

MATERIAL  
CONTRADICTIONS  
IN MAO'S  
CHINA



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## 4 DANCE PROPS AND THE RURAL IMAGINARY

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IN 2009 I WAS INTERPRETING FOR AN INTERNATIONAL CHOREOGRAPHY research project at the Beijing Dance Academy, a top conservatory in China. On the first day of rehearsals, Shobana Jeyasingh, the guest British choreographer who would be creating a new piece for the academy's dancers, announced that before starting, she wanted to see how they moved in their own work. After the dancers had warmed up, she asked each of them to present a segment they had recently performed.

As nationally ranked professional soloists, these dancers all had repertoires at the ready and typically loved to perform and be watched. Thus, I was surprised when they appeared hesitant in response to Jeyasingh's request. They whispered to each other and looked anxiously around the room. "We aren't prepared," one dancer finally responded. Thinking she knew what was wrong, Jeyasingh reassured them that costumes and music were not necessary. "Just dance the choreography," she said. "I just want to see how you move." However, the dancers still insisted this was not possible. To perform, they explained, they needed their props.

It was a classic case of competing cultural definitions. In both European contemporary dance and south Indian classical dance, the major forms in which Jeyasingh worked, dance is understood as an art form performed by the human body alone. With the exception perhaps of the latter's ankle bells, both regard the material trappings of performance, such as costumes and stage sets, as essentially external to the dance itself. Even special footwear is not required for these dances, which are both typically performed barefoot.

By contrast, Chinese dance, the style in which this group specialized, often employs props (*daoju*)—objects manipulated by the dancers as part of their performance. Rather than seeing these as external elements added for the stage, dancers regard these props as integral to Chinese choreography. Thus, the work is conceived of as a composition performed not by the human

body alone but by a cyborgian assemblage (in Donna Haraway's sense) of human and prop together.<sup>1</sup> Huang Dongmei, one of the academy's dancers Jeyasingh worked with, is known for her award-winning solo *Red Apricot*, in which she moves with a large red silk fan.<sup>2</sup> Wang Lei, another dancer in the group, performs his iconic solo *Calligraphic Rhythms* with an oversized writing brush.<sup>3</sup> Like other props, the silk fan and the writing brush each have distinct material characteristics that shape the meaning and composition of the dances. These include signifying features, such as references to particular places, times, ritual events, artistic works, kinds of labor, and social roles and relationships. They also include kinesthetic and tactile features, such as weight, balance, drag, texture, and malleability. This combination of the signifying and the kinesthetic or tactile makes the props an essential component of the work's form. The props impact both how the dancer moves and how these movements are perceived by audiences. Just as the ballet *Swan Lake* would be incomplete without pointe shoes, and a tango would be lacking if performed by one person, so too would these Chinese choreographies not be whole if missing their props.

The history of dance props in contemporary China dates to the early years of the Mao era—particularly the 1950s—when dance was institutionalized as an important component of China's emerging socialist culture.<sup>4</sup> One reason props played such a large role in early Maoist dance is that they served as "object mediators," material objects that allowed dancers to embody socialist ideals by learning about the world around them. When creating new choreography for the stage in China during the 1950s and early 1960s, professional dancers were often called upon to perform rural styles and characters, even though they themselves often came from urban backgrounds. Dance props provided a physical medium through which urban and rural performers interacted with one another and urban dancers learned to portray rural characters on stage. This created a way for choreographers to situate dancing bodies within specific social contexts in their artistic works. The use of props, together with costumes and movements, helped ensure that dancing bodies were understood in a Marxist sense as subjects with particular class, gender, and geographic identities, not as universal humans who exist outside material relations. Props helped situate dancers in the material and social environment as conceptualized by a socialist worldview.

The majority of props employed in early Mao-era choreography were borrowed from existing performance forms practiced in rural and folk contexts. Writings of the period emphasize the experience of learning to grasp

and manipulate props as a crucial element of the field research through which urban dancers developed the corporeal and affective repertoires needed to perform a variety of unfamiliar roles, such as tea pickers, milkmaids, farmers, and itinerant village performers. Learning to dance with props often required engaging with rural communities by “going down to rural areas” (*xia xiang*) and collaborating with “folk artists” (*minjian yiren*). At times, rural performers also traveled to urban areas to participate in “trial performances” (*guanmo huiyan*), events designed to expose urban audiences to the wide variety of rural performance styles. In these varied interactions, props came to symbolize the practice of “learning from the folk” (*xiang minjian xuexi*), an important tenet of socialist cultural production since the Yan’an years that had deep artistic as well as political and ideological significance. Thus, beyond being a visual marker of rural communities, props served as mediating objects that by way of their distinct material characteristics allowed urban dancers to explore physical sensations linked to rural life. Dancers further sought to infuse these sensations into their own bodily feelings and choreographic movements. This use of props created flows of artists traveling between city and country. It also helped maintain the rural aesthetic orientation of Chinese socialist culture after the central government moved out of wartime rural base areas and back into cities. In this historical context, dance props worked to bridge the rural and urban, making rural life graspable for urban performers. It also created opportunities for rural artists to visit urban areas and participate in national conversations about dance creation.

The research for this essay stems from bodily experiences of studying Chinese dance, not only watching others use props but also doing so myself. Through the embodied regimen of dance training, I learned to perform with silk water sleeves, metal swords, silk and bamboo fans, chopsticks, and handkerchiefs, among other objects. This physical practice helped me gain a kinesthetic appreciation and understanding of the complex embodied knowledge required to perform with props. Although Chinese dance has changed since the 1950s, the basic approaches to incorporating props into Chinese choreography have remained largely consistent. Thus, object-based “practice-as-research” methodology is one lens through which to read the material culture of dance props in the Mao era,<sup>5</sup> and bodily knowledge of performing prop-based Chinese dance is an analytical tool for the examination of early Mao-era documents, including dance films and manuals, photographs, and essays. In this way, material objects serve as both the focus of inquiry and a medium of knowledge production.

### DANCING WITH PROPS IN MAO'S CHINA

Like many other aspects of contemporary Chinese dance, its extensive use of props is a product of the Mao era. It was during this period, particularly prior to the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, that professional dancers and choreographers, with support and direction from the Maoist state, created the modern concert dance genre known today as Chinese dance.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of props as a core feature of this genre in the early Mao era was not a historical accident or an inevitable outcome driven by global dance developments. Rather, it was a calculated choice that emerged out of conceptions of what constitutes good dance in a socialist society and how best to go about learning, creating, teaching, and promoting such work.

Dancing with props in the Mao era was a performed manifestation of Chinese socialist approaches to choreography as both an artistic and social practice. It included ideas about the material and signifying parameters of dancers' bodies and notions about who or what the core agents and sources of Chinese socialist culture are. As dancers in Mao's China created and popularized new movement styles, these styles brought with them a new field of material culture. This field included the dance props, the human bodies that performed with them, and the practices of social interaction, circulation, and embodiment that went into the creation of prop-based choreographies.

A look at representations of dance in China's popular media during the early Mao years offers a sense of the pervasiveness and variety of dances with props during this period. Visual documentation of this phenomenon can be found in photographs published in *China Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*), an important magazine, founded in 1950, that served as a consistent source of dance news in the Mao era.<sup>7</sup> These photographs show a wide range of dances involving props—in which dancers either grasp objects while dancing or wear items that extend or transform their bodily shape and create trajectories through space as they move.

In “silk dance” (*chou wu*), the performers hold long streamers of silk fabric in their hands and use them to draw patterns in the air around their bodies while they are dancing.<sup>8</sup> In “peacock dance” (*kongque wu*) and “lion dance” (*shizi wu*), performers dress as animals, wearing either a false peacock tail and wings or baggy lion suits with oversized eyes, large moving jaws, and shaggy hair and manes.<sup>9</sup> In “tea-picking lantern” (*caicha deng*) and “picking tea and catching butterflies” (*caicha pudie*), dancers carry baskets and twirl small, painted folding fans in their hands while they imitate the motions of tea-picking and chase paper butterflies mounted on long, thin rods.<sup>10</sup> In “fan

dance" (*shan wu*), dancers hold arm-length semicircular folding fans that they expand, contract, and arc through the air.<sup>11</sup> Numerous varieties of "drum dance" (*gu wu*) incorporate drums of all shapes and sizes, from the large "hourglass drum" (*changgu*) worn slung over the shoulder, to the small "waist drum" (*yaogu*) fastened on the hip, to the hand-held "Taiping drum" (*taiping gu*), which resembles an enlarged ping-pong paddle.<sup>12</sup> "Sword dance" (*jian wu*) is another common sight. Typically, it uses narrow metal swords about four feet in length, with a knotted red tassel (*suizi*) that dangles from the handle and spins as the dancer moves.<sup>13</sup> Dances that employ parasols (*san*), often painted with flowers or other colorful patterns, are also common.<sup>14</sup> There are also a number of "flower lamp dances" (*huadeng wu*), in which orb-like lanterns designed to resemble flowers are either held in one's hand or attached to the dancer's costume.<sup>15</sup>

Another common type of choreography features dancers interacting with animals depicted using props, such as in "dragon dance" (*long wu*), in which a line of dancers carries a long snaking dragon above their heads attached to poles, or "running donkey" (*pao lü*), in which a hobby horse is suspended around the dancer's waist so that she appears to be riding a donkey (there is also a similar variation involving a fish).<sup>16</sup> Other dances incorporate objects from everyday life as props, such as milk pails, cups and bowls, clothing and hair extensions, vehicles such as carts and boats, plates of food or bouquets of flowers, wedding paraphernalia, embroidery, water-carrying vessels, hats, etc.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s, the high point of Chinese dance in the Mao era, it was more common to see dancers performing with props than without them.<sup>18</sup>

Dance manuals published during the 1950s offer further insight into how the material culture of props was disseminated during the Mao era. Since manuals were typically published when more people wanted to learn a dance than there were teachers available, they offer a record of dances that achieved especially widespread duplication, with many bodies learning to perform them simultaneously across the country and even internationally.<sup>19</sup> Attention to props was a major focus in these manuals. *Red Silk Dance* (*Hongchou wu*), for example, published in 1953, contains a musical score, stage plots, and step-by-step instructions on how to perform the dance, with the majority of its fifty pages dedicated to explaining how to maneuver the long silk streamers. Illustrations accompanied by text also explain how to construct the streamer props, by first fastening the long pieces of silk fabric to sticklike handles, then bundling and securing the fabric together for the first part of the dance, when they resemble torches, before the silks are released to flow



FIGURE 4.1. Dancers performing a tea-picking dance using fans and baskets as props. *China Pictorial* (Renmin huabao), no. 4 (1954). Used with permission from China Foto Bank.

fully into the air. The instructions show would-be performers precisely how to handle the props, detailing specific hand grips and other movement techniques that allow the dancers to execute the airborne circles, spirals, figure eights, and zigzagging lines necessary to complete the choreography.<sup>20</sup>

Recognizing that props are material objects with limited life spans and their own interactions with the physical environment, dance manuals also instructed readers on how to properly care for the props to maintain their maximum effectiveness. In a special section titled "How to Use and Take Care of the Props," the authors of the *Red Silk Dance* manual reminded readers that during the beginning stages of learning the dance, it is best to practice with old silk. "This is because if one uses new silk during the practice period, by the time of the performance, the silk color will already be faded, and the new silk will have turned into old silk. This will negatively impact the effect of the performance," they explained.<sup>21</sup> When selecting old silk for practicing, the authors continued, it is essential not to use any that contains a seam in the middle, since this will make it difficult to distribute force equally through the fabric and thus aggravate learning. When preparing for a performance, it is also important not to bundle the "torches" too early, since this will cause the silk to become wrinkled. After the show, one should also

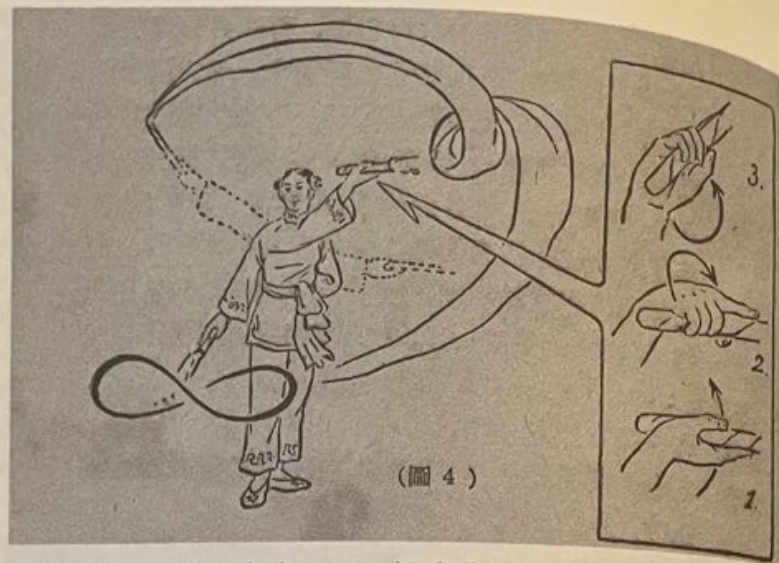


FIGURE 4.2. Detail from the dance manual *Red Silk Dance*. Wang Kewei, *Hongchou wu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Lukaiji Bookstore, 1953), 10. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Asia Library Chinese Dance Collection.

not toss the silks together but instead roll them up one by one and place them into a clean fabric bag for storage. In terms of appropriate spaces for rehearsal, the authors implored readers never to practice on concrete, since this will quickly damage the silk. They also reminded readers not to perform this piece outdoors, since “even the slightest bit of wind will easily cause the silks to be swept together, making them very difficult to control.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, one should always rehearse on a well-swept floor to avoid having the silks whip up clouds of dust in the practice room.

Other instructional books from the period offer similarly detailed instructions on how to dance with props. One example is the 1954 manual *Selected Chinese Folk Dances*, which teaches dancers how to perform with silk fabric, lotus lamps, fans and handkerchiefs, butterfly wands, a donkey-shaped hobby horse, a whip, and a doll.<sup>23</sup> *Fan Dance*, published in 1958, instructs readers on how to manipulate large folding fans, as well as the hem of one’s skirt, to perform this Korean-style folk dance.<sup>24</sup> The 1959 handbook *Sword Dance* similarly guides readers step-by-step through about forty different sword movement variations used in this dance.<sup>25</sup>

Dance films offer even further insight into how props were incorporated into choreography. There are at least nine such extant films produced in the PRC between 1950 and 1965, some of which are full-length narrative dramas

and others are compilations of shorter works. Each of these films depicts extensive use of dance props.<sup>26</sup> Some uses are merely cosmetic, meaning that the props are not integrated into the movement and thus do not require special techniques to maneuver. The majority, however, are integrated and require the dancer to rehearse extensively to master the prop movement. In 1959’s *Magic Lotus Lantern* (Bao liandeng), dancers perform with long silk streamers and swords, showing a high degree of body-object coordination that centers the movement of the prop as a focal point of the choreographic action. In these films, the props’ material characteristics are clearly reflected in the dance forms. Scenes involving the silk streamers, for example, maximize the fabric’s lightness and fluidity. The dancer casts them out in long, voluptuous lines that hang, float, and cascade through the air, surrounding her body in an ethereal nest of pastel swirls that evoke clouds, in this case fitting the character’s role as a heavenly immortal. Scenes involving swords, by contrast, highlight the metal object’s weight and ability to cut through the air without drag. Dancers spear the air in clean, crisp strokes and then allow the sword to wheel around on arcs and axes, creating momentum and speed that in turn amplifies the movements of the human operator.<sup>27</sup> This integrated use of props shows how physical features of the objects shape movement choices, producing contrasting choreographies that require the human body to move in different ways.

The 1960 film *Red Flowers Blossoming Everywhere* (Hong hua biandi kai), which features highlights from a workers’ arts festival, shows how integrated prop-based choreography permeated beyond professionals to reach amateurs as well. One dance in the film, by a team from Anhui, stars a female lead deftly wielding a small silk folding fan and handkerchief, a pair of props commonly used in Han folk dances. Pulling and tossing them through the air with nimble arm swings and small wrist loops, she coordinates her own movements with those of a male partner, almost as if she is the conductor and he the orchestra. This creates the effect that each of his full-body actions amplifies the more delicate movements of her fan and handkerchief. Within her own movement, there is also a rhythmic contrast between the incessant drive of her bouncing footwork with the airy swooshes and flutters of the props. In contrast to the silk water sleeve and sword dances, which have a more serious tone, this dance is humorous and lively.

The thunderous finale of this film offers another example of integrated prop-based dancing and skillful coordination between groups of performers, here through the combination of dance and percussion. The scene is composed of horizontal lines of dancers brandishing differently shaped drums. Each line moves forward in success waves, each offering a fresh movement technique



FIGURE 4.3. Sword dance scene in *Magic Lotus Lantern* (Bao liandeng). Reproduced with permission from the private collection of Fang Bonian and the Pioneers of Chinese Dance digital archive.

combined with fast-paced drumming. Some dancers spin drums on straps around their necks and beat them mid-orbit. Others twirl their drumsticks in the air so quickly between beats that the sticks become invisible. Still others skillfully weave real-time rhythms produced by striking drums strapped to their necks or waists while they execute complicated choreography involving spins, steps, hip swivels, and jumps.<sup>28</sup> Here, like in many of the dance scenes found in Mao-era films, the movement of the props becomes as much of a focal point and object of appreciation as the movement of the dancers.

From an international perspective, the widespread and integrated use of props in Chinese choreography set the repertoires of Mao's China apart from trends in many other countries at the time. Documentation of competitions held at the World Festivals of Youth and Students (WFYS), the main international venue where China's dancers performed their work abroad during the early Mao era, suggests that props were very common in the works China sent to the festivals but were much less so among delegations from other participating countries.<sup>29</sup> The only other WFYS dance delegation from another country that regularly performed with props was the North Korean one, and these two countries had a history of close interaction in the dance field.<sup>30</sup> In China's WFYS works, judging by those that won awards, props were nearly ubiquitous. Out of the total forty-one choreographies for which China won awards at WFYS

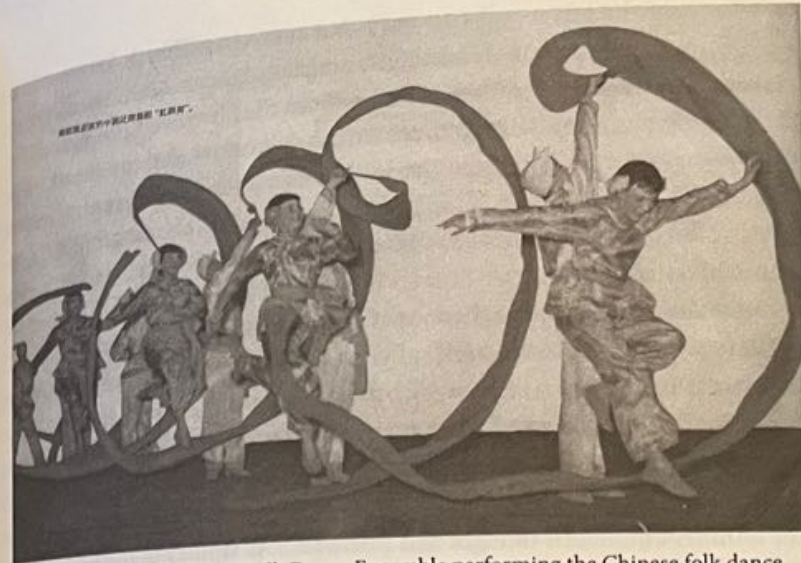


FIGURE 4.4. USSR National Folk Dance Ensemble performing the Chinese folk dance "red silk dance" in China in 1954. *China Pictorial* (Renmin huabao), no. 11 (1954). Used with permission from China Foto Bank.

festivals between 1949 and 1962, at least thirty-two employed props.<sup>31</sup> Several of these dances are recorded in the Mao-era dance films *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* (Bai feng chao yang, 1959) and *Colored Butterflies Flutter About* (Caidie fenfei, 1963), and the integrated role of the props in the movement technique and choreography is quite evident in these recordings.<sup>32</sup> This association between props and the dancing of Maoist China is further expressed graphically in a poster printed for the cultural forum at the 1957 WFYS festival in Moscow. Of the five dancers of different national backgrounds depicted in the poster, only the Chinese dancer is using a prop, in this case a long, red streamer.<sup>33</sup> Another indication of this association is that when the Soviet State Folk Dance Ensemble visited China in 1954 and performed two Chinese pieces as part of its show, both used props.<sup>34</sup>

#### DANCE PROPS AND CHINA'S SOCIALIST CULTURE

What prompted this extensive use of props, and why did it become such an iconic element of dance performance in Mao-era China? Reading China's publications from the time provides insight into how these dances were created and the cultural imaginaries they were meant to provoke and exhibit. One source of such accounts is *Dance News* (Wudao tongxun), a professional

bulletin published from 1951 to 1957 that served as China's first national news source dedicated to dance. In its articles, dancers often wrote about their motivations for creating performances that involved props and the methods they used to develop these works. Educators also discussed what they regarded as the pedagogical value of such choreography, while researchers explored the dances' historical and cultural backgrounds, and critics offered assessments based on aesthetic, ideological, and cultural values of the day.

A predominant theme in these writings is the role props played in mediating between social worlds. Specifically, props helped dancers cross the divide between urban and rural China, by bringing rural characters, rhythms, and images onto urban stages, albeit in revised forms designed for urban viewers. This effort to link urban and rural society and to make rural people and their expressions central to the culture of modern China was a long-standing commitment of Maoist thought and practice.<sup>35</sup> As studies of the CCP's turn to rural folk culture under Mao's leadership in late 1930s and early 1940s Yan'an show, this development was connected to the rising nationalism of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the nationwide debates over "national forms" (*minzu xingshi*) in the arts and literature, the rectification of artists and intellectuals, and the Yan'an *yangge* movement that transformed farmers' harvest celebrations and New Year's parades into political theater. All of these activities produced new expressive forms inspired by regional folk culture.

Recent studies of urban *yangge* in the early 1950s have shown that after the CCP moved its operations from its rural base areas back to the cities in 1949, it faced problems when simplified versions of folk culture, exemplified by *yangge* dance, failed to maintain the interest of urban residents.<sup>36</sup> During the land reform movement and early PRC, the CCP continued to view folk artists as important collaborators in its efforts to use the performing arts, such as revolutionary drama troupes, in rural China as a medium for promoting its political ideas and campaigns through the mid-1950s. However, bridging the gap between urban and rural culture remained an important challenge for the artists as well as audiences involved in these efforts. China's urban dramatists in the late 1940s and early 1950s spent a great deal of their time addressing the problem of how to understand, communicate with, and emotionally move rural audiences. At the same time, folk artists from rural areas often joined up with revolutionary drama troupes to provide expertise and technical knowledge, although the collaborations fostered between them and urban groups were typically fraught.<sup>37</sup> Given this historical background, it is not surprising that the divide between urban and

rural culture was also a major point of concern for dancers. Props became one medium for addressing this perpetual dilemma.

By looking at the creative developments in dance, it is clear that rural culture continued to play an important role on urban stages in Maoist China through the 1950s and early 1960s. Rather than dying out shortly after the establishment of the PRC, as some scholars have speculated, historical sources show that dances derived from folk performance in the manner of the *yangge* movement continued to fill China's stages until the start of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s.<sup>38</sup> Rather than abandoning folk dances, Mao-era dancers instead doubled down on their commitment to folk forms, which often involved props. The proliferation of props in the new choreographies of the early PRC period demonstrates urban dancers' ongoing engagement with rural forms, as well as their commitment to collaborating with folk artists and "learning from the folk," to cite one of the most common phrases in dance writings of the period. The extensive use of props in Chinese works of the 1950s and early 1960s shows urban dancers' continued interest in folk performance as a source of innovation in Chinese socialist cultural production. It also shows their ongoing efforts to perform rural identities by cultivating embodied investments in dance props as material vehicles of rural culture.

A typical account of how this process worked from the perspective of urban dancers in the early PRC can be found in an essay titled "How We Adapted and Rehearsed *Fan Dance*," one of a series of articles published in the inaugural July 1951 issue of *Dance News*.<sup>39</sup> Like most of the other articles in this issue, the essay explained the provenance of a dance that had received acclaim at the national folk dance "trial performance" held in Beijing a few months earlier, which lasted three days and featured ensembles from multiple regions across China. Many of its most successful pieces had been inspired by folk forms that used props. Apart from *Fan Dance*, for example, there had also been the premiere of *Red Silk Dance* discussed above, as well as those involving carts and boats and several different forms of drum dances.<sup>40</sup> As a writer for the state newspaper *Guangming Daily* attested, it had been a turning point in attitudes toward the study of local and folk dance, showing that "it really is as Chairman Mao said: studying the rich content of people's lives and critically learning from national art heritage, especially of the local and the folk, is the right direction."<sup>41</sup>

The trial performance was considered so important that the entire issue of *Dance News* was dedicated to it. The articles it contained operated as pedagogical tools for other dancers, providing models for correct choreographic

practices that might offer inspiration for new works. "Learning from the folk" was a common theme in almost every article in the special issue, including "How We Adapted and Rehearsed *Fan Dance*." In such discussions, choreographers typically recounted how their ensemble members had traveled to the countryside and, often through experiences with props, gained a closer connection to rural life. In this process, the dancers also typically spent time learning from folk artists. As recounted in this article, the group came across their idea for *Fan Dance* while they were studying in China's northeast. Working with folk artists, the author reported, they had studied a particularly rich and complex local style of *yangge* dance, which was part of a comic folk theater genre called *bengbengxi* (also known as *erren zhuan*). In this process, they had come across an interesting popular northeastern folk dance called "catching butterflies" (*bu hudie*), also called "fan dance." The group first studied this dance and then worked together with a folk artist to adapt it for the concert stage.

According to the article, the part of their creative process that had been most transformative for the dancers was when they mastered fan movement. Initially, the author writes, the dancers had trouble inhabiting the roles of peasants, who were supposed to be the subjects of the dance, because the dancers themselves did not come from peasant backgrounds. The author wrote, "The performers knew intellectually that they were supposed to perform the new, joyful mood of today's peasants, but when they performed, they still more or less expressed their own thoughts and feelings (the thoughts and feelings of intellectuals)."<sup>42</sup> To resolve this problem, the group used visualization to establish a concrete setting for the dance in their minds: "We decided the time would be one midday around the Dragon Boat Festival and the place would be a hillside, in a path of wildflowers and grass next to a crop field. The story we would perform would be a group of healthy, humble, and lively village girls who sing and play in the untilled land. Birds would sing loudly, and beautiful butterflies would fly freely about. The girls would look for their favorite wildflowers and then use fans to chase and catch their even more beloved butterflies. After a few rounds of chasing, they would finally catch one."<sup>43</sup>

By way of this exercise, the author explained, the dancers eventually expressed a bit of the rural feeling the dance was aiming for. They reportedly used this story to discuss and determine the details of the entire fan dance choreography, including each section's emotional expressions, speed, steps, formations, and entire organization. Within this process, the fan had served as the medium that allowed them to gain a feeling for and embody the rural

culture they were aiming to perform. The prop thus played a critical role as an object mediator when the dancers attempted to put themselves into the roles of rural subjects. Through the kinesthetic experience of manipulating this object—flapping and fluttering the fan in their hands while chasing the imaginary butterflies—the urban dancers gained a feeling of rural place and identity, which they used as a source of inspiration for their performance. For the dancers, grasping the props and learning to twirl and toss them in just the right way helped them to shed their bodily habits of urban intellectuals and cross into a mode of embodiment that was, at least in their idealized version of it, more consistent with rural life.

Judging from articles published in *Dance News* during the 1950s, the props that were most frequently adopted in Mao-era Chinese choreographies during this period came primarily from two sources: field surveys of rural folk performances and crossover techniques borrowed from Chinese opera. In both cases, learning to manipulate props was considered essential for dancers to embody characters and comportments appropriate to socialist performance. In one essay, for example, a choreographer from the South-Central Cultural Work Troupe explained how learning to perform the "walking lotus boat" (*zou lian chuan*) technique from folk performers and dancers training in Chinese opera helped company members portray the lives of fishers in New China.<sup>44</sup> Other choreographers reportedly drew inspiration from the deep reservoirs of rural culture that could be learned from studying and performing dragon and lion dances.<sup>45</sup> Still others, focused on the silk sleeves and combat weapons used by actors in Chinese opera, argued that physically mastering the techniques to wield these materials was necessary for dancers who intended to play characters in many new dramas, whether featuring classical or folk themes.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, field reports on folk dance forms practiced in various regions of the country contained long lists of object-centered genres, such as lantern, drum, fan, and parasol dances, and the like.<sup>47</sup> To perform rural dances, and by extension rural identities, meant dancing with props.

#### RURAL PROPS ON URBAN STAGES

Previous studies of folk aesthetics in the socialist culture of Mao's China have often emphasized substitutions, by which new objects and imagery associated with the iconography of socialism were inserted into and thus ended up becoming an integral part of rural folk forms. In the Yan'an *yangge* movement, for example, the *santou*, a dancer dressed in a special costume and



carrying some type of open umbrella, who would traditionally lead a rural *yangge* procession, was replaced in the new CCP-sponsored version by two dancers dressed instead as workers and peasants and carrying a hammer and a sickle.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in a new form of *nianhua*, or New Year's prints, introduced in the early years of the PRC, traditional symbols such as door gods were replaced by new socialist symbols such as PLA soldiers.<sup>49</sup> The prop-filled choreographies of the early Mao-era dance stage present a different direction of substitution from these earlier accounts. That is, they offer examples of how objects from rural folk culture were inserted into and ended up becoming an integral part of China's socialist culture. Although often embodied by dancers who came from urban backgrounds, the prop-based dances and their attendant techniques—whether mastered through direct field research and study with folk artists or secondhand from films or popular manuals—allowed these urban performers to bring elements of rural culture to life on urban stages domestically and internationally.

The introduction of props into Mao-era Chinese choreography came about as part of a larger mission espoused by early PRC choreographers to “inherit and develop” (*jicheng yu fazhan*) China's new national dance culture by building creatively on local performance practices from all over the country.<sup>50</sup> Because of this mission, dancers in Mao's China were expected to spend a great deal of their time and energy conducting field research, studying with folk performers, and publishing scholarly accounts that confirmed the links between their choreographic creations and existing practices, whether from rural village life, historical accounts, or the opera stage.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond the Maoist concern with folk culture, however, these dances with props also served another ideological function. That is, they ensured that dancers appearing on stage could never be viewed simply as “bodies,” in the sense of a self-determined, universal, abstract human individual that could be theoretically divorced from a specific social context.<sup>52</sup> A foundational premise of Marxist views on human life, which Maoist thought also adopted, was the idea that all humans are situated in specific social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances and that all people are thus fundamentally shaped by their social and physical environments. Dancing with props is a way of manifesting this idea in an aesthetic and bodily sense. When the dancer moves with the prop in an integrated technique, the relationship between them is one of mutual entanglement. That is, the materiality and movement of one is mutually implicated in that of the other. From this perspective, the assemblage of the dancer and the prop in Chinese choreography of Mao's China actualizes in performance the concept of the socially situated

and environmentally entangled human being that is at the core of a socialist worldview. In other words, dancing with objects not only allowed dancers to better understand and perform rural lives and experiences, it also placed them metaphorically into a social context, reinforcing the broader Maoist conviction that no human life can be understood detached from its concrete social reality.

## NOTES

- 1 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 2 Video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgKBmiyqCjg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgKBmiyqCjg).
- 3 Video, [www.bilibili.com/video/av11512109](http://www.bilibili.com/video/av11512109).
- 4 In this chapter, I use the term “socialist” to describe a cultural phenomenon that began during the 1920s, enjoyed widespread influence from the late 1940s through the end of the 1970s, and continues to be part of the cultural landscape, albeit in varied and constantly changing forms, in China today.
- 5 “Practice as research” is a concept used in dance and performance studies. It refers to the idea that artistic activities, such as performance, can constitute a form of academic research.
- 6 Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*.
- 7 Won Ho Chang, *Mass Media in China: The History and the Future* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), 33. *Renmin huabao* (henceforth RMHB) was one of the seven highest-circulation magazines in China in 1955. During the Maoist period, this periodical included reporting on both domestic dance creation and international dance groups that toured in China. See Emily Wilcox, “The Postcolonial Blind Spot: Chinese Dance in the Era of Third World-ism, 1949–1965,” *positions: asia critique* 26, no. 4 (2018): 781–815; and Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*. Here, I am only focusing on photographs of domestically produced Chinese choreography.
- 8 RMHB 1, no. 1 (July 1950); RMHB 3, no. 1 (January 1952); RMHB 5, no. 9 (September 1954); RMHB 8, no. 6 (June 1957); RMHB 12, no. 1 (1961); RMHB 13, no. 5 (1962); RMHB 14, no. 5 (1963).
- 9 RMHB 4, no. 6 (June 1953); RMHB 5, no. 3 (March 1954); RMHB 6, no. 7 (July 1955); RMHB 8, no. 6 (June 1957); RMHB 11, no. 18 (October 1960).
- 10 RMHB 4, no. 6 (June 1953); RMHB 5, no. 4 (April 1954); RMHB 10, no. 10a (October 1959).
- 11 RMHB 6, no. 10 (October 1955); RMHB 11, no. 4b (April 1960); RMHB 11, no. 6b (June 1960); RMHB 12, no. 9 (1961); RMHB 15, no. 11 (1964).
- 12 RMHB 3, no. 7 (July 1952); RMHB 5, no. 1 (January 1954); RMHB 6, no. 4 (April 1955); RMHB 7, no. 1 (January 1956); RMHB 8, no. 4 (April 1957); RMHB 10, no. 7a (July 1959); RMHB 10, no. 8b (August 1959).
- 13 RMHB 3, no. 7 (July 1952); RMHB 5, no. 1 (January 1954); RMHB 6, no. 4 (April 1955); RMHB 7, no. 1 (January 1956); RMHB 8, no. 4 (April 1957); RMHB 10, no. 7a (July 1959); RMHB 10, no. 8b (August 1959).

- 14 RMHB 6, no. 4 (April 1955); RMHB 10, no. 10a (October 1959); RMHB 11, no. 2b (February 1960); RMHB 11, no. 6b (June 1960).
- 15 RMHB 6, no. 4 (April 1955); RMHB 10, no. 10a (October 1959); RMHB 11, no. 2b (February 1960); RMHB 11, no. 6b (June 1960).
- 16 RMHB 4, no. 6 (June 1953); RMHB 6, no. 5 (May 1955); RMHB 8, no. 2 (February 1957); RMHB 11, no. 4b (April 1960).
- 17 RMHB 5, no. 7 (July 1954); RMHB 6, no. 5 (May 1955); RMHB 6, no. 11 (November 1955); RMHB 7, no. 12 (December 1956); RMHB 8, no. 6 (June 1957); RMHB 11, no. 6b (June 1960); RMHB 11, no. 16 (1960); RMHB 12, no. 7 (1961); RMHB 13, no. 1 (1962); RMHB 13, no. 10 (1962); RMHB 15, no. 4 (1964); RMHB 15, no. 8 (1964); RMHB 16, no. 2 (1965).
- 18 This description is based on a review of all photographs of dance published in RMHB from 1950 to 1965.
- 19 On the international circulation of these choreographies, see Wilcox, "When Folk Dance Was Radical."
- 20 Wang Kewei, *Hongchou wu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Lukaiji Bookstore, 1953). University of Michigan Chinese Dance Collection. For more on this dance, including a 1963 recording, see Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 72–73, 85–86.
- 21 Wang, *Hongchou wu*, 49.
- 22 Wang, *Hongchou wu*, 50.
- 23 Chinese Dance Art Research Association, ed., *Zhongguo minjian wudao xuanji* (Beijing: Yishu Chubanshe, 1954), University of Michigan Chinese Dance Collection.
- 24 Chinese Dance Art Research Association, ed. *Shan wu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1958), University of Michigan Chinese Dance Collection. During the Mao era, as today, Chinese dance includes both Han and ethnic minority dance. For more on this, see Wilcox, "Beyond Internal Orientalism"; and Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*.
- 25 Shanghai Experimental Opera Theater, ed., *Jian wu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1959), University of Michigan Chinese Dance Collection.
- 26 *Bao liandeng* (Shanghai Tianma Film Studio, 1959); *Bai feng chao yang* (Beijing Film Studio, 1959); *Honghua biandi kai* (Beijing Film Studio, 1960); *Wu duo hongyun* (PLA August First Film Studio, 1960); *Xiao dao hui* (Shanghai: Shanghai Tianma Film Studio, 1961); *Caidie fenfei* (Beijing Film Studio, 1963); *Xuri dongsheng* (August First Film Studio, 1964); *Dongfeng wanli* (August First Film Studio, 1964); *Dongfang hong* (Beijing Film Studio et al., 1965).
- 27 Video, <http://v.chinadance.cn/video/56747.html>. Scenes begin at 36:35 and 53:40.
- 28 Video, [www.bilibili.com/video/av10713997](http://www.bilibili.com/video/av10713997). Scenes begin at 36:44 and 72:00.
- 29 *Festival* newsletters from the 1951, 1953, 1955, 1957, 1959, and 1962 WFYS, stored in the World Festival of Youth and Students Collection, ARCH01667, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
- 30 Emily Wilcox, "Crossing Over: Choe Seung-hui's Pan-Asianism in Revolutionary Time," *Journal of Society for Dance Documentation and History* 51 (December 2018): 65–97.
- 31 Song Tianyi, *Zhongwai biaoyan yishu jiaoliu shilüe, 1949–1992* (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, 1994), 290–92.
- 32 Videos, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=g19Jzc\\_cPo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g19Jzc_cPo) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXQJ3ylq\\_9M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXQJ3ylq_9M).

- 33 A figure who appears to represent Latin America holds a tambourine, but he seems to be a musician, not a dancer. Poster, World Festival of Youth and Students Collection, ARCH01667, binder 9 (1957 Moscow), folder 1.
- 34 "Youmei de Sulian minjian wudao," RMHB 5, no. 11 (September 1954): 32–33.
- 35 Holm, "Folk Art as Propaganda"; Holm, *Art and Ideology*. See also Judd, "Prelude to the 'Yan'an Talks'"; Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Wang, "Local Forms, Vernacular Dialects."
- 36 Hung, "The Dance of Revolution"; Hung, *Mao's New World*.
- 37 DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army*.
- 38 Wilcox, "When Folk Dance Was Radical"; Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*.
- 39 Yang Mingquan, "Women zenyang gaibian ji paiyan 'Shanzi wu,'" *Wudao tongxun*, July 7, 1951, 11–12. The *Fan Dance* discussed in this essay is different from the Korean-style version discussed in the handbook cited above.
- 40 Hu Sha, "Lun xiang minzu chuantong wudao yishu xuexi," *Wudao tongxun*, July 7, 1951, 5–7.
- 41 Fan Ming, "Kan wudao guanmo huiyan de jidian ganxiang," *Guangming ribao*, May 24, 1951. This article links such approaches to the goal of "realist art," although the term "socialist realism" is rarely used in these essays.
- 42 Yang, "Women zenyang gaibian," 11.
- 43 Yang, "Women zenyang gaibian," 11.
- 44 Wang Xi, "'Dayu chuan' pailian jingguo ji jingyan," *Wudao tongxun*, July 7, 1951, 27–29.
- 45 Tong Feng, "Cong yige you xingge de 'Long wu' tan qi," *Wudao tongxun* 6 (1956): 21–22; Wu Xiongyun, "Guanyu shizi wu," *Wudao tongxun* 11 (1956): 15–17.
- 46 Wang Ping, "Tan xiuwu de xunlian he qita," *Wudao tongxun* 6 (1956): 14–16; Wang Ping, "Dui wudao yanyuan xuexi gudian xiju wu zhong 'zhanqi wu' de wo jian," *Wudao tongxun* 10 (1956): 36–37.
- 47 "Quanguo minjian wudao buchong diaocha biao," *Wudao tongxun* (June 1955): 15; Liu Zhijun, "Shandong sheng minjian wudao fenbu qingkuang," *Wudao tongxun* 8–9 (1956): 32–33.
- 48 Holm, "Folk Art as Propaganda," 21–22.
- 49 Hung, *Mao's New World*.
- 50 Wilcox, "Dynamic Inheritance."
- 51 An example of this is *Zhongguo minzu minjian wu jicheng*, which documents folk dances, many of which involve props, based on long-term field surveys. The collection is huge and has a separate volume dedicated to each province and autonomous region. For more on this practice, see Emily Wilcox, "Dancers Doing Fieldwork: Socialist Aesthetics and Bodily Experience in the People's Republic of China," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2010, published 2012).
- 52 By contrast, this was a common image of the dancer promoted in American modern dance during this same era, also with ideological implications. See Rebekah Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).