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## CONCERT DANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Crossing borders while maintaining difference

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### Introduction

If we compare concert dance with haute cuisine, contemporary China would be for dance enthusiasts what France is to food lovers. The sheer long-term investment of human labour, material resources, and financial capital to the development of concert dance in China has made the country a leading force in today's global dance marketplace. An enduring commitment to localized tastes and aesthetic expectations has combined with exceptionally high standards of technical ability and production quality to foster a concert dance scene marked by extreme dynamism and distinctiveness. Much of the dance work that appears on stage in China today is rarely replicated elsewhere, either because of the large scale and unusual technical requirements needed for many of these productions or as a result of their close interweaving with domestic social, political, historical, and cultural issues and audiences that makes them less easily transferrable to other contexts. Much like locally sourced restaurants whose menus and flavours reflect the ecology and tastes of nearby communities, the concert dance scene in contemporary China is rooted in localization to the needs and desires of its unique environment.

To continue the metaphor further, China's concert dance, like French cuisine, requires a seasoned palette and familiarity with the milieu to be fully appreciated. To the virgin diner, a slice of Roquefort cheese with its pockets of blue mould and sweat-like moist surface may seem repugnant, if not inedible. The smell alone, combined with the fact that it is customarily not refrigerated, may leave even the most adventurous eater faint hearted. And yet, to those with a penchant for rare cheeses who have spent time in Southern France, this unusual combination of flavour, sight, and texture conjures the warmest of sensations, offering one of the finest delicacies the experienced mouth can enjoy. Thus, while unappealing to some, for others, this substance, especially when savoured in its ideal environment alongside wine, fruit, and warm summer air, is simply exquisite – a perfect combination of tang, crumble, and creaminess that sends the taste buds singing and inspires cravings for more.

Concert dance in contemporary China possesses a comparable sense of '*terroir*' – a special flavour or quality nurtured over time through intensive cultivation in a specific

environment – and thus offers a distinctive dance experience that, like other art forms with rich cultural histories and devoted circles of patronage and connoisseurship, is tailored to indulge a particularly attuned set of tastes. Concert dance in contemporary China is not equally meaningful or enjoyable to all viewers, nor, I would argue, should it be. Rather, what defines this dance scene as a mature artistic environment is precisely that it has fostered a complex aesthetic culture of its own.

This scene has not developed in isolation from international dialogue but rather has benefited from it. That is, the vibrant local character of concert dance in contemporary China has resulted from an intentional and highly self-reflexive effort to be actively engaged with dance trends happening in other parts of the world without being subsumed into any singular hegemonic global dance aesthetic. Concert dance in contemporary China, by virtue of its diverse array of distinct and well-supported dance genres, its long history of engaging in international exchange while emphasizing local difference, and its dense institutional structures for continually developing new domestic talent and choreographic innovation, has evolved into one of the world's great destinations for theatrical dance. In contemporary China, audiences enjoy exceptional experiences of dance for the stage that are at once in tune with international developments and rooted enough in local history and culture to be truly distinctive.

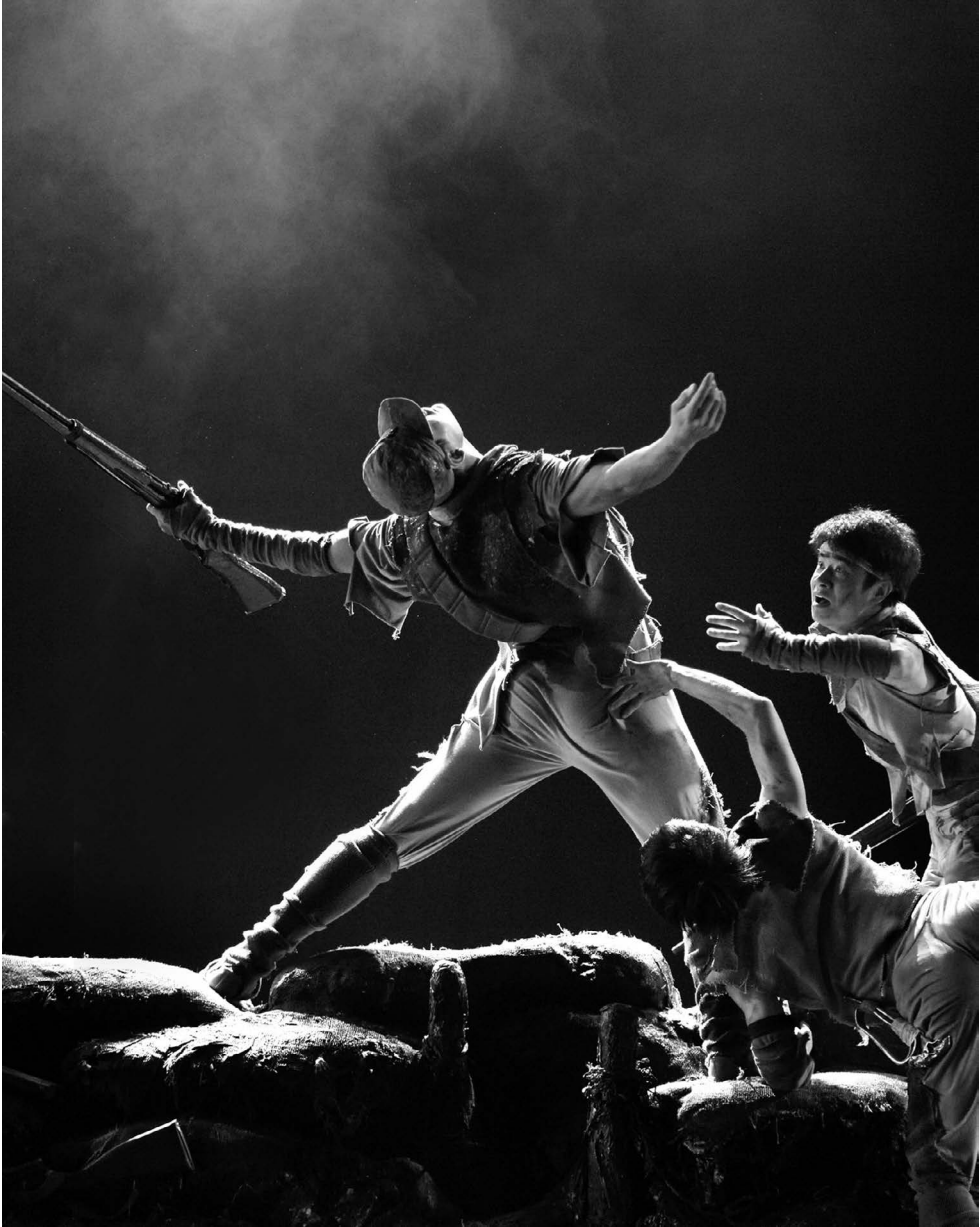
### **Diversity of genres**

Any dance enthusiast spending time in China is likely to be shocked by the large number of concert dance performances happening throughout the year. Beijing, as the national capital and home to many of the country's top dance conservatories and leading dance ensembles, has the most active and wide-ranging dance performance calendar. Major metropolitan regions and provincial capitals all over China also have state-of-the-art theatres as well as smaller venues with active concert dance programmes. Regular dance festivals and national, regional, and local dance competitions ensure a constant stream of new choreography. Meanwhile, nearly every one of the hundreds of professional state-sponsored dance ensembles and university dance programmes has its own home theatre where it frequently stages performances.

A wide variety of dance genres appears in these productions. Some of them, such as ballet and modern dance, are relatively familiar to international audiences. Others, such as military dance, Chinese classical dance, and Chinese national folk dance, are more specific to China. Regardless of genre, however, all domestic concert dance productions are rooted in some way in the local environment and its institutional and cultural ecologies. This may be in how dancers' bodies are moulded by China's unique system of professional conservatory dance education, including its practices of recruitment, tracks of specialization, and common career pathways and lifecycles. It may also be in how different genres of dance have historically been funded, created, and programmed in China. This may include cultivated expectations about what productions in different dance genres ought to look like and how collaboration, remuneration, and authorship operate within creative teams, as well as what the ideal links are between dance choreography and local historical, cultural, and political material. While the genres of concert dance in contemporary China are constantly in flux and often blur into one another, their distinct qualities and trajectories can be mapped and identified over time. At base, the maintenance of this genre diversity is itself a fundamental feature of concert dance in contemporary China.

### *Military dance*

Among the many genres of concert dance regularly performed on China's stages, one of the least likely to be found anywhere else is military dance (*junlü wudao* 军旅舞蹈), also known in Chinese, somewhat confusingly for those outside China, as contemporary dance



**FIGURE 5.1** *Our Father's Generation* 父辈

Source: Performed by Nanjing Military District Political Department Front Line Cultural Work Troupe, ca. 2009

Photographer: Ye Jin (used with permission)

(*dangdai wu* 当代舞). Military dance has its roots in cultural mobilization troupes of the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949). At that time, dance was widely used, sometimes performed at the front lines of battle, to invigorate soldiers and civilians to support the war efforts. Beginning in the 1950s, many of these war-time performance troupes were converted into professional ensembles with support from local, provincial, regional, and national governments (Liu 2011). The most famous of these is the Chinese People's Liberation Army General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe, commonly known as the General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe (*Zongzheng gewutuan* 总政歌舞团) founded in 1953, which was renamed the Central Military Commission Political Work Department Song and Dance Troupe in 2016.

A typical military dance choreography features groups of exceptionally lithe male or female dancers in form-fitting army green costumes resembling military uniforms. Often, the look is completed with belts, boots, gold buttons, ammunition packs, water flasks, berets, and so on. Depending on the choreography, dancers may perform with rifles or other weapons as props. If a story is set during the Civil War, dancers will be dressed in the grey-blue uniforms with red-banded lapels and red-starred caps of early Chinese Communist Party soldiers. Similar to war films, these dances are emotional rollercoasters. They tend to begin with tense, stealth movements that build up to extreme high-energy action sequences, typically set to heart-pounding marches with horns and flashing lights and filled with bursts of flying leaps, flips, and other acrobatic feats. This is intended to simulate the life-and-death struggle of active combat through live performance. Inevitably, some soldiers will be wounded or killed in battle, producing another indispensable element of military dance choreography – the tear-jerking scenes in which comrades-in-arm witness and mourn the loss of their friends.<sup>1</sup>

Heroic poses and melodramatic acting are a hallmark of these dances, which deliver impassioned performances filled with high sentimentalism and themes of patriotism, national history, friendship, intimacy, trauma, and commemoration. These dances are designed to inspire reflection on the bravery and sacrifices made by past generations of Chinese soldiers and revolutionaries, usually with the aim of invoking renewed feelings of commitment to the national cause among contemporary citizens. Apart from being staged at military banquets and military arts events, these performances also often appear in live and televised galas celebrating national holidays and political anniversaries. Significant prestige and benefits are associated with employment in military performance ensembles, so many of China's most talented dance artists have appeared in military dance choreography over the years.

### **Chinese national folk dance**

Another genre of concert dance specific to China is Chinese national folk dance (*Zhongguo minzu minjian wu* 中国民族民间舞), also translated as Chinese ethnic and folk dance or simply Chinese folk dance. Like military dance, the concert form of Chinese national folk dance began to develop during the wartime period of the late 1930s and early 1940s and was institutionalized at the national level in the 1950s with support from state-sponsored professional dance schools, ensembles, and cultural bureaus, many of which remain active today (Wilcox 2019). In China, scholars distinguish between Chinese national folk dance, a conservatory concert dance genre, and traditional or popular folk dances that exist outside

the conservatory setting. Chinese national folk dance draws its artistic inspiration from folk dances and other local traditions. However, it emphasizes the creative development of these materials into new contemporary choreography adapted for the concert stage (Wilcox 2018). Each style of Chinese national folk dance is associated with a specific region or ethnic group from around China, marking the source from which it draws its inspiration. In this way, Chinese national folk dance brings local performance practices to the concert stage under the rubric of a 'national' dance form, yet it also embodies the regional and ethnic diversity contained within the contemporary Chinese nation-state.

A common misperception about Chinese national folk dance is that it primarily includes dance styles representing ethnic minority groups. Colloquially, the term *minzu wu* (民族舞), literally meaning 'ethnic dance' or 'national dance', is often used as a synonym for Chinese national folk dance. Because *minzu wu* is frequently equated in popular usage with ethnic minority dance, this usage obscures the important role that dances of the Han majority also play in this genre. The fact that many non-experts cannot distinguish between Han and non-Han dance and mistakenly believe that all 'colorful folk dances' are ethnic minority dances further exacerbates this misunderstanding (Wilcox 2016). In fact, some of the earliest and most influential works of Chinese national folk dance were stage adaptations inspired by *yangge* 秧歌, a rural Han folk form from northern China (Wilcox 2020). Today, Han folk dance styles, many derived from regional *yangge* forms, remain a vital component of Chinese national folk dance. One such form is Dongbei (Northeast) Yangge (东北秧歌), in which dancers create a playful and celebratory mood by tossing and spinning bright red eight-point star handkerchiefs as they cross their feet over one another, bob their shoulders up and down, and swing their chin and hips from side to side.<sup>2</sup> Another example is Shandong Jiaozhou Yangge (山东胶州秧歌), in which dancers (usually women), perform graceful twisting actions in the knees and torso and carve smooth, swerving figure-eight patterns through the air with their arms and wrists while holding a large silk fan in one hand and a gauze handkerchief in the other.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic minority dance also makes up an important component of Chinese national folk dance. Among the most widely performed are Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongolian, Korean, and Dai dance, although there are now dance styles and repertoires representing nearly all of China's 55 recognized minority groups. Each form of Chinese ethnic minority dance has its own distinct techniques and repertoires, and these are often further broken down into numerous sub-styles, most of which also have masculine and feminine versions that can be quite different from one another. Because of the enormous variation both between and within minority dance styles, it is difficult to describe Chinese ethnic minority dance as a whole. However, Uyghur dance is generally known for its percussive spins and expressive hand gestures, Tibetan dance for its rhythmic stomping footwork, Mongolian dance for its swaggering machismo and shoulder isolations, Korean dance for its combination of floating arms and sinking pelvis, and Dai dance for its flexed wrists and slithering torso. Like Han folk dance, ethnic minority dance is also constantly evolving, with each generation of choreographers developing their own creative interpretations of existing styles and themes while also discovering new sources of inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

Chinese national folk dance is part of the training of nearly every professional dancer in China, regardless of discipline. Its works are staged in every kind of performance venue, from the most ornate of grand national opera houses to the humblest of remote tourist sites and school gymnasiums. Chinese national folk dance is a staple of most dance competitions,



**FIGURE 5.2** Chinese national folk dance yangge-inspired choreography *Spring Wind and Willow*  
春风杨柳

Source: Performed by Jilin Provincial Song and Dance Theater, ca. 2001

Photographer: Ye Jin (used with permission)

performance festivals, and entertainment galas, which are presented live as well as on many major television stations. The popularity of this dance genre is perhaps most evident in public urban life, where amateur enthusiasts learn and perform it daily in parks and squares all over China. Chinese national folk dance is also a common symbol of Chinese culture internationally and is practiced among Chinese diaspora communities and others interested in Chinese arts worldwide.



**FIGURE 5.3** Chinese national folk dance Mongolian-style choreography *Cup Bowl Chopsticks*  
盅碗筷

Source: Performed by Inner Mongolia Ethnic Song and Dance Theater, ca. 2011

Photographer: Ye Jin (used with permission)

### ***Chinese classical dance***

Chinese classical dance (*Zhongguo gudian wu* 中国古典舞) is the third major genre of concert dance specific to China. It first developed in the 1950s through collaborations between dancers (one of whom was famously from Korea) and Chinese theatre actors, especially performers of Peking opera (*Jingju* 京剧) and Kun opera (*Kunju* 昆剧, also known as Kunqu 昆曲). Despite being a latecomer to the scene, Chinese classical dance quickly rose to prominence as one of China's most important national dance forms. By the late 1950s, it enjoyed a status similar to military dance and Chinese national folk dance in terms of the attention it received within the professional dance field, as well as recognition in the national media and government support (Wilcox 2019). Chinese classical dance was created to serve as the movement language for Chinese-style long-form narrative dance choreography, known in Chinese as 'national dance drama' (*minzu wuju* 民族舞剧), which was first developed in the late 1950s. National dance dramas composed using Chinese classical dance continue to be extremely popular in China today, where they make up a major category of new concert dance choreography. The leading ensemble creating works of this kind is the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (*Zhongguo geju wujuyuan* 中国歌剧舞剧院, est. 1953), whose recent productions include the Chinese classical dance national dance dramas

*Confucius* (Kongzi 孔子 2013), *Princess Zhaojun* (*Zhaojun chusai* 昭君出塞 2016), and *Li Bai* (李白 2017).<sup>5</sup>

The term ‘classical’ in Chinese classical dance has often been a source of confusion, both in China and abroad. Some mistakenly confuse Chinese classical dance with Chinese ballet because ‘classical dance’ can refer to ballet in both English and Chinese. Others wrongfully believe Chinese classical dance is a directly inherited ancient court or religious tradition, the way the term ‘classical dance’ is often used in other parts of Asia. There are some elements of truth in both of these interpretations. The early creators of Chinese classical dance did borrow from Soviet ballet in their quest to create a Chinese national dance form that could be used to train professional dancers and convey full-length narrative stories. Also, as Chinese classical dance has developed over the decades, new branches of the genre have been added that take increasing inspiration from historical materials (Wilcox 2012a, 2019; Jiang 2020). Nevertheless, both of these interpretations are more problematic than helpful overall. This is because Chinese classical dance is an entirely different dance genre from ballet, with its own distinct movement techniques, educational systems, aesthetic expectations, practitioners, and repertoires. Moreover, Chinese classical dance is not an ancient dance form. It is a mode of contemporary concert dance that derives inspiration from traditional aesthetics and sources. The genre’s creativity and artistry lie in its choreographers’ efforts to imagine and produce impressions of Chinese classical culture from within a contemporary art form.

Movement elements that are often found in Chinese classical dance choreography include inertia, fluidity, and the appearance of circulating breath, particularly in the upper body and chest but also in the arms and legs, especially the joints. This appearance of breath may be expressed through sudden rising and falling actions; circling and spiralling movements that run parallel, vertical, or diagonal to the floor; and the unfurling of full-body extensions that stretch and flex through space rather than holding fixed lines. As in military dance and Chinese national folk dance, the entire body is theatrically expressive in Chinese classical dance, including the dancer’s face and eyes, as well as her fingers and even toes. Props are also common in Chinese classical dance. Whereas military dance often employs guns, and Chinese national folk dance features fans, handkerchiefs, porcelain bowls, and so on, in Chinese classical dance, the most common props are metal swords and long silk sleeves. These objects amplify the dancer’s physical movement and add technical difficulty to the choreography. At the same time, they also provide mediums of emotional expressivity, vectors for aesthetic experimentation, and cultural symbols related to the characters or themes being explored.

### ***Ballet and modern dance***

Ballet (*balei wu* 芭蕾舞) and modern dance (*xiandai wu* 现代舞) are also important components of the concert dance scene in contemporary China. China has several professional ballet companies, the oldest and most famous of which is the National Ballet of China (*Zhongyang balei wutuan* 中央芭蕾舞团), established in 1959. China’s ballet ensembles perform both European classics such as *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* and newly created Chinese-themed ballet productions. The latter are often based on Chinese theatrical or literary works, events from Chinese history, or well-known Chinese films. While ballet productions on Chinese themes often include Chinese aesthetic elements





**FIGURE 5.4** Chinese classical dance choreography *The Mother River* 黄河母亲

Source: Performed by People's Liberation Army Art Academy, ca. 2001

Photographer: Ye Jin (used with permission)



**FIGURE 5.5** Chinese-themed ballet *Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭

Source: Performed by National Ballet of China, ca. 2008

Photographer: Ye Jin (used with permission)

in the sound scores, costuming, and set design, the movement vocabularies and choreographic conventions in these productions are typically drawn from ballet, making these works choreographically distinct from national dance dramas based on Chinese classical dance or Chinese national folk dance.<sup>6</sup> Female dancers in Chinese-themed ballet productions usually perform on pointe, and costumes are often cut to reveal the dancers' shoulders, upper arms, sternum, and legs, which differs from costume designs usually used

in military dance, Chinese classical dance, or Chinese national folk dance. New works developed by Chinese ballet companies often incorporate movement and choreographic approaches from modern dance, bringing them in line with trends in ballet companies worldwide. As a whole, ballet operates as a transplanted ‘foreign’ genre in contemporary China that draws value from its association with elite European aesthetics and culture. Ballet companies not only perform works from classical European (predominantly Russian and French) ballet repertoires, they also participate in the Eurocentric international ballet community and produce new choreography that largely aligns with the tastes and expectations of this field.

Modern dance is one of contemporary China’s most rapidly growing genres of concert dance. The first professional companies in China specializing in modern dance were established in the 1990s, beginning with the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (*Guangdong xiandai wutuan* 广东现代舞团) in 1992 and followed soon after by Wen Hui’s Living Dance Studio (*Shenghuo wudao gongzushishi* 生活舞蹈工作室) in Beijing and Jin Xing Dance Theatre (*Shanghai Jin Xing wudaotuan* 上海金星舞蹈团) in Shanghai. Today, China’s leading modern dance company is TAO Dance Theater (*Tao shenti juchang* 陶身体剧场), established in Beijing in 2008. Modern dance is unlike contemporary China’s other major concert dance genres in that there are few professional conservatory programmes focused on training dancers in modern dance. Rather, most practitioners in this genre train and in some cases perform professionally in other genres before they join modern dance companies. In the case of TAO Dance Theater, for example, the company’s founding members Tao Ye 陶冶, Duan Ni 段妮, and Wang Hao 王好 previously trained or performed in military dance, Chinese classical dance, Chinese national folk dance, and ballet before they began practicing modern dance. Unlike many other concert dance genres in China, modern dance practitioners also often gain significant professional experience abroad before setting up their own companies. Duan Ni, for instance, danced with New York-based Shen Wei Dance Arts and London-based Akram Khan Company before becoming a founding member of TAO Dance Theater (Wilcox 2012b). This rich breadth of experience makes modern dance in China particularly dynamic and has led companies like TAO Dance Theater to be recognized as drivers of modern dance innovation globally (see cover photo).

Ballet and modern dance are both commonly categorized in Chinese dance discourse as ‘Western dance’ (*Xifang wudao* 西方舞蹈 or *Xiyang wudao* 西洋舞蹈). This is because both genres originally developed in Europe and North America and were introduced to China in the early 20th century by artists who had either trained in Europe and North America or had teachers who were trained there (Ma 2016; Wilcox 2019). Despite these associations, however, ballet and modern dance have both become deeply ingrained in the concert dance scene of contemporary China and have developed into local genres in their own right. Many of the artists who led the early development of military dance, Chinese national folk dance, and Chinese classical dance were also trained in ballet and modern dance, so the origins of these fields are mutually intersecting. Chinese-themed ballet productions and new forms of modern dance developed by Chinese artists with diverse dance backgrounds both constitute unique dance developments specific to China. It is the balance and intermingling of these five major genres together as equal players in the scene that make concert dance in contemporary China a vibrant and unique place for dance creation and appreciation.

## Structures of support

Since its emergence as a new artistic practice in China during the early decades of the 20th century, concert dance has grown into one of the country's most ubiquitous and flourishing cultural industries, gaining large audiences and fans domestically and internationally and establishing China as a powerful player in global dance culture worldwide. In the 21st century, China is now one of the largest producers of concert dance in the world, and it is also a major international exporter of dance talent, including performers, choreographers, designers, scholars, teachers, entrepreneurs, and producers. China boasts hundreds of professional dance schools and university dance departments, and professional dance companies that enjoy robust support from local, regional, and national governments, as well as private and corporate donors, exist all across the country. Each of these groups produces a significant body of new concert dance works every year, creating new choreography that is constantly being regenerated and reconfigured (Ou 2016).

One factor that has been essential to China's success in developing concert dance over the past century is the country's rigorous and diverse system of professional dance education. Since the first full-time, state-sponsored professional dance conservatories were established in China in the 1950s, Chinese dance students have been recruited between the ages of 9 and 12 (usually following the completion of elementary school) to engage in intensive bodily training in preparation for careers as dancers (Wilcox 2011). This educational method, originally modelled on Russian and Soviet practices, is extraordinarily competitive and places supreme importance on physical ability. Historically, tuition and living expenses at professional dance schools were paid for by the state, meaning that promising recruits could enjoy top-level training regardless of their family's wealth. Recruitment for top schools was also historically done nation-wide, so that children with exceptional promise do not need to grow up in major cultural centres to have access to the highest levels of dance education. Over the years, the establishment of private dance schools and an increase in educational competition overall has made it more difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be recruited into top dance programmes. Nevertheless, the general structure of professional dance education in China has not changed, and dancers in contemporary China continue to be recruited from all over the country to begin intensive full-time training programmes in dance starting in middle school.

Another factor that has contributed to the successful development of concert dance in China is the government's robust financial support for choreographic research and innovation. During the era of complete state support for professional dance institutions, which lasted from the 1950s to approximately the early 2000s, dance schools and professional companies received funds to pay permanent full-time salaries to dancers and other employees. Housing and other social services were also provided under this system, as were funds to regularly create new dance productions. Starting in the 1980s, commercial dance performances were increased, and many companies began to engage in commercial projects in addition to their state-funded work. Some dance companies, especially those practicing modern dance, also relied on support from private international investors and arts and culture organizations abroad. In the early 2000s, the system of permanent employment contracts for dancers largely came to an end, and most professional dance companies were required to move from full state funding to partially or fully commercial operations. In the 2010s, a new system for arts grants was introduced, and professional companies and schools now apply and compete with one another for large

sums of money to produce new concert dance choreography. In addition to funding for new choreography, there are also grants available to support projects in dance education and scholarship. This helps to sustain a large and thriving industry of curricular development and publishing in all fields of dance research, including pedagogy, choreography, history, anthropology, and criticism.

A final key factor that has nourished the dynamism of concert dance in contemporary China is a sustained investment in intercultural, cross-disciplinary, and transnational exchanges and collaborations. All five major genres of contemporary Chinese concert dance discussed previously were established through border-crossing activities of some kind. Military dance, for example, grew out of the introduction of early Euro-American and Japanese modern dance, Western realist theatre, Soviet agitprop, European military marches, and Chinese wartime mass media (Ma 2016). Chinese national folk dance emerged out of collaborations across class (between urban intellectuals and rural farmers, for example), as well as between artists from different ethnic communities within China. Some of the creators of early Chinese national folk dance were diasporic figures trained abroad (Wilcox 2019). As mentioned previously, early Chinese classical dance benefited from the involvement of Chinese theatre practitioners, as well as artists from Korea, and it also took inspiration from Soviet ballet, as well as classical dance forms from other parts of Asia. Over the years, experts in Chinese martial arts, archaeology, art history, and court ritual have further contributed to the development of Chinese classical dance.

In the case of ballet and modern dance, international collaboration has been central to these fields throughout their development. Russian émigrés first brought ballet to China in the 1920s, and over the years, numerous waves of international ballet instructors from different countries have taught and worked with Chinese ballet companies. China's earliest practitioners of modern dance were trained in Paris, Tokyo, and New York, and the establishment of China's first modern dance company in 1992 grew out of visits in the early 1980s by Asian American dancers and, beginning in 1987, cooperation with the American Dance Festival (Solomon and Solomon 1995). Dancers, choreographers, and dance scholars from all over the world frequently perform and teach in China, and their Chinese counterparts also regularly perform, work, teach, and study abroad. This commitment to movement across borders has increased over time, and it has been further enhanced by new data-sharing technologies that facilitate virtual communication even when physical travel is not possible.

## Conclusion

Like other countries and regions across Asia and the Pacific, China has managed both to import and localize diverse dance genres from abroad and to create new dance genres out of its own unique cultural materials and historical circumstances. Rather than remaining isolated from one another, practitioners of imported and locally developed dance styles have continuously crossed borders and broken boundaries between dance forms even as they have remained fervently committed to the promotion of stylistic and thematic diversity. This spirit of balancing collaboration with local specificity has allowed dancers in China to continuously forge new experiments and innovations without succumbing to any single universalizing or hegemonic national or global contemporary dance aesthetic.

One way that contemporary China has maintained this extensive diversity of concert dance practices is through the way concert dance itself is theorized and defined in Chinese dance discourse. In much of the English-speaking world, ‘concert dance’ is an exclusive term reserved for a relatively small range of dance genres and practices, often those that conform to aesthetics and norms defined by ballet and Euro-American modern, postmodern, and contemporary dance. University dance programmes, professional grant funding, and performance programming likewise tend to privilege this narrow range of forms and require practitioners of other genres to assimilate in order to be taken seriously (Chatterjea 2013).

In China, however, the term ‘dance art’ (*wudao yishu* 舞蹈艺术), also known as ‘art dance’ (*yishu wudao* 艺术舞蹈), does not discriminate by genre or aesthetic approach. As defined in the *Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Dance*, dance art is

a kind of integrated performing art form that takes the human body itself as creative subject, employing the principle methods of posture, shaping, movement, and technique in close integration with the artistic methods of music, literature (e.g., poetic sentiment, composition, narrative plot), costume, makeup, props, scenery, installations, lighting, and effects, also known as art dance.

(Wang et al. 2009, p. 568)<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the *Dictionary* specifies that

In terms of expressive traits, art dance can be divided into lyrical or expressive dance (dance of feelings), narrative dance (dance of plot), and theatrical dance (dance drama); in terms of expressive form, [art dance] can be divided into solo, duet, trio, group dance, suite, dance poem, song and dance, music and dance historical epic, etc. In terms of expressive style, [art dance] can be divided into Classical Dance (*gudianwu* 古典舞), Folk Dance (*minjianwu* 民间舞), Modern Dance (*xiandaiwu* 现代舞), etc.

(Wang et al. 2009, pp. 546–547)

From this definition, it is clear that China’s concept of dance art or art dance is broader and more inclusive than the English concept of concert dance. This inclusivity allows radically different dance genres and their diverse choreographic aesthetics and approaches to coexist within the world of professional dance schools and ensembles in China without one approach gaining dominance over the others. Rather than setting up concert dance as an exclusive category defined by one or two privileged models that others must conform to if they wish to gain access to resources and institutional space, China’s definition of dance art or art dance is an open invitation to introduce new forms and develop new possibilities. In other words, it is a definition that recognizes multiple approaches to choreographic innovation as equally valid.

Apart from the five genres discussed previously, there are a wide range of additional dance forms gaining prominence on China’s concert stages today, including hip hop or street dance, ballroom dance, jazz, and others. These same forms also have a strong and growing presence in China’s dance conservatories. Dance genres from other Asian countries, as well as from Africa and Latin America, in addition to folk dances from Europe, have also at times been taught and performed by China’s professional dance schools and ensembles (Wilcox 2017). As concert dance platforms around the world seek to become

more inclusive, China offers one model for how diversity can be achieved while cultivating the distinct flavours of one's own *terroir*.

## Notes

- 1 To view *Our Father's Generation*, visit [www.bilibili.com/video/BV1oc411h7BA?from=search](http://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1oc411h7BA?from=search)
- 2 To view students performing Dongbei Yangge, visit <https://v.qq.com/x/page/g0170emm79p.html>
- 3 To view students performing Shandong Jiaozhou Yangge, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nr1kak0ZQSg>
- 4 To view *Cup Bowl Chopsticks*, visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOx8IIg6Qkw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOx8IIg6Qkw)
- 5 To view these recent productions, visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVLt1W7Z6PQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVLt1W7Z6PQ) (*Confucius*), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYYA\\_k-fIJg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYYA_k-fIJg) (*Princess Zhaojun*) <https://youtu.be/xqFGRXliNeY> (*Li Bai*)
- 6 To view *Peony Pavilion*, visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzRaCdVPO4I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzRaCdVPO4I)
- 7 All translations from Chinese are mine.

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