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“SELLING OUT” POST-MAO: DANCE LABOR AND THE ETHICS OF FULFILLMENT IN REFORM ERA CHINA

Emily Wilcox¹

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Dance labor as artistic practice

Since the construction of state-sponsored professional dance schools and performance companies in the early 1950s, dance has been a recognized category of artistic labor in the People's Republic of China (hereafter China). During the Mao Era (1949–76), dance was referred to in socialist state discourse as “literary and artistic work” (*wenyi gongzuo* 文艺工作), a category that indicated its status as professional labor. In return for their work, dancers received free or highly subsidized tuition and room and board during their training years, and, after graduation, enjoyed life-long employment with a salary, housing, and benefits paid for by the state. One reason for this high level of support was that the Maoist state regarded dance, like all literary and artistic work, as a service to society. Thus, dance companies and schools were known not just as regular “work units” (*danwei* 单位), but as “vocational work units” (*shiyeye danwei* 事业单位), a special category of employment that indicated its social mission. Because of their high status in society, dancers in Maoist China took pride in their specialized skills: Those who graduated from full-time dance conservatories were considered “professional” (*zhuanyeye* 专业) dancers and were eligible for state-sponsored employment as dance workers. Others were considered amateur (*yeyu* 业余) dancers who practiced dance as a hobby, not a profession.

Starting in the late 1970s, the post-Mao Reform Era introduced marketization into nearly every arena of Chinese life, and this brought about significant changes in the employment conditions and social status of dancers in Chinese society. During the 1980s and 1990s, the process of privatization shifted many professional activities previously managed and funded by the state into the realm of commercial enterprise or, more commonly, a mix of public and private (Lin 2006, Zhang and Li 2008). Comparing these changes to the contemporaneous

economic reforms instituted by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the USA and the UK respectively, British sociologist David Harvey (2005) theorizes this period in Chinese economic and social history as the emergence of Chinese neoliberalism. Similarly, Chinese historian Wang Hui (2009) describes it as the end of China's revolutionary era and the beginning of a new period dominated by the embrace of economic liberalism and the political right wing. As scholars have shown, the Reform Era brought not only profound economic and political changes, but also fundamental shifts in ethical structures and cultural values, including the abandonment of many policies of the Mao Era (Zhang 2008, Cao *et al.* 2010, Wang and Lu 2012). For dancers, the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s introduced new opportunities for artistic experimentation and entrepreneurship, as a private industry sprang up for dance entertainment and entrepreneurship, sites, and other leisure venues (Nyíri 2006, Wilcox forthcoming). However, as dance work shifted from a state-sponsored social mission to a consumer good experienced as part of entertainment and leisure, dance and art in general came to be seen as increasingly frivolous and divorced from cultural value. Meanwhile, the state's economic support for dance work was eroded away, as formerly state-sponsored institutions were forced to privatize and salaried employment shifted to short-term contract work (Wilcox 2011).

As artists who work with their bodies, dancers are especially vulnerable in these changing employment conditions and the shifting social status of art workers. As Helena Wulff (1998) demonstrates in her study of ballet, the physical nature of dance work exposes the dancer to risk of injury, a short career span, negative social stereotypes, low economic compensation, and intense competition in the context of most market economies. With the advent of privatization, this also increasingly became the case for dancers in China. Under China's Reform Era conditions, dancers face new challenges to define the value of their work, both to themselves and to others. The dilemma of "selling out" becomes a constant challenge for dancers, as they seek the impossible balance between a life dedicated to art and making a living in a market economy that places decreasing value on dance labor.

An ethics of fulfillment

The insights into dancers' lives presented in this essay come from formal interviews, everyday conversations, and daily observations collected during two years of ethnographic research conducted while living and studying among professional dancers in China in 2008–09. Although I was based at the Beijing Dance Academy during the majority of this research, the dancers I got to know came from a wide variety of backgrounds and worked in diverse institutions across China. The questions explored in this essay thus cut across boundaries of generation, location, gender, ethnicity, and institutional status within the professional dance field. The individual narratives I focus on in this essay are by no means universally representative of all experiences of professional dancers

in China. However, they reflect what I found to be common trends in dancers' stories and self-articulated life narratives during a moment when China's dance field was undergoing a new wave of funding cuts and privatization measures. To respect dancers' privacy, all personal names and identifying details of the individuals discussed have been anonymized.

My exploration of dance labor is structured here around two concepts: "ethics of fulfillment" and "selling out." I use the term "ethics of fulfillment" to mean the ways in which people derive satisfaction from the behaviors and investments in which they are engaged—a rubric for understanding how individuals or groups find pleasure, happiness, or a sense of accomplishment and worth from their activities. To understand the ethics of fulfillment for professional dancers means to understand how dancers manage, through a range of practical and ideological strategies and techniques, to pursue their work "as a vocation," to use Max Weber's (1946) famous phrase. The vocation, for Weber (1946, 134–37), is characterized by "inward calling," by "inspiration," and by "an inner devotion to the task." As I discuss below, dancers in China often associate the ethics of fulfillment with concepts of "spirit," the value of physical training, contribution to the collective good, and life-long devotion to a task.

I use the term "selling out" to point to the antithesis of an ethics of fulfillment for professional dancers in Reform Era China. To "sell out" meant something different for a dancer in China during the 1990s than it means for a dancer in the USA in the 2010s due to differences in historical and cultural context, especially the specific constellation of historical conditions that anthropologists have identified as "postsocialism" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Farquhar 2002, Yurchak 2006). During my fieldwork, Chinese dancers did not often use any direct Chinese equivalents to the English term "selling out." Despite differences in historical context and lack of a direct Chinese equivalent, however, the term "selling out" effectively captures an experience of a crisis of artistic commitment that dancers did regularly discuss. Dancers addressed this topic frequently and with great emotional trepidation, describing a sense of betraying their commitment to dance as an artistic vocation. I thus understand "selling out" to mean this experience of betraying the vocational enterprise of art practice.

Selling out in the Reform Era

"Yu," born in 1979, is an extremely successful male dancer who graduated from a top dance school, won dozens of national awards, and works at an elite dance company. He is considered one of the best dancers of his generation. Despite his considerable success, however, Yu is plagued by professional conflicts. He explained:

I get calls all the time to appear on television and to guest perform in events. Each time I get one of these calls I feel sad, like it is a death call. These jobs pay well, so of course I agree, but I don't really want to ...

Sometimes I feel like I'm no more than a circus bear. They just want me to do flips and jumps and pull my leg up over my ear to impress the audience. These people don't understand dance at all. Is this really what I worked for my whole life? ... My teachers used to talk about dance like it was something more meaningful, and I believed that. I guess the dream I once had is very different from the reality I exist in today.²

Yu's description contains the basic elements of a common dilemma faced by professional dancers in early twenty-first-century China. Although they prefer to do work they consider “meaningful”—performing for audiences who understand dance, as in their experiences while in school—in fact many of their employment opportunities fall into a category many view as “meaningless” because of a focus on entertainment and tricks. At the same time, Yu argues that work that is not meaningful often cannot be refused because of its financial rewards. While meaningful work fulfills dreams for Yu, meaningless work balances the checkbook.

“Cao,” born in 1957, is another male professional dancer who, like Yu, was extremely successful in the prime of his career. Due to exceptional physical ability and a deep commitment to training, Cao performed as a soloist into his late forties, rare for professional dancers in China. It was this commitment that Cao spoke of with the most pride, and he saw it as a defining feature of what constitutes an ideal career in dance. Reflecting on his experiences in the late 1980s at the height of his career, Cao recalled a crisis of commitment similar to the one Yu articulated. Like Yu, Cao identified his crisis as a result of social and economic pressures. Specifically, he pointed to the impact of economic liberalization on local government-sponsored dance companies. Cao wrote about his experiences in an unpublished autobiographical essay composed around 2006. Just before the experience described in the essay, Cao had been working in a well-funded state dance troupe. In 1986, when the essay begins, Cao was transferred to a different ensemble that was going through privatization. He writes:

After I arrived, I realized how bad things really were. In those years local companies were in a terrible condition. Performers had no work [because state-funded commissions had stopped]; they just sat around drinking and playing mahjongg all day and making money performing in nightclubs in the evenings. I would go to work, and since there was nothing to do, I would be the only one practicing in the rehearsal room ... I spent three years hopping nightclubs as a singer and back-up dancer, vexed by the realities of being poor, wondering where my next meal would come from, and living in a tortured nostalgia for the past. I remember there was only one bulb still lit in the practice room. It seemed to be flickering, like my emotions, about to burn out. I swore that if that light burnt out I would stop practicing for good. I stared up at that light for three years, afraid it would stay lit and at the same

time afraid it would burn out. I thought of this great vocation I had once struggled and fought for, the arduous years of blood and sweat, of endless jumping and turning. The barre that had turned from yellow to black under my hands, and the smooth flat floor that became wavy and cracked under my feet. It seemed I could hear the groans of one pair after another of worn out dance shoes piled before my eyes, as if a battle were going on between flesh and spirit. I felt my soul crying out. In the end I struggled through, and when I left that bulb was still lit.

Cao's description captures an experience that was recounted to me again and again by dancers who had been employed in local-level song and dance troupes in the 1980s and the 1990s, those hit hardest at the height of the marketization of China's arts field. At the time, many local governments had transferred funding from performance commissions to investment in industry. Simultaneously, a rise in urban entertainment culture created a market for "back-up dancing" (*banwu* 伴舞), in which groups of dancers performed simple, choreographed routines in nightclubs, usually as a backdrop for solo singers performing Hong Kong, Taiwan, and US-style pop music. For professional dancers, back-up dancing was both demeaning and boring: It asked dancers with years of training in artistically sophisticated elite dance forms to work as glorified stage sets for performances that, in their view, not only did not make use of their specialized skills but also had little or no artistic value.

In both Yu's and Cao's reflections, a contrast appears between entertainment performance and artistic performance, with the former being seen as unfulfilling and the latter as fulfilling. In both cases, the issue of training becomes especially important, because the professionally trained body is what identifies the dancer as a professional. To use one's training in a way that devalues the meaning of dance labor is to betray one's profession and the ideals of artistic value upon which it is built. When Yu states that television performances and galas turn him into a "circus bear," he expresses indignation at being forced to use his physical body for artistically meaningless entertainment. Likewise, for Cao, being forced to engage in back-up dancing as a way to make money betrays his daily regimen of studio practice, since it is no longer necessary for such work. The flickering light bulb in Cao's story stands in for his flickering commitment, a commitment to the vocation of dance that the rippled floor, the yellowed barre, and piles of dance shoes all represent. To work as a back-up dancer, for Cao, is to betray the vocation of dance and, with it, his own value and identity as a dancer.

"Loss of spirit" and the spiritual/material distinction

Describing their crisis of fulfillment and pressure to sell out, many dancers theorized the problems they faced as a conflict between two types of goals, what they called "spiritual pursuits" (*jingshen zhuiqiu* 精神追求) and "material pursuits" (*wuzhi zhuiqiu* 物质追求). Exhibiting a form of postsocialist nostalgia, many

dancers argued that the problems they faced reflected a larger "loss of spirit" in Chinese society as a whole since the end of the Mao Era. "Guo," a senior-level dance researcher, explained this as follows:

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the majority of Chinese society began to pursue the satisfaction of material life, yet they didn't pursue the satisfaction of spiritual life. Overall, people's living standards improved, but China suffered in other respects. For example, I feel that as a whole the post-1980s generation, though they feel a great deal of pressure, lacks in personal cultivation and drive for excellence. This has a lot to do with the way that education has changed, and the ways in which people's lives have changed.

Like many of the dancers I spoke with, Guo felt that the spiritual dimension of life had weakened during China's Reform Era, and had been replaced by a pursuit of material wealth.

Reflections by a middle-aged couple "Han" and "Meng" who started performance careers during the Mao Era offer one example of how artists personally experienced changes from the Mao Era to the Reform Era. Han, a singer who retired to run a nightclub that hired dancers, explained:

Literature and art workers in China today aren't like they used to be. When my wife and I performed in the state troupe during the 1970s, we had many spiritual pursuits but few material pursuits. We believed that we were building the ideological superstructure, so in theoretical terms our work had great importance ... Literature and art workers today, in contrast, are individualistic, and they only pursue profit ... Now, most performers have no guarantee of existence [economic support], so they have no choice but to feel that economic gain is more important. Because they do not have spiritual pursuits, today many performers are lacking in direction.

Han's wife Meng, a dancer who later retired to become a middle school dance teacher, echoes these views. However, she emphasizes not just the changing attitudes of performers themselves, but also the changing attitudes of society toward performers. She explains:

There is such an enormous difference between [the Mao Era] and today. Back then, our material standards of living were very low, but our psyche was pure ... Back then, a dancer walking down the street would be respected and admired. Everyone knew who they were and believed that they had this kind of glowing luster that made people notice them. [People would look at them and think:] "It's a member of the literary and art troupe!" But now, when someone runs into a dancer on the street,

they wear an especially scornful look. They say in a hushed voice, "Oh, it's only a dancer."

The "loss of spirit" narrative dates to the early 1980s, when Chinese state intellectuals promoted what was called the "theory of spiritual civilization" (*jingshen wenming lun* 精神文明论) as part of an effort to preserve socialist ideals within the new Reform Era economic system. In an official 1982 report dedicated to this theme, authors warned: "At the same time that we produce a high-level material civilization, we must work hard to construct a high-level socialist spiritual civilization. This is a problem of the strategic policy of building socialism" (Cao and Wei 1992, 119). The report defined the "spiritual" in several ways: "the state of progress of humanity's knowledge and morality"; "the civilization of human consciousness, thought, and psychology"; and "the entire spiritual wealth created in the process of humanity's social historical development, including education, science, culture, ideals, morality, tradition, custom, etc" (1992, 220). In this context, the "spiritual" referred to a type of humanistic social good not easily quantified in material terms.

The idea that excessive focus on materialistic pursuits could be a corrupting force on society was also expressed in the 1983 campaign against "spiritual pollution" (*jingshen wuran* 精神污染), a socially conservative movement sparked by what was perceived at the time as the excessive influence of Western capitalist culture on Chinese society. Promoted by anti-liberalists in the Chinese Communist Party, the campaign focused specifically on the area of arts and culture (Wang 1986, 53–54). While the campaign died out after about one year, it left the lasting idea that the arts should be a space for cultivating spiritual depth against the ethical or cultural corruption produced by an increasingly materialistic society.

While the theory of spiritual civilization and the campaign against spiritual pollution both concerned the problem of what was considered the excessive pursuit of material fulfillment, when dancers invoked the spiritual/material divide it was most often to describe issues of fulfilling basic needs. When discussing their economic stresses, dancers often remarked on the elimination of the "iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan* 铁饭碗), a metaphor for the job stability provided by state enterprises during the Mao Era. Without the iron rice bowl, dancers were forced to turn to the market to receive basic compensation for their dance labor, a position that proved increasingly untenable in the new market conditions.

Art beyond the individual

Scholarship on the performing arts in Reform Era China has often celebrated the increased individual autonomy that artists enjoy as a result of the state's retreat from the artistic sphere (Baranovitch 2003). This understanding of autonomy as a basis for good art is grounded in conceptions of art developed in modern capitalist societies, as theorized most famously by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu

(1993). However, scholars have shown that the ideal of artistic autonomy often requires rethinking in the context of postsocialist art worlds (Faraday 2000). For dancers in Reform Era China, individual autonomy is often not a sufficient condition for meaningful dance labor, even when it comes with economic support. This is because, for many, individual autonomy is associated more with selling out than with an ethics of fulfillment.

A testimony from "Pan," a female dancer born in the early 1980s, shows how autonomy can be seen as contradictory to artistic fulfillment for some dancers. She explains:

Pure art affects people's hearts and souls. Commercial things are part of the market and, to put it frankly, they are just for existence ... If I wanted to do commercial art, I could easily do that; I have the qualifications and ability. I wouldn't need to [come to study at the Beijing Dance Academy] ... To pursue [pure] art, I left my boyfriend ... He was ready to get married and settle down, but I didn't want that ... I feel that romance, having a family, all of that belongs only to you as an individual. But, to create a work of art, that affects the benefit of the masses ... I am creating things that give people a sense of common feeling. Otherwise, you do all of those things that only belong to yourself as an individual. I don't think that's worth it.

In Pan's account, pursuing "commercial art" is something that would have given her significant autonomy from the state: It would have allowed her to make money on her own, to get married and have children, and to pursue her own individual life. To pursue "pure art," however, requires her to enroll in a state-sponsored art academy and sacrifice things of importance in her individual life, both choices that, in her account, bring her away from the individual and closer to what she calls "the masses." Pan's use of "the masses" refers to Mao Era discourses about the idea that good art "serves the masses," or contributes to the greater good of the collective (Chen 2002, Cheng 2009). This suggests that, even in the Reform Era, the notion of dance labor as a social good remains a powerful idea.

As part of her explanation of the collective good, Pan argues that the pursuit of pure art entails a kind of full personal commitment that is distinct from the pursuit of instrumental benefit. She expressed this idea using the phrase "I took it seriously" (*wo renzhen le* 我认真了), meaning a full dedication of personal energy, labor, and life. "This vocation, I really took it seriously, and that's what counts," she explained, linking the idea of "taking it seriously" to the value of treating work as a vocation, making it something that "counts," or has value. Later, she repeated this idea:

[When I look back someday on my accomplishments,] I want to be able to say, "I did it. I took it seriously." I'll know that what I put forth is not just the time to create this work, but the entire time I spent living. [I'll

be able to say that] I used my life to do this thing. I want to do it seriously, you know?

Here, Pan explains her idea of commitment and seriousness through a contrast between two measures of labor as understood through time. In the first, labor is measured by the time taken to produce an art work. This is usually how labor is measured in the increasingly contract-based creative economy of the Reform Era. In contrast, the second type of labor measured through time is one in which the time counted exceeds any finite period of labor—it is the time of one's life as a whole. In Pan's words, this second type of labor is defined by "the entire time I spent living." Whereas the first is an instrumental measurement of labor, based on a materialist notion of art as a means to an end, the second is a non-instrumental or spiritual measurement of labor, based on a notion of vocational commitment of one's entire life energies.

Notions of collective value and non-instrumental life are common themes in discussions of spiritual meaning and fulfillment in Reform Era China. As shown in a recent study of middle-aged "life cultivation" practitioners living in Beijing (Farquhar and Zhang 2005), the idea of spirit (*jingshen* 精神) in contemporary China confounds distinctions between individual and social value, and it defies materialistic or instrumental conceptions of individual life. "To have spirit, to be spirited, is to be more than just being alive ... [Spirit] is that excess that characterizes civilized life" (Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 312). According to Farquhar and Zhang, to pursue spirit among middle-aged "life cultivation practitioners" is to pursue emotional and physical health that goes beyond basic living, and it is to do so by way of cultivating one's capacity to participate in the social. Pursuit of spirit is characterized by "emphasis on collective practice and friendship" that, in the terms of Agamben (1998), distinguishes bare life (*zoē*) from "the form of life of the citizen" (*bios*) (Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 313). This notion of spirit assumes that sociability is a central component of the generation of personal spiritual life as well as part of the life of the citizen that is sought through spiritual practice. Since, in post-Mao China, "social ties are prior to the individual and constitutive of the self," to speak of spiritual pursuits and personal fulfillment is also to speak of collective experience and social value (Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 318).

In their distinctions between instrumental and pure artistic practice, dancers and other performers posit a "problem of existence" (*shengcun wenti* 生存问题) in which they argue that increased economic pressure in the Reform Era has led many artists to give up pure art in favor of instrumental art. This discourse of existence is central to the material/spiritual contradiction because it locates the cause of the loss of spirit in what are understood as the interconnected phenomena of economic liberalization, individualism, and materialism in the Reform Era. According to this discourse, it is pressure for existence that drives artists to become individualistic and instrumental, and this is the cause of a move away from spiritual pursuits, or the pursuit of meaningful artistic practice. In the

problem of existence discourse, dancers and other performers describe the ideal artist not as autonomous but rather socially embedded. It is this social connection and support that makes spiritual pursuits possible.

Expanding on her notion of "pure art" discussed above, Pan explains that the major factor inhibiting artists from producing pure art is the increasing pressures of the economic struggle for existence in a market economy. She states:

The problem is that right now artistic creation is not connected up with existence. Many people, in order to exist, are forced to totally give up on commercial performances. This is because art is fairly high in the field of the spiritual. If you haven't eaten, you can't go do art. If you are at war, or you have nothing to eat, how can you do art?

This view echoes that of the middle-aged couple Han and Meng discussed above, who likewise offer accounts of how pressure for economic existence forces artists to abandon spiritual forms of artistic work in favor of materialistic ones. Han went further to elaborate this analysis, explaining how structural inequalities of labor value contribute to increased economic pressures specific to performers, because of the accumulative nature of performance labor. He explained:

Today, there are two kinds of professional performance students: one that just needs to make money, to exist, to earn enough to support themselves in the future; and a second that has a dream but realizes that the competition is extreme ... The reality is the same for both kinds of students. After they graduate, the majority of these students go to work in tourist areas, bars, or other commercial venues. The economic and social value they gain from these kinds of work does not equal the amount of long-term training that they have undergone [in professional arts schools]. The amount of money that a [dance] work earns on the entertainment market can never be equal to the amount of time and effort that goes into its making. *The initial investment can never be earned back.* There is no method for determining the value of a piece of performance art that really makes up for its value in time and exertion.

In the quotation above, Han theorizes a performer's training as a kind of investment. In the market economy, he argues, structures of value are arranged in such a way that performers are unable to derive a return on their investment that equals the labor they put in. This is the root cause, he argues, for the pressure performers feel in the Reform Era to abandon spiritual pursuits and lose artistic direction.

Economic factors were not the only way that dancers linked the Reform Era "loss of spirit" to a critique of individualism. "Li," a female dancer born in the

early 1970s, echoed Meng's argument that people's values had also changed. Li recounted:

Why do people participate in dance competitions nowadays? They do it to get a prize, because with a prize they can apply for a higher professional status, and with a higher professional status they make more money, get better benefits, and in turn get more fame and more work ... People in my parent's generation were very pure and simple. Why? Because they were really doing things for the nation. People today, in contrast, only do things for the individual material gain.

Here, Li echoes Pan's notion of a difference between art that serves the individual and art that serves the collective. Whereas dancers once saw art as part of a higher social mission—serving the nation—what motivates them now, in her view, is a desire for individual wealth, prestige, and status. For her, this change in desire is associated fundamentally with the rise of individualism, in addition to the economic pressures of survival.

Conclusion

For many professional dancers in Reform Era China, to sell out means to submit to a ruthless individualism encouraged by marketization and privatization, in which Chinese society is becoming increasingly similar to neoliberal societies around the world. While the Reform Era has often been celebrated as a time of expanded individual expression in China, it has also encouraged processes that have limited artists' abilities to find fulfillment in their work, such as the replacement of state subsidies for art by a reliance on commercial entertainment industries. As dancers and other performers observe from their own experience, the structures for valuing dance labor within this new system are often insufficient to support the specialized training and life-long commitment necessary to support a fulfilling dance vocation. Under these conditions, dancers find themselves in a constant struggle to maintain meaningful work within an economic system structured to encourage, or even require, selling out.

The challenges faced by dancers in Reform Era China are unfortunately all too common in societies around the world in the twenty-first century. While it is important not to idealize the state support for art that existed in socialist societies such as Mao Era China, it is also essential for us to be willing to examine and, when appropriate, learn from the successful aspects of these past experiments. Regardless of its many flaws, the Mao Era art system was premised on the basic idea that artistic labor, as a collective social value, should be economically supported by the state as a public good. As this system comes under attack in the neoliberal dismantling of basic concepts of public welfare, it is essential to hear the voices of dancers who still remember a different time.

Notes

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- 2 All quotations from Chinese are my own translations.