, and the entire production advocated multiethnic nation-building and respect for non-Han cultural traditions.<sup>59</sup>

Some of Dai's Chinese-themed dances, even when they had little or no basis in local performance culture, also embodied potential for multiply-angulated critique insofar as they could be interpreted differently by Chinese and British audiences. Dai's dances *The Concubine Beauty Dances Before the Emperor* and *Willow* were given little attention by the critic of the English-language *South China Morning Post*, who described them simply as “two dances from old opera.”<sup>60</sup> However, like her modern-dance works, these dances were also Dai's creations and contained cultural messages about the wartime situation and Chinese patriotism. *Willow*, for example, created by Dai in London in 1936, took the weeping willow tree as a symbol for China's suffering during the Japanese military invasions.<sup>61</sup> *The Concubine Beauty Dances Before the Emperor*, also created in 1936 in London, depicted Yang Guifei, a woman famous for being blamed for a rebellion and killed during war. “Multiply-angulated critique” could thus be achieved in the double meanings of such cultural symbols that spoke distinct messages to different audiences.



## CONCLUSION: DAI AILIAN'S DIASPORIC MOVES

Dai's many contributions to the development of modern Chinese dance came not in spite, but rather because, of her identity as a diasporic artist. Without her experiences growing up abroad, she never would have received the dance training and professional opportunities she did. These experiences allowed her to master diverse dance knowledge and skills and to develop critical perspectives and learn to adapt to a wide range of cultural environments and audiences. Among her many talents, Dai excelled at learning from those around her and knowing the right kind of dance to create at a particular place and time. This versatility as a human being who could move between different cultural worlds was also reflected in her dancing body. Thus, Dai performed "diasporic moves" both in her everyday migrations and in her staged choreographies.

While Dai harnessed the power of her diasporic experience to contribute to the creation of new approaches to dance in China, she also laid a foundation for new Sinophone epistemologies in dance by helping to influence dance developments among other Sinophone communities. As Ya-ping Chen has documented, several students Dai taught in Chongqing later emigrated to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese Civil War. There, these dancers helped establish *minzu wudao* 民族舞蹈, a place-based version of Chinese Dance in Taiwan, which took a different direction from Chinese Dance on the mainland.<sup>62</sup> Some of Dai's students and contemporaries also took her Chongqing repertoires to Sinophone communities in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in the late 1940s, where they helped initiate new dance movements in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.<sup>63</sup> In the succeeding decades, the dance styles Dai helped foster in China also circulated back to Chinese heritage communities in North America.<sup>64</sup>

Dai's story challenges a bounded geographic definition of East Asia that excludes overseas diaspora communities. At the same time, Dai's story calls into question notions of biological determinism that assume people in the diaspora remain culturally linked to East Asia. Dai's innovative and multivalent choreographies benefited from the fact that, for her, Chineseness was not inherited or innate, but had to be actively sought out, researched, and reimaged.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Full resolution versions of Figure 6.1 at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.mpub.11521701.cmp.11> and Figure 6.2 at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11521701.cmp.12>

Link 6.1: Dai Ailian Foundation (see Gallery for additional photographs of Dai Ailian). Available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11521701.cmp.45>

Link 6.2: *Dance On* Interview with Dai Ailian, 1983 (institutional login required). Available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11521701.cmp.46>

Link 6.3: Video of Dai Ailian performing *The Mute Carries the Cripple*, 1947. Available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11521701.cmp.47>

Link 6.4: Video of Dai Ailian performing *Yao Drum*, 1947. Available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11521701.cmp.48>

*Notes*

I am grateful for comments on earlier drafts of this essay from Elizabeth Chan, participants in the *Dancing East Asia* conference, and two anonymous reviewers.

1. On the history of Chinese Dance and Dai's leading role in it, see Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). See also Jiang and Chang, this volume.

2. For Dai's Chinese memoir, see Dai Ailian 戴爱莲, transcribed and edited by Luo Bin 羅斌 and Wu Jingshu 吴静姝, *Dai Ailian: wo de yishu yu shenghuo* 戴爱莲: 我的藝術与生活 (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 2003). For her English biography, see Richard Glasstone, *The Story of Dai Ailian: Icon of Chinese Folk Dance Pioneer of Chinese Ballet* (Hampshire, UK: Dance Books, 2007).

3. Wang Guobin 王國賓, "Zai Dai Ailian xiansheng zhuisihui shang de jianghua" 在戴爱莲先生追思會上的講話, *Beijing Wudao xueyuan xuebao* 北京舞蹈學院學報, March 30, 2006: 3–4.

4. Walton Look Lai, "The Chinese of Trinidad and Tobago: Mobility, Modernity, and Assimilation During and After Colonialism," in *Chinese Transnational Networks*, ed. Tan Chee-Beng (New York: Routledge, 2007), 191–210.

5. Wang Kefen 王克芬 and Long Yinpei 隆蔭培, *Zhongguo jinxindai dangdai wudao fazhanshi* 中國近現代當代舞蹈發展史 (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1999), 72.

6. Between 1949 and 1960, an estimated 600,000 *Guiqiao* immigrated to the PRC. Technically, because Dai moved to China prior to 1949, her official status would have

been “domestic overseas Chinese,” which also included people born in China with family members abroad. There were around ten million people in this category in 1960. Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China* (London: Routledge, 2012), 2–3.

7. Peterson, *Overseas Chinese*, 3. On ethnic return migrants worldwide, see Takeyuki Tsuda, ed., *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

8. “Dai, Ailian,” produced by Billie Mahoney and directed by William Hohausser, in *Dance On* (Kansas City, MO: Dance On Video, 1983), 22:25–23:05.

9. Peterson, *Overseas Chinese*, 15. See also Philip Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

10. Cited in Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 241.

11. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 243; Peterson, *Overseas Chinese*, 15. This was further reinforced in 1909 by the Qing Nationality Law that declared “law of the bloodline” (*jus sanguinis*), in which the children of Chinese nationals born abroad were considered Chinese nationals. This law was reaffirmed in 1928 by the Republic of China, extending the legal basis of “Overseas Chinese” identity into the modern era. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 266.

12. Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (May 2011): 709–18; Shu-mei Shih, “Introduction: What Is Sinophone Studies?” and “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production,” in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1–42.

13. Shu-mei Shih, “Introduction,” 7.

14. See, for example, Shih, Tsai, and Bernards, *Sinophone Studies*; Audrey Yue, and Olivia Khoo, eds., *Sinophone Cinemas* (Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

15. Shu-mei Shih, “Against Diaspora,” 39.

16. “Dai Ailian nüshi zhi wuzi” 戴爱蓮女士之舞姿, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, March 31, 1940.

17. For a reproduction of this photograph, see Glasstone, *The Story of Dai Ailian*, 9.

18. “Miss Tai Ai-lien: Famous Dancer in the Colony,” *South China Morning Post*, April 1, 1940.

19. “Ben Gang jianxun” 本港簡訊, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, June 26, 1940; “Si Guiyi duchang hui” 斯桂義獨唱會, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, September 15, 1940.

20. “Dance Recital for War Orphans,” *South China Morning Post*, September 21, 1940.

21. Ma Lai 馬萊, “Ballet Music,” *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, October 13, 1940.

22. Zhi An 之安, “Ji yi wei you liangxin de yishujia” 記一位有良心的藝術家, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, October 13, 1940. All translations from Chinese are mine.

23. “Baowei Zhongguo tongmeng yinyue wudao hui” 保衛中國同盟音樂舞蹈會, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, October 15, 1940.

24. “Miss Ai-lien Tai: Assists War Orphans in Hongkong Debut Interpretive Dancing,” *South China Morning Post*, October 19, 1940

25. Dai, *Dai Ailian*, 86.
26. Glasstone, *The Story of Dai Ailian*, 37.
27. “The Spirit of China,” *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 1940.
28. Dai, *Wo de yishu*, 72.
29. “Aid for War Orphans,” *South China Morning Post*, October 26, 1940.
30. Ibid.
31. “Huidian yiyuan ben Gang mujuan weiyuanhui jiang jüxing yuewuchoukuan” 惠濱醫院本港募捐委員會將舉行樂舞籌款, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, January 4, 1941; “Baowei Zhongguo tongmeng jüxing yuewu dahui” 保衛中國同盟舉行樂舞大會, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, January 20, 1941; “Benefit Performance to be Given on Wednesday,” *South China Morning Post*, January 20, 1941; “Yinyue wudao dahui” 音樂舞蹈大會, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, January 22, 1941; H.W.C.M., “Chinese Artistes: Fine Entertainment At King’s Theatre to Aid Defense League,” *South China Morning Post*, January 23, 1941.
32. H.W.C.M., “Chinese Artistes.”
33. Dai, *Dai Ailian*, 111–112. Many articles about Dai published in the Chinese press during this period noted her inability to speak Chinese and her ongoing struggle to learn the language. See, for example, Mozi 墨子, “Ye Qianyu furen: Dai Ailian” 葉淺予夫人: 戴爱蓮舉辦蒙疆舞蹈會·重慶市長, *Haijing* 海晶 no. 5 (1946): 1; Ren Feng 刃鋒, “Dai Ailian he ta de wudao” 戴爱蓮和她的舞蹈, *Minjian* 民間 5 (1946): 10; “Bianjiang wudao hui dayou xuetou: Ye Qianyu Dai Ailian fuchangfusui” 邊疆舞蹈會大有噱頭: 葉淺予戴爱蓮夫唱婦隨, *Kuaihuolin* 快活林 8 (1946): 3; “Bu hui jiang Zhongguo hua de nü wudao mingshou, Dai Ailian de Yangjingbang” 不會講中國話的女舞蹈名手, 戴爱蓮的洋涇浜, *Shanghai tan* 上海灘 11 (1946): 10.
34. A 1941 article describes Dai having to perform on a dance space with floorboards so loose they “started dancing along with [her].” Xu Chi 徐遲, “Ma Sicong, qiren ji qi yinyue” 馬思聰, 其人及其音樂, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, September 29, 1941. During their first summer in Chongqing, Dai and her husband witnessed a ten-day bombing of the city, which Ye documented in a series of drawings and watercolors. “China’s Ordeal,” *South China Morning Post*, October 7, 1941.
35. Dai, *Dai Ailian*, 90–100.
36. Qian Fei 茜菲, “Chunguang li de Guilin funü” 春光里的桂林婦女, *Da Kung Bao* 大公報, April 21, 1941.
37. For video, see <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.1>
38. Dai Ailian, *Dai Ailian*, 103; Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
39. Dai Ailian, *Dai Ailian*, 134.
40. For video, see <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.2>
41. Dai Ailian, *Dai Ailian*, 134.
42. Dai Ailian, *Dai Ailian*, 135.
43. On the history of this term, see Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen Siu, and Donald Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern Chi-*

na (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenous Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). On the construction of Han identity, see Thomas Mullaney et al., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

44. Chen Zhiliang 陳志良, "Lüetan minjian yuewu: 'Bianjiang yinyue wudao dahui' guanhou gan" 略談民間樂舞: '邊疆音樂舞蹈大會'觀後感, *Keguan* 客觀 18 (1946): 10.

45. Dai, *Dai Ailian*, 131.

46. Chen Zhiliang, "Lüetan minjian yuewu."

47. Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 34–43.

48. Chen Zhiliang, "Lüetan minjian yuewu."

49. See, for example, "Dai Ailian lingdao biaoyan bianjiang wudao" 戴愛蓮領導表演邊疆舞蹈, *Zhongyang ribao* 中央日報, April 10, 1946; Dai Ailian 戴愛蓮, "Zhongguo wudao di yi bu" 中國舞蹈第一步, *Qingming* 清明 (Shanghai), 1946, no. 2: 9–12.

50. See, for example, Yu Wenzhou 宇文宙, "Dai Ailian de wudao" 戴愛蓮的舞蹈, *Xiao Shanghairen* 小上海人, 1946 1(1): 10–12.

51. Jing Pu 鏡溥 "Wudao kui bianqing, lianqing ru liehuo" 舞蹈窺遍情, 戀情如烈火, *Xiang-Hai huabao* 香海畫報 1946(2): 1–2.

52. See, for example, "Dai Ailian biaoqing shenke bianjiangwu xiaokou changkai" 戴愛蓮表情深刻邊疆舞笑口常開, *Shenbao* 申報 August 27, 1946; Shang Guanyao 上官瑤 "Shanghai de bayue feng: kan Dai Ailian da tiao bianjiang wu" 上海的八月風-看戴愛蓮大跳邊疆舞!, *Hai chao zhoukan* 海潮週刊 20 (1946): 8; "Haofang reqing Dai Ailian de wudao tian" 豪放熱情戴愛蓮的舞蹈天, *Piao* 飄 1946(5): 2.

53. Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 34.

54. Shih, "Against Diaspora," 38–39.

55. Dai, *Dai Ailian*, 76.

56. Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 18–19.

57. "Arts Theater: A Tibetan Fairy Tale," *The Times* (London), October 13, 1937, 2; "From Tibet to Troy," *The Sunday Times*, August 7, 1938, 15.

58. Zhi An, "Ji yi wei you liangxin de yishujia."

59. For more on the politics of representation in Chinese ethnic minority dance, see Emily Wilcox, "Beyond Internal Orientalism: Dance and Nationality Discourse in the Early People's Republic of China, 1949–1954," *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (May 2016): 363–86.

60. "Miss Ai-lien Tai."

61. Dai, *Dai Ailian*, 72–73.

62. Ya-Ping Chen, "Dancing Chinese Nationalism and Anticommunism: The *Minzu Wudao* Movement in 1950s Taiwan," in *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, eds. Naomi M. Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 34–50.

63. "Dance in Wartime China: Liang Lun's Choreographic Migrations of the 1940s," 무용역사기록학 (*Journal of Society for Dance Documentation and History*) 52 (March): 45-75.

64. See, for example, Sau-ling Wong, "Dancing in the Diaspora: Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism and the Staging of Chineseness by San Francisco's Chinese Folk Dance Association," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2010): electronic.