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Introduction: Performance in Circulation—Exploring Activity, Artistry, and Itinerancy

Jonathan S. Marion and Emily Wilcox

Introduction

This project began shortly after the 2009 American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) annual meeting in Philadelphia, as the authors began to think about how our respective areas of ethnographic research and fieldwork would lend themselves to the theme of the 2010 annual meeting of the AAA—‘circulation.’ Jonathan Marion had been working for several years on the international dancesport circuit for competitive ballroom dancers, and Emily Wilcox had just returned to the United States having completed her doctoral dissertation fieldwork with dancers in state-sponsored performance troupes in the People’s Republic of China. Since the most obvious overlap in our research was the broader topic of ‘performance,’ we decided to convene a panel with the title “Performance in Circulation.”

Determining specifically what we meant by ‘performance in circulation’ was, of course, the more difficult task. We agreed that some anthropological attention had already been paid to the circulation of performance forms and related aesthetic practices, as well as to the types of hybrid and dynamic entities that emerge out of such circulations (e.g., Browning 1995, Imada 2004, Kendall 2009, Nijhawan 2009). At the 2009 AAA meeting, there was significant discussion of how transnational circulation of works and artists impacts the production and experience of performance. In one exemplary paper, Yolanda Van Ede (University of Amsterdam) showed how, in the cultural milieu of female flamenco dancers in Tokyo, the strong, passionate female image portrayed in flamenco dance takes on new meanings and forms when it is embodied by Japanese women in a cosmopolitan urban dance school. The questions of how circulation impacts the ‘liveness’ of performance (Auslander 1999), how it shapes the emergence of racialized, gendered, and national identities and subjectivities (Burt 1998, Desmond 1997, Goldstein 2007, Reed 2010, Shea Murphy 2007), and the very problem of universalism as an underlying ideology of ‘Western,’ ‘modern’ performance in global circulation (Kowal 2010, Foster 2009) all form important themes in the scholarship on performance in circulation more broadly and in the anthropology of dance specifically.

As we shared more of our own research interests, we realized that there was yet another very important dimension of performance in circulation that neither of us had considered in depth before: the significance of transnational and transcultural travel as an inherent part of the lifestyles of performers and the interesting consequences these movements have for performers’ lives. Wilcox reflected on the ways in which professional performers in China had, for centuries, been relegated to low social status in the Chinese popular imagination because of their lack of a ‘stable’ home and limited access to conventional family relationships and social roles. Marion spoke of the interesting connection between travel and prestige in the international dancesport community, in which the more global ‘appearances’ one could make, the more connected, successful, and important one seemed to become. It occurred to us that many types of performers, for reasons related to their specific occupational circumstances (such as their reliance on the physical body as their primary source of capital and skill or the need to be seen and to be known) are artist itinerants, and the activity of their circulation is a topic of some relevance to broader anthropological inquiry. Building on such realizations based on our own research, we began to organize a panel of speakers for the 2010 AAA meeting. The panel would examine what it means for dance performers when being ‘away’ (from home) is not the exception but the rule. In other words, the panel would explore circulation as a way of life in the context of performance, including how and why circulation is an important aspect of professional performers’ mundane lives and their professional identity and prestige, as well as an inherent part of the creative process for making performance. This led to the second part of our title: “Exploring Activity, Artistry, and Itinerancy.”

The articles in this issue have been developed out of the 2010 AAA conference papers. They explore what happens when practitioners’ work requires them to be on the go constantly, especially when professional value is inextricable from such circulation. Often labeled ‘vagabonds’ in various contexts, such performers and other itinerants have historically occupied the margins of society. Such floating groups have developed their own forms of social belonging, however, including unique ways of experiencing place and space, and special economies of relationship and value. While the papers in our session each concerned different forms of dancing, ultimately the issues in question have applicability for a far broader range of performers and live-performance artists as particular kinds of itinerants— pop stars, circus performers, musicians, stage actors, athletes, and politicians, to name just a few. As anthropologists
interested in human movement within cultural and social contexts, it is imperative that we consider not only the
circulation of human movement forms but also the reshaping of human lives that occurs as a result and makes such
circulation possible.

The five articles in this special issue present three of the four original papers and two commentaries by the
discussants for the panel, Brenda Farnell and Helena Wulff.¹

In the first article, "Dancers Doing Fieldwork: Socialist Aesthetics and Bodily Experience in the People's Republic of
China" Wilcox contests Katherine Verdery's notion of the "authoritative discourse" of socialist cultural production
(Verdery 1991: 429–31) by arguing that dancers in the People's Republic of China experienced a kind of open-ended
creative practice in state-sponsored fieldwork experiences that involved extensive travel and an existential process the
dancers call "entering deeply into life."

Eleni Bizas's paper "Navigating Trans-Atlantic Flows: New York's Senegalese Sabar Teachers, Pedagogies, and
Notions of Being" draws on Arjun Appadurai's notion of luxury goods as a "specific 'register' of consumption" (1986: 38)
to show how the inaccessibility of an actual Senegalese context in New York Sabar dance classrooms leads to the
commercialization of such a context. This impacts who teaches, the pedagogical techniques used, and even the
content of the dances.

In "Circulation as Destination: Considerations from the Translocal Culture of Competitive Ballroom Dance," Marion
examines travel as a means for making and marking membership in the translocal world of international dancesport, in
which visibility is key to success. He adapts William Skinner's regional systems-based 'principles of mobility' (1980,
1985) in order to analyze the mobility of dancers, whose skills and knowledge—the object of their economic exchange
—is contained in their physical bodies.

Although dealing with quite different topics, together these articles provide a coherent conversation on the theme of
'artistic itinerancy.' Each presents a highly original analysis based on deep ethnographic engagement, the result of
which is often surprising. Reading them, we discover that artist itinerants are not the people we thought they were—
people without homes. Rather, they are people for whom what it is to have, to leave, to seek, or to make a home takes
on a range of meanings, both unexpected and diverse.

The commentaries by discussants Brenda Farnell and Helena Wulff that follow offer a wider dialogue and critical
reflection on issues such as belonging and alienation, the problem of dynamic embodiment, agency in movement, and
'circulation' as a paradigmatic shift in anthropology. Further questions that these articles raise include the following: Are
performances expected to be constant even as their participants move from place to place, facing different social and
cultural contexts as well different levels of personal comfort and belonging? Do technologies involved in the creation of
performance spaces diminish differences of place, minimizing the effects of circulation even as they are often extreme?
If so, how? How do itinerant performers negotiate relations involving family, identity, and citizenship? Does the product
of a performer's labor—which is inseparable from the performer's own life and flesh—grow in demand (and therefore
'value') the more he or she circulates? What impact does this increased value have on the social or cultural status of
the performer in this same scenario? What emergent surplus value or possibilities of transcendence does the life of
circulation offer? How do practitioners manage the contradiction entailed in an itinerant lifestyle, since performers often
gain marketing or commercial appeal by 'hailing from somewhere,' while 'home' is likely to be or become somewhat
fictional or at least temporary?

We hope that these issues will continue to be explored across broader domains of anthropological activity. We note
that, while the February 2011 issue of Anthropology News focuses on "The Circulation of Knowledge and Culture" in
general terms, we believe the articles published here demonstrate that focusing on the circulation of actors and their
activities represents another stream of valuable anthropological inquiry—one that will only become more significant in
the face of performance artists' expanding mobility and circulation.

Notes:

¹ The fourth paper was "Choreographing Exile: Festival of Lies and the Democratic Republic of Congo" by Ariel
Osterweis Scott.

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Dancers Doing Fieldwork: Socialist Aesthetics and Bodily Experience in the People's Republic of China

Emily Wilcox

Introduction: "Entering Deeply into Life"

In the early 1960s, seventeen-year-old Ba Jingkan, then a professional ballet dancer in a major state-supported, provincial-level song-and-dance troupe in northeast China, was sent to the An Mountain Steel Factory, where he performed three weeks of manual labor as part of his professional training. "I worked alongside the workers in the steel factory," Ba remembers during an interview nearly fifty years later, "and I experienced the real details of steel life." Ba states that he learned from the workers in the factory how to heat pieces of steel in giant vats, to test steel for weakness using industrial machines and giant presses, and to mold steel using heavy tools. He recalls, "Steel work is extremely difficult, and it requires great physical strength. In the winter, it is very cold here; when you are standing facing the giant steel vat, you will feel that your face and chest are burning from the heat of the molten steel, but your back will face the harsh wind and it will feel frozen."

Unlike so many others in China during the 1960s and 70s who were sent to the countryside or to factories to undergo "reeducation through manual labor," Ba labored in the An Mountain Steel Factory not for political reeducation but rather to create better art. "To create a good dance performance, you have to learn from life," Ba explained. "After I had experienced the steelworkers' life with my own body, I performed much better in pieces in which we tried to depict real workers' lives. My performances were more informed by experience, and thus they were much more moving and artistically rich." Ba went to the steel factory so that he could, in his words, "experience life" (tiyan shenghuo 体验生活), in order to become a better artist. Through the experience of working in the steel factory, he argued, he became a better ballet dancer, and he provided better performances that made for higher-quality artistic works.

While the idea of working in a steel factory to improve one's dancing might seem unexpected for those familiar with American and Western European practices of ballet training and artistic creation, it was not at all peculiar for Chinese ballet dancers like Ba in the 1960s. The type of experience Ba describes in the steel factory was standard practice for dancers in China during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s (the height of the so-called "Mao era"), and I would argue that it continues, in theory at least, to be an important part of the creative process for dancers in China in the early twenty-first century. Through oral histories conducted in China in 2008–9 with 170 professional dancers ranging in age from eighteen to ninety-two and in birthplace from twenty provinces, I found that nearly every dancer I interviewed had participated in some form of dance-related fieldwork during his or her life.

These dancers, as I learned through the interviews, conducted fieldwork in a number of different settings and contexts. Many dancers, like Ba, had conducted field trips in industrial contexts where they labored alongside workers to experience physically the life of a particular factory environment. Others, especially dancers in military troupes, conducted field trips to military compounds, to "learn from the soldier's life so that they could better represent it on stage." For dancers who specialized in Chinese folk and ethnic dance, it was common for them to take field trips to rural areas or minority regions of China. During these field trips, which lasted anywhere from a few days to several months, sometimes including multiple trips over several decades, dancers often lived among local villagers, took part in local activities, and studied with folk performers.

While some dancers, like Ba, conducted fieldwork to do research for a specific new work (Ba went to the An Mountain Steel Factory in preparation for making a dance piece called The Steelworker), others went regularly as part of their ongoing dance training or as part of their performance schedule. Most state-sponsored dance troupes in China are required to provide performances for workers, soldiers, and peasants in factories, military zones, and rural areas as part of their annual "national responsibilities" (guojia renwu 国家任务). Thus, dancers often engage in fieldwork as part of their touring schedule. Between performances, for example, dancers might engage in the work of the people for whom they are performing, and, especially in the past, they often lived in the homes of the people for whom they provided touring performances. While most touring performance troupes today stay in hotels or other private housing facilities, it is not uncommon for them to arrange for special opportunities to "experience life" as part of their continued training and artistic development.
The idea that dancers should "experience life" by conducting fieldwork is part of a larger aesthetic philosophy of bodily experience (tiyan 体验) that dominated artistic life in the People's Republic of China (PRC), not only for dancers but for all artists and intellectuals working under the Maoist state motto of "entering deeply into life" (shenru shenghuo 深入生活). "Entering deeply into life," according to Maoist aesthetic theory, was the ultimate creative practice for artists and intellectuals seeking to produce innovative and dynamic artistic works in a socialist society. In his 1942 speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao Zedong advanced a new aesthetic ideology (Lee 2002) that called on artists and intellectuals to "learn from the worker, peasant, and soldier masses" by participating in "observation, experience, research" (Mao 1967). According to Mao's argument, artists and intellectuals who learned from the lives of the masses would have a more direct access to artistic creativity, because they would be drawing on the dynamic resources provided by life itself. Mao explains,

China's revolutionary writers and artists, to be writers and artists of promise, must on the long term, unconditionally, whole-heartedly go into the worker, peasant and soldier masses, into the fiery hot struggle, into the one and only greatest, most abundant original source: observation, experience, research, and analysis of every person, every class, every mass, every vivid and lively form of life and struggle, the primary material for all literature and all art, for only then is it possible to begin the process of creation. (Mao 1967, author's translation)

Here, Mao cites experience of life itself as a source of artistic creativity, and he argues that writers and artists, "to be writers and artists of promise," must experience, with their own bodies, the "fiery hot struggle" of the masses. As one instance of the Maoist aesthetic method of "entering deeply into life," fieldwork practiced by dancers in the People's Republic was, therefore, understood to be a fundamental part of creative experience, as well as an indispensable methodology for the making of good art.

In this article, I advance three arguments about dancers doing fieldwork in the People's Republic of China: First, I argue that 'fieldwork,' as it is practiced by dancers in China as part of the Maoist aesthetic ideology of "experiencing life," is characterized by sensorially rich physical experiences of real or imagined bodily displacement. Second, I argue that the practices of fieldwork used by dancers in the People's Republic after 1949 (largely in service of state-sponsored propaganda) developed out of politically subversive and genuinely democratic artistic movements of the 1930s and '40s, whose legacies persisted in the socialist era. Third, I argue that, although fieldwork after 1949 became an ideologically mandated practice with often strictly prescribed creative ends for those dancers who undertook it, it nevertheless remained a source of meaningful artistic practice and inspiration for those whose own lives it indelibly shaped.

Fieldwork and the Bodily Aesthetics of Displacement

In Ba's account of his three-week visit to the steel factory, bodily experience is a constant theme. "When you are standing facing the giant steel vat, you will feel that your face and chest are burning from the heat of the molten steel, but your back will face the harsh wind and it will feel frozen," Ba states. It is this very physical sense of the lived experience of factory labor that Ba seems to imply when he speaks of learning "the real details of steel life." During the interview, when I asked him to explain what he meant by "experiencing life" (tiyan shenghuo 体验生活), he answered, "There is a famous saying among steelworkers: 'Fire roasts the front while wind blows the back.' After I experienced steel life, I knew what this meant." For Ba, then, to experience life meant to become familiar, on a visceral level, with the everyday experiences of a kind of life that was different from his own, but that nevertheless constituted the everyday for those who lived it.

When I asked Ba how such experience helped contribute to his dancing, he said that learning directly from steel life had helped him to develop a deeper and more realistic set of bodily habits and repertoires proper to steelworkers, which he drew on when he danced the role of the steelworker on stage. "There is this movement, for example, that steelworkers do with their hands and their face when they pull a piece of steel out of the giant vat." Ba paused and repeated the shielding gesture. "For us, it was new at first, but, after a while, we started to do this movement too; it was just a natural part of the work." He continued, "For us, it was new at first, but, after a while, we started to do this movement too; it was just a natural part of the work."

Learning from steel life, for Ba, meant acquiring the bodily knowledge of a steelworker, through the process of physically taking part in the steelworkers' daily activities, on what Ba called "the front lines" (di yi xian 第一线). By working alongside the steelworker, Ba learned the important bodily practices that made his dance piece thrilling to watch. "If you had never experienced steel life, you probably wouldn't know to do this movement," he states, as he

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became natural to us."

For Ba, the face-shielding movement had become part of a bodily repertoire of steel life, and when he performed the steelworker in the dance piece *The Steelworker*, he drew on this bodily repertoire for aesthetic inspiration. "We knew instinctively how the steelworker would respond in certain situations, so, when we choreographed the piece, we were able to include all of these real details; they came naturally to us because we experienced them with our own bodies [zishen tiyan]." This personal bodily knowledge—what Ba calls "experience with one's own body"—becomes an essential part of the artistic success of the dance work and especially of the dancers' performances. Ba states, "Because we had experienced it with our own bodies, so the performances were amazing!"

Ba was just one out of a long list of Chinese dancers I knew who saw bodily knowledge gained from firsthand experiences of fieldwork as an essential component of the training and practice required of a professional dancer. Bodily experience and bodily knowledge were accorded very high importance in China during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s because of their connection to an important idea in Maoist ideology known as "practice" (shijian 实践). As scholars Judith Farquhar (1994) and Yinghong Cheng (2009) have shown, a direct link was often made during this time between bodily experience or "practice" on the one hand and professional skill or correct ideological consciousness on the other. In her writing on Chinese traditional medicine in the People's Republic, for example, Farquhar argues that, for medical practitioners, experience or "practice" (shiyan), rather than abstract truth, became the ultimate site of medical knowledge and skill.

According to Cheng, the physical component of practice was essential to the allegedly transformative capacities that practice was accorded in Maoist ideology. It was due to the supposedly transformative effects of the bodily practice of physical labor, for example, that labor was often prescribed to individuals of so-called bourgeois-class backgrounds in China during the Mao years to instill in them a revolutionary ideology. Cheng writes,

> It was possible that people of working-class origin could be contaminated by bourgeois ideas and habits, and conversely, people with a bourgeois or petit bourgeois background could be rehabilitated through education, often combined with heavy physical labor. Physical labor, which was regarded as characteristic of a lifestyle belonging solely to workers and peasants, would have a mystical quality in redeeming people of nonproletariat origin. (Cheng 2009: 57)

Thus, labor, Cheng argues, was seen as capable of transforming individual mentalities, just as it was capable of instilling particular professional skills.

What Cheng calls the "mystical quality" attributed to physical labor in Maoist ideology and its connection to the lives of workers and peasants can be seen in the quotation from Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an speech cited above. Mao encourages artists and writers to enter "into the fiery hot struggle," which he calls the "the one and only greatest, most abundant original source." His speech is filled with references to practical experience and even to fieldwork specifically. For example, he calls on writers and artists to practice "observation, experience, research, and analysis of every person, every class, every mass, every vivid and lively form of life and struggle," and he calls this experience "the primary material for all literature and all art." This way of describing the artistic process places enormous emphasis on practical experience and direct interaction with the struggles and details of everyday life, and it sees these practices as an integral part of artistic creation.

In their groundbreaking accounts of dance and theater work in China in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, numerous historians and scholars have cited the use of field research by Chinese actors, dancers, and directors as an important artistic practice in Chinese performance in the PRC. Lois Wheeler Snow (1972) quotes interviews in which ballet dancers from the Cultural Revolution era revolutionary ballets *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl* reflect on their experiences of living and working with peasants and workers to improve their performances. "'Working with the peasants is not only good for our own thinking, it's good for the characters we play,'" Snow quotes the dancer who played Xi'er in *The White-Haired Girl*. "'For example, in the first scene when father brings back the red string as a gift . . . [at first] I couldn't express Hsi-erh's [Xi'er's] happiness at receiving this little piece of thread as a gift. Then we went to the countryside . . . [and] I began to understand that piece of string'" (p. 205). In their discussions of Yangge dance in the 1950s, Wang Kefen (1985) and Hung Chang-tai (2011) show that rural folk-dance forms were incorporated into national parades and performances. Likewise, in their accounts of theater during the first three decades of the People's Republic, Colin Mackerras (1975), William Dolby (1976), and Xiaomei Chen (2002) all show that engagement with rural and factory life was an important part of theater life at this time.

What I seek to emphasize here is the importance of 'displacement' as the primary bodily experience in fieldwork conducted by Chinese dancers in China after the establishment of the People's Republic. By 'displacement,' I mean the
experience—real or imagined—of physical engagement with an environment, behavior, or way of life other than one's own. Dancers in China since the 1950s are constantly on the road, literally or figuratively, due to professional, ideological, and aesthetic expectations that shape their work environments. Through processes of displacement, they generate bodily experience and knowledge that serves as the basis for their creative work as artists and performers.

Dancers in China engage largely in three types of displacement, each of which could be called a type of fieldwork. First, to create dance works that, in the terms of Chinese socialist realism, "reflect the lives of the worker, peasant, and soldier masses," dancers visit places such as factories, villages, and military barracks, often participating for a short time in a specific type of physical labor that is meant to encapsulate that particular way of life. Ba's experience in the steel factory is an example of this type of displacement or fieldwork. He visited the steel factory for the specific purpose of physically engaging in the lives of people there, so that he could draw on this experience as a source of his later choreography and performance.

A second type of displacement occurred when dancers, as members of traveling performance troupes with required "national responsibilities," toured around the country serving "the masses" by offering performances in workplaces, rural areas, and military compounds. As mentioned above, it was common, especially before the 1990s, for performers to board in the homes of local families as they toured, an arrangement that produced extensive opportunities, on numerous levels, for intimate engagement with local life. To reach the people, so that one may serve them, troupes were required to move themselves, often along with their performance gear, from one factory, village, or barrack to the next, performing for workers, peasants, and soldiers all over the country. In recent years, most troupes own a so-called performance car—a theater on wheels. When the car, which is a large van, arrives on location, the ceiling and walls fold down to produce a stage. The performers jump out of the car with their costumes and gear ready to offer service. Before the arrival of performance cars, troupes traveled most often by train, cart, and foot.

Finally, dancers participate in displacement virtually through imagined experiences in classrooms and performance spaces. When teaching a dance movement, for example, I have often witnessed choreographers and teachers ask students to look out in the studio or close their eyes and imagine themselves in another place. In these moments, dancers are called upon to access the experiential content of fieldwork produced through previous experience of physical displacement and to "relive" it as part of the creative process for making dance. When learning Mongolian dances, for example, in which the embodied experience of the grassland is the central creative source, my teacher often exhorted us to "look out into the distance and see where the sky meets the grass." Through sensory experience produced by imagination, dancers conjure up reality as a product of their own bodily practice of dance. They "see" green grass or mountains surrounding them; they "feel" the heat of a steel furnace blasting onto their chests; they are "moved by" the rhythm of horses hoofs on the earth.

The combination of these three practices of displacement makes up the total creative process of fieldwork as practiced by dancers in China. I reflect more on the details of these different experiences, as well as the way they developed and change over time, in the sections below. I show how these three experiences, together, form a type of body-centered, democratic socialist aesthetic practice that developed in China beginning before the establishment of the People's Republic and then became widely practiced during the Mao era (1950s–1970s). In the post-Mao period of economic reform and ideological transition, many dancers still practice fieldwork. However, as I show below, many lament what they see as its inevitable decline, in a period when the personally significant and artistically inspiring experiences once made possible by displacement are now increasingly being replaced by substitute forms of meaning production, whether technological or economic. In their laments, it is possible to see more broadly a mourning of the slow disappearance of the centrality of the body as a primary site of aesthetic practice, experience, and creativity.

"Caifeng," "New Dance," and Fieldwork as Avant-Garde Legacy

In the 1930s and '40s, artists and writers in China practiced fieldwork as part of a new drama movement that took place on the "front lines," both literally and metaphorically. Immediately following the Marco Polo Bridge incident in 1937 (which set off full-scale war between China and Japan), the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists formed, and it began organizing literary activities that sent artists and writers to the battlefront. "[The association] organized writers into 'battlefront visiting teams', who made trips to military defense positions, fraternized with the troops, and wrote emotion-tinged reports" (Lee 2002: 241). Apart from literary reporting, the association also set up theatrical troupes in large numbers, whose goal was to use theater as a means of social agitation and education. "[I]nitially [there were] five propaganda teams (each consisting of sixteen members) and ten dramatic troupes (with thirty members each)." Soon after, spontaneous popular troupes also emerged. "Popular dramatic troupes sprang up with such speed that by 1939, according to one account, there were 130,000 people engaged in dramatic performances" (ibid., 242).
According to Lee's analysis, which is consistent with historical accounts by Dolby (1976), Mackerass (1975), and Wang (1999), the activities of the anti-Japanese war efforts changed Chinese literary and theatrical production from a primarily urban and elite phenomenon to one fundamentally oriented toward the masses. "Joining in the nationwide movement to resist aggression," Lee writes, "the urban writers forsook their sheltered existence, whether willingly or not, and reached out to their compatriots in the countryside and on the battlefront. Two reigning slogans indicated the mood of patriotic commitment: 'Literature must go to the countryside! Literature must join the army!'" (2002: 242). Writers and dramatists such as Cao Yu and Lao She who once sought out more limited avenues of social activism through progressive theater performances in Shanghai and Beijing now turned to the countryside and the front for a wider stage for social impact. To appeal to a wider audience, an increasing number of dramatic pieces made use of regional folk performance forms, such as yangge, indigenous theater, and folk songs. Also, these works increasingly took poor people as their subjects and heroes (Dolby 1976).

Dancers were an important part of this war-era activist movement in Chinese literature and theater, and they too, like writers and dramatists, took their work to the battlefront and the countryside. In 1937, Wu Xiaobang (1906–95), leader of China's "New Dance" movement, left his newly established modern-dance studio in Shanghai to join the traveling Shanghai National Salvation Performance Team. In his memoir, Wu writes of this era, "It wasn't until after August 13, 1937, when I was baptized into the flames of the anti-Japanese war, that I finally threw out that immature 'beautiful dream' of my student years. I faced into the tempest of revolutionary struggle, stepped into the wide road of realist dance, and really leapt into the great door of life" (Wu 1982: 30; translation by author). It was with this artistic mission that Wu Xiaobang created, during his time on the road with the Shanghai National Salvation Performance Team in 1937–38, more than fifty dance works, which later became the foundation for revolutionary dance during the PRC era. During this period, Wu traveled across central and south China, performing, teaching, and creating new works aimed at inspiring anti-imperialist struggle and reflecting the realities he witnessed and experienced. In Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province, Wu created the Exile Trilogy, based on the experiences of refugees he met there who had fled from northeast China. In Nanchang, Wu organized a battle service team to perform a New Year show for the soldiers, which included his famous work March of the Volunteers, a piece set to the music that later became the national anthem of the People's Republic of China (ibid., 30–34).

Apart from the experiential research into the lives of soldiers, refugees, and the poor that they conducted as part of the battlefront performance teams, Wu Xiaobang and other early Chinese dance pioneers in the 1930s and '40s also engaged in another type of fieldwork that was directed specifically at rural peasants and ethnic minorities. Known as "caifeng" (采风), literally "to gather customs," this second type of fieldwork usually entailed short visits to live and study among minority peoples or rural peasants to learn their folk customs and ways of life. Luo Xiongyan (2006), one of China's foremost experts on the making of Chinese folk and ethnic dance and a former student of Wu Xiaobang, writes, "Beginning in the 1930s, the older generation of dance artists entered the stockaded villages to observe and study folk dances, and, at the same time, they choreographed and created fresh new dance forms" (Luo 2006: 5). Some of the most important of these new forms, Luo argues, were those based on the local dances of ethnic minorities and rural areas, which were discovered and explored through the caifeng research process.

Fieldwork conducted among ethnic minorities was a common part of dance research and creation in the late 1940s, just after the end of the anti-Japanese war. Luo recounts a field expedition to Inner Mongolia in 1946 led by Wu Xiaobang, the goal of which, Luo states, was to "research the basic rhythms of the folk dances of the Mongolian ethnicity" (Luo 2006: 5). Wu writes of this expedition in his memoir:

In mid-June [1946], I went with six students from my dance class to join the Inner Mongolia Cultural Work Troupe down to the grassland for two months. We moved into an Inner Mongolian grassland castle, welcomed by the troupe's ethnic brother comrades. Each morning, I led more than thirty members of the troupe who liked dancing in a practice of basic dance training out on the muddy ground. Inner Mongolian folk-dance activities are very common, and the members of the troupe placed a lot of importance on dance work. The young male and female troupe members quickly gained an understanding of the basic principles of modern-dance art. Based on movements taken from the life of the Mongolian people, adding my own selection, refinement, and combinations, I created and rehearsed two new dance pieces for them: Mongolian Dance and Inner Mongolia People's Trilogy. (Wu 1982: 77–78; translation by author)

In Wu's description, we see the basic model of much caifeng work as it was carried out by dancers in China beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the early twenty-first century. The dancer and his or her team travel to the minority or rural region, spend a period of time living with the people there, and then create a dance work for performance that utilizes movements, rhythms, and content drawn from the lives of the people as experienced through the fieldwork process.
Dai Ailian (1916–2006) and Sheng Jie (b. 1917), two other important pioneers of China's New Dance movement, also organized and participated in fieldwork with rural and minority groups. In the late 1940s, around the same time that Wu was conducting his fieldwork in Inner Mongolia, Dai Ailian did similar work with other ethnic minority groups. "As a foreign-born returning Chinese," Luo writes, Dai "overcame many inconveniences of language and lifestyle to enter into the minority regions to caifeng and study dance. In the process of studying and researching the local folk dance, she was deeply moved by the sincerity and humility of the local cultures, and she recognized in their folk dances a tenacious vitality" (Luo 2006: 5). Luo lists a series of caifeng trips led by Sheng Jie in collaboration with Wu Xiaobang and the Dance Cadre Training Class offered at the Central Drama Academy in 1951. Luo writes, "A group of students, under Sheng Jie's leadership, went to Anhui and the three provinces of northeast China to study the huagudeng, stilts, and errenzhuan [folk performance styles] with local artists, and to study, arrange, and develop their experience of Dongbei yangge" (ibid., 6).

Comparative studies of art and culture under state socialism see socialist art as a highly controlled means of enacting symbolic and discursive political power for ruling regimes, with little generative or creative possibilities beyond the direct service of ideology. Katherine Verdery, for example, argues that, under state socialism, cultural production acts as a "symbolic-ideological mode of control," producing a restrictive kind of "authoritative discourse" (1991: 429–31). "Communist rule seeks to make all language into authoritative discourse," Verdery writes, "to reduce the meanings of words, to straightjacket them into singular intentions, and to preclude any use of language that permits multiple meanings" (ibid., 430). Miklós Haraszti (1989) too describes art and cultural production under state socialism as narrowly in service of politics, even to such an extent that professional standards and political standards become indistinguishable in socialist regimes. "Art can be taught in schools only if professional judgement and political loyalty are not separated," Haraszti writes, describing his view of the situation in socialist Hungary (1989: 137). Similar assessments, in varying degrees of severity, can be found in the work of Susan Buck-Morss (2002), in her discussion of artists and architects under Stalin in the Soviet Union, Julia Andrews (1994) on painters in the People's Republic of China, and others (see Groyes 2008).

There can be no doubt that, in contexts of state socialism, compared historically and transnationally, art has been used as a direct tool of political power and that, for this reason, it has been largely subject to ideological control. Nevertheless, as this paper argues, it can also be seen that the socialist project of using art for ideological ends in some cases also provided opportunities for new and generative forms of creative practice and artistic expression. Wu Xiaobang's early practices of creating dance works based on experiences in traveling, living, and working on the road with refugees, soldiers, and performance troupes located in remote areas continued into China's socialist era. Under the financial and political support of the Chinese Communist Party, song-and-dance troupes around the country sent dancers like Ba Jingkan to conduct fieldwork as part of their training and careers as dancers. In turn, these dancers often underwent significant, and sometimes even life-changing, personal experiences while they were conducting fieldwork. These experiences, even fifty years after they occured, are so vivid and meaningful to the dancers that they recount them with great relish and enthusiasm, reporting that the experiences contributed greatly to their artistic development and creative expression.

For dancers in socialist China, the socialist ideological imperative to "experience life" and to "learn from the worker, peasant, and soldier masses" helped bring about a new creative practice for dancers, namely, fieldwork. Fieldwork was an opportunity for dancers to experience environments and ways of life that were very different from their own, and in this process, they often found new sources of artistic productivity. As we see in the history of fieldwork practice by dancers before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, fieldwork emerged through the work of wartime dance pioneers such as Wu Xiaobang, Sheng Jie, and Dai Ailian. In the context of the war period, when battlefront visiting teams and propaganda troupes performed for workers, peasants, and even soldiers at the front, the use of fieldwork to produce realistic performance was extremely progressive and experimental. Thus, fieldwork in their era was a tool of the artistic avant-garde. Although the political situation of these dancers changed after 1949—they moved from a politically subversive role to a position of hegemonic power—many of the creative practices remained. When dancers in China practiced fieldwork after 1949, they often learned to do so under the direct mentorship of the early pioneers; thus, despite being "called upon" to do such work by the state as a ruling entity, the spirit with which they were partaking in these activities often maintained much of the sense of discovery, the creativity, and the democratizing ideals that were present during the development of these practices in an earlier era.

Apart from constraining artistic production, the close relationship between art and politics under socialist regimes also served to stimulate the emergence of new artistic forms and creative practice. Because socialist regimes have often been the historical outgrowth of subversive political movements, the artistic traditions that become established as hegemonic under socialism often have the very peculiar characteristic of being born out of the extreme avant-garde. As Paperno and Grossman (1994) show in their discussion of early twentieth-century Russian modernism, the utopian tendencies of socialist realism in high Stalinist art emerged out of experimental movements of Russian avant-gardes. In
the context of prerevolutionary Russia, as with early Chinese political dance, works were not only highly innovative but also politically subversive and progressive. When the revolution was successful in Russia, as Paperno and Grossman show, the vanguard did not disappear; rather, the artists retained many of their stylistic conventions and creative practices, even as they transformed into the new ruling regime. While Buck-Morss (2002) argues that the essentially open-ended and experimental nature of Russian avant-garde painting and architecture was lost during Stalin's rule, the case with dance in China seems to follow more the argument that Paperno and Grossman promote—namely, that some avant-garde practices continued to exist, though subject to different ideological controls, in the socialist regime. What Verdery calls the "straightjacketing" cultural production under state socialism, therefore, must be understood as a process that was balanced against the often progressivist and experimental artistic practices that were being produced and carried out within, beside, and often in debt to the politics of the ruling regime.

Being "Moved": The Impact of the Body in Motion

When I met Qian Dongfan, he was a forty-six-year-old choreographer working for the Yunnan Provincial Song and Dance Troupe, a state-sponsored performance company located in southwest China. Qian was born in the early 1960s, and he joined the troupe as a dancer in the 1980s. Throughout his work as a dancer and later as a choreographer, Qian conducted extensive fieldwork. Because of the large populations of ethnic minority groups living in Yunnan Province and the troupe's focus on ethnic music and dance performance, most of Qian's fieldwork took place among ethnic-minority groups living in remote mountain villages. In its practical conditions and the nature of the activities in which he participated, Qian's experience was quite different from Ba's fieldwork in the steel factory. Nevertheless, both Qian and Ba's fieldwork experiences shared two similar aspects: first, both involved a special type of bodily engagement produced through physical displacement; and second, both Qian and Ba maintained insistently that the bodily process of fieldwork was an essential part of their creative process for making good dances.

Qian sees field experience as the most important source of creative energy and inspiration for making dance works, and he argues that they cannot be replaced by simulated travel using means such as visual images, the Internet, or even film. "You know those beautiful sword dance movements in the piece I was just talking about?" Qian asks during an interview in 2009, "Well, those were all things the choreographers discovered when they went to caifeng in the countryside. Those were actually gathered during fieldwork (caifeng cai de). Now many people just gather a few images or things from the Internet and make a piece, but it's not the same."

Qian feels that the experience of being in a place and experiencing what he calls the "rhythms of life" of that place is essential to the dancer's creative process. The unfolding of bodily experience, in which one takes in and processes multiple stimuli through all the senses through a process of time, is the core of what fieldwork is for Qian. He explains:

When you sit with the old yiren (local folk artist) and he's had a few drinks and smoked a few cigarettes, he starts singing the mountain songs. Wow, those melodies! Really, they are just too beautiful. You know, lullabies, songs about daughters going off to be married, funeral songs. I've gathered all of these. There are songs to the seeds in the dirt to make them grow. Every place has songs they sing not for people but for the earth to hear, you know? They sing to celebrate the soul of the rice seedling in the earth. The fire and the water all have spirits too, and they sing songs to them. [He sings,] "I sing that my harvest will be even better next year." You know, these kinds of songs. They are so far from anything you've heard before. And then there are the stories they tell around the firepits, and . . .

As Qian speaks, his demeanor becomes increasingly excited. Already energetic by nature, Qian reaches an almost ecstatic pitch when he recounts the details of his fieldwork experiences, clearly aroused by the passionate memories they recall for him. He continues:

You go there, and you see the people dancing in the big square. You see them dancing on designs on the ground. They dance until the dust from the ground comes up around them. The shoulders are uncovered and black. And they're drinking alcohol. Two glasses of alcohol, then 'dong! dong!'—just like American Indians, you know? And, wow, there is so much feeling. That's when you really experience the marrow and essence; it's not that kind of on-the-surface thing anymore. You know, "I learned two steps, and that, sort of jin'r (劲儿), physical energy or spirit) finally come out. Creative inspiration comes from this kind of experience. You teach your dancers, and you have to communicate this experience to them. And when they perform, they have to dance that kind of passion. That's what moves the audience to say, "Yes, this is a real folk dance."
According to Qian, folk or ethnic dance that is created without the experiential foundation of fieldwork lacks deep artistic content, or what he calls the "marrow and essence." Only with this deep content, Qian argues, can the dance "move" people, because the dancers themselves are moved. Finally, Qian explains that this feeling of "being moved," which he sees as critical to true creativity and expression, is the direct result of the experience of fieldwork:

It's about doing real fieldwork. You go to the folk or ethnic areas, sit with the people, talk with them, ask about their lives—just like you are asking me right now. You really ask them questions. And when they are dancing, tossing their heads, you toss your head together with them. You become a part of it yourself, you feel the excitement yourself, and that's when the inspiration gets stirred up and comes out. What I feel is missing in many works now is this element of experience (tiyan).

Like Ba, Qian highlights tiyan, or bodily experience, as the most important feature that connects fieldwork to artistic practice. Through fieldwork, Qian argues, the dancer becomes physically engaged in the activities of a particular kind of life, arriving at a rich and multisensory bodily experience (tiyan). As Qian suggests, when he compares his experience talking with folk performers to my experience interviewing him, the fieldwork that dancers conduct is similar to anthropological fieldwork. Like anthropological fieldwork, Qian argues, in dance fieldwork it is the actual physical participation in daily life—"you become a part of it yourself"—that becomes a source for artistic inspiration and creativity. "That's when the inspiration gets stirred up and comes out," he concludes.

What to me offers the most compelling argument for seeing fieldwork as a personally significant and artistically productive form of creative practice for dancers in China (something whose richness is not fully explained by the "straightjacket" metaphor) is the sense of loss dancers express when they discuss the slow disappearance of fieldwork in the reform era. With the increasing commercialization of China's dance industry, many of the dancers I became friends with and interviewed lamented the fact that economic pressures now make it difficult to find the time and energy to conduct serious fieldwork. Qian, for example, reports that many choreographers now use videos from the Internet as an alternative to conducting fieldwork. He worries that the works produced through these new methods lack an important experiential component. In these statements, the sentiments of which I found scattered throughout my interviews, spoken by dancers of all ages and experiences, is a tragic sense of the loss for a kind of artistic practice that, though valued in the past, is now increasingly less valued. In their view, as the market economy comes to replace the socialist state as arbiter of value in artistic practice, the bodily experience of fieldwork is something lost in the exchange.

Creative process for dancers has changed a great deal in China during the thirty years since the beginning of market reforms in 1978. Recording technology and the easy exchange of video makes possible the replacement of incorporating practices with inscribing practices. Pressure to compete on an entertainment market now pushes song-and-dance troupes to spend money on advertising, design, stage technology, costumes, and other aspects of what are referred to as "packaging" (baozhuang 包装), since this is considered essential for attracting audiences and sponsors. Packaging expenditures divert funding that otherwise might support fieldwork, and a commercial category known as "taste quality" (pinzhi 品质) becomes the sole determinant of artistic value. To increase the "taste quality" of a work, troupes often find it necessary to hire nationally famous directors and performers to work on their pieces, rather than hiring local artists, since name recognition draws attention from the market. The number of such famous individuals is by nature limited, thus the famous few find themselves perennially stretched thin, often creating multiple works simultaneously and flying back and forth from one troupe to another, squeezing the maximum of artistic potential out of increasingly limited aesthetic experience. While this produces a new kind of displacement, it involves, according to dancers, increasingly less "entering into life." 3

Critics of cultural production under state socialism argue that the need to produce ideological consistency restricted the creativity of state artists and that this creativity is being rescued by reform-era marketization. Michael Keane (2004), for example, in a recent article on "creative industries" in China, argues that one can be optimistic about increased creativity in China after the 1990s only because the socialist tradition of the "engineering of culture" is disappearing. Keane writes, "Independent production is on the increase, along with greater ease of production due to digital technology. The producer/creator is no longer first and foremost defined as a cultural worker; she or he can also be an entrepreneur, a cultural intermediary and a person employed by non-state (i.e. international) companies" (2004: 272). While the increased commercialization of China's dance industry has provided new avenues of work and artistic practice for dancers, it has also produced a fundamental revaluing of dance work in which "experiencing life" and "learning from the masses" are less important than they once were. Because of the great importance that was placed on bodily experience and fieldwork throughout the early decades of socialist dance making in China, many dancers still personally value such experience as the most "moving." For these dancers, the commercialization of dance and the retreat of the state from the cultural realm have brought about a decline, rather than an increase, in those opportunities.
Conclusion: No Substitutes for Experience

In his now-classic text on the meaning of bodily experience, *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton (1989) suggests that there is no substitute for physical presence when it comes to producing knowledge, memory, and meaning through bodily practice. Bodily memory is central to the socialist aesthetics of making dances in twentieth-century China because the body, through its participation in fieldwork, serves as the receptor and repository of "life," the ultimate source of artistic creation. Life, according to Mao, was "the one and only greatest, most abundant original source" for artistic creation. Thus, to be an artist in socialist China, one needed to access life. For dancers, accessing life meant using their bodies to "gather customs" (*caifeng*), through processes of bodily experience (*tiyan*), which involved fieldwork. Dancers in socialist China saw what Connerton calls "incorporating practices" as the core of their creative process. Unlike "inscribing practices," which by definition are capable of transmitting information in the absence of the living sender, incorporating practices exist only through sensorial contact between living bodies. Dancers accumulated artistic material through incorporating practices of physical and experiential displacement, and they came to value these incorporating practices of displacement as a privileged source of creativity and inspiration in their own lives and in their dance work.

With the political ascendance of the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1940s, former revolutionaries were transformed into government functionaries. In the realm of performance, this meant that practitioners of avant-garde, experimental, and even subversive theater and dance became the heads of new state-sponsored institutions for performance training and production. Individuals like Wu Xiaobang, Sheng Jie, and Dai Ailian, who had pioneered the practice of fieldwork in their creation of patriotic and stirring dance works during the pre-1949 war era, turned their efforts to the making of new schools and dance-research groups, through which they spread their values and methods to a younger generation. Starting in the 1950s, and continuing to a large extent to the present, dancers all over China have followed these early dance pioneers, embarking on journeys to the countryside, to learn the "dances of the people" and to experience what they call "entering deeply into life." While their work is carefully monitored by the state and it largely serves a mandated set of narrow ideologically driven goals, the fieldwork practiced by dancers throughout the period of socialist state sponsorship maintained much of its original artistic significance for its participants.

Because of the highly physical aspect of fieldwork—the fact that it entails corporeal displacement and its associated emotional and physical consequences—dancers have often found themselves "moved" (both literally and figuratively) by their experiences during fieldwork trips. As a bodily practice, regardless of whether it is eventually leveraged to produce "authoritative discourses" in support of the ruling regime, *caifeng* as it is practiced by dancers in the People's Republic of China is itself a highly creative artistic practice. When they find themselves in unfamiliar locales, living and moving to the different "local rhythms" of life, dancers find that the Maoist slogan "entering deeply into life" has personal meaning and resonance. This experience often becomes the inspiration for a dancer's or choreographer's subsequent artistic works. The corporeal experience of fieldwork, although it is both state sponsored and used in the service of promoting authoritative discourses directed by state policy, nevertheless also produces what dancers themselves describe as meaningful artistic experiences, and they lead to innovation in the production of new stylistic practices and aesthetic conventions.

Notes:

1 Based on an interview conducted with the author in Shenyang, China, in January 2009. Transcribed and translated by the author.

2 In 1949, with the founding of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, China entered into a particular type of social, political, and economic order that is often known as "state socialism." As scholars of comparative post-cold-war studies and the anthropology of postsocialism have shown, socialist societies around the world share important characteristics that can be studied comparatively. See Chari and Verdery (2009), Hann et al. (2002), and Verdery (1996).

3 The observations noted above are based on my own research, further details of which can be found in my dissertation "Tempering Virtue: Dance and the Transformation of Cultural Work in the People's Republic of China, 1949–2009." For an overview of the commercialization of performance in China during the reform era, see Kraus (2004).
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