

Writing “Chinese Dance” in the West

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Across is my twenty-minute experimental solo concert premiered as a livestream in May 2020 as part of the University of Michigan Dance Department’s annual performance. This piece integrates movement, spoken text, and props marked as culturally Chinese to undo stereotypical expectations about a Chinese woman performing “Chinese dance.” For the full video, visit the online journal at <https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/conversations/>.

This essay questions the necessity of theoretically defining “Chinese dance” in Anglophone academia. Drawing from my personal experience as an outsider-insider and artist-scholar between the United States and China, I scrutinize the problematics of theorizing dance in China through established and seemingly self-evident approaches. On many occasions, Chinese dance culture has been twisted in dance studies in the West to make it fully knowable and accessible. Decolonizing dance studies requires a disruption to dominant practices in Anglophone scholarship

that fixate on revolutionary and liberal lenses to approach Chinese dance culture. The body of literature produced by dance scholars in China represents a crucial voice of anti-colonial dance research and contributes to a globally inclusive conversation about “Chinese dance.”

“Defending” China

Dominant American ideologies have fixed China as a solely revolutionary, communist land where people have no freedom. As a Chinese person who lives in the United States, criticizing dominant American ideologies about China often invites accusations that I lack critical thinking skills. Since revolutionary nationalism and liberalism have become the primary lenses in the West for understanding contemporary China, the “easiest” way for me to assimilate is to think and talk by following American mainstream political narratives. Welcome, recognition, and sympathy will immediately come forth when one attacks their home country for its lack of democracy and freedom. To be perceived as exercising critical thinking, I am required to criticize the nationalist politics of China and not allowed to question how China is demonized in the United States. Otherwise, I am perceived as being unable to think independently because of too much previous “brain training” by the communist party. In front of me are two options: assimilation or degradation. In this either/or situation, my contestation of one country’s politics directly equates to advocacy in favor of the other country. Questioning mainstream American ideologies is interpreted as supporting Chinese socialist norms and defending China, as if there is no in-between space for inspection, inquiry, and debate.

As the first dancer from the People’s Republic of China to receive a PhD in the United States, I am an outsider-insider. I stand in-between the United States and China and unpack both countries’ prejudicial narratives about each other to improve cross-cultural understandings. To criticize the demonization of China in the United States does not equate to extolling China. However, my international identity as a native Chinese woman makes it difficult for my American peers to

understand this and to believe me. To be clear, I refuse assimilation into an American-centric mode of thinking, in which China *needs* to be revolutionary and illiberal so that this cultural other becomes fully knowable. Recent scholarly shifts in Chinese studies have criticized the limits of revolutionary nationalism, liberalism, and other grand perspectives in shaping a China in theory only meaningful to the West. In Chinese studies, the framework of revolutionary nationalism refers to scrutinizing China's early socialist period (the 1940s–1960s) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), instead of the post-Mao Reform Era (1978–the present). Through the concept of "postsocialism," Arif Dirlik has theorized how Reform Era China brought capitalism into its morphing socialist structure in order to break away from its revolutionary past. "Postsocialism" highlights China's socio-historical transition toward a depoliticized and economy-driven development model in the Reform Era. To acknowledge a constantly changing China refutes an established theoretical approach that tends to homogenize the country's transforming ideological infrastructures into a unified revolutionary nationalism (Dirlik 1989, 374). In addition, as Hentyle Yapp has argued, the demand to continue reading China as illiberal stems from Western anxiety confronting China's rise. Under this anxiety, some scholars in the West want to believe that China is illiberal so that they can gain a sense of security. In this view, China, although rising, remains under control within Western epistemological frameworks (Yapp 2021, 20). Daniel Vukovich emphasizes a similar idea that "Part of 'our' problems in coming to terms with the rise of China is the prison house of liberalism: it is hard to read contemporary China without falling back into familiar histories and conceptual shibboleths about what freedom, individuality, human rights, and so on are" (Vukovich 2019, 10). This shift in Chinese studies serves as an effective tool to decolonize dance studies. I refuse to theorize dance in China through conventional revolutionary and liberal lenses in order to make myself celebrated in the West. As a serious artist-scholar, I cautiously question the ideologies of any country. I am aware that it will take a longer route for me to convince my colleagues that there are other ways to theorize dance in

China beyond socialism and liberalism. I did not come to the United States for assimilation, but to become a real bicultural thinker.

Defining “Chinese Dance”

Anglophone scholarship has shaped China as a land with an abundance of dance but no dance scholarship. Classical dance, folk dance, ballet, local theatre, modern dance, and other performing arts in China are perceived as a trove of material waiting to be discovered and theorized by the West. Of course, the growing field of Chinese dance studies in the West should receive recognition and celebration, but the visibility of the field should not overshadow the established field of dance studies in China.

For example, a scholarly act to define “Chinese dance” in the West overlooks the vibrant debates among dance scholars in China about what qualifies as their country’s dance. In Anglophone scholarship, Chinese dance is defined as a newly constructed genre of Chinese classical and folk dance starting from the 1940s, a genre that demonstrates three key commitments to (1) the aesthetic forms instead of the content or performer, (2) the embracing of diverse ethnic communities and geographic regions across China, and (3) inheritance and constant innovation.¹ However, in the eyes of dance scholars in China, this definition seems like a basic introduction, instead of a theory, of Chinese dance culture that oversimplifies the ongoing debates within Chinese dance academia. In the PRC, “Chinese dance” (*zhongguowu* 中国舞), a questionable concept, interlocks with other related terms such as China dance (*zhongguo wudao* 中国舞蹈) and national ethnic dance (*minzu wu* 民族舞), all of which convey similar and slightly different meanings with regard to “dance that belongs to China.” A socio-historical shift in the Reform Era intensified such complexity, during which time dance scholars in China preferred the more concrete

1. Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

terminologies of Chinese classical dance, Chinese folk dance, Chinese ballet, and Chinese modern dance. Similar to modern dance or Black dance, "Chinese dance" changes in meaning and scope throughout history and is under constant debate among scholars in China. I question the need to define Chinese dance in the West, because the theoretical move of defining risks pinning down dance in China with the so-called "core of culture" and fixing the dance of the cultural other. Highlighting the socio-historical complexity behind the term "Chinese dance," instead of insisting on a single definition, represents a significant way to decolonize dance studies in the West.

Dance theoretical writings and dance practice have existed alongside each other in China for over two thousand years. The study of Chinese dance history and aesthetics can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), when the scholar Fu Yi (傅毅 45–90 AD) published his article *Dance Examination* (*wufu* 舞賦) to study the popular "plate and drum dance" (*panguwu* 盘鼓舞) at that time. Theorizations of dance performance emerged in the following dynasties in books such as *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龙) by Liu Xie (刘勰 465–522), *Dance Chronicle* (*wuzhi* 舞志) by Zhang Mi (张敕 Ming Dynasty 1368–1644), and *Leisure Moments of Occasional Literature* (*xianqing ouji* 闲情偶寄) by Li Yu (李渔 1611–1680). In the early and mid-twentieth century, dance theories by critics, scholars, and artists appeared in magazines and newspapers in the forms of reviews, essays, interviews, and memoirs. After the Cultural Revolution, dance studies started to become prevalent in Chinese institutions. In 1980, the Chinese National Academy of Arts, China's premier art research institution, founded the Dance Research Institute and in 1982 recruited the country's first group of MA students in dance studies. In 1985, the Beijing Dance Academy, China's premier dance conservatory, established the Department of Dance History and Theory and recruited the country's first group of BA students majoring in dance history and theory. In 1997, the Chinese National Academy of Arts created the first PhD program in dance studies in China. Now an increasingly interdisciplinary field, dance studies in China embraces

scholars who received their PhDs not only in dance studies but also in history, anthropology, literary studies, and aesthetics. Their diverse research interests cover not only Chinese classical dance, Chinese folk dance, Chinese ballet, and contemporary dance but also dance drama, dance film, ancient religious dance, Western modern dance and ballet, musical theatre, social dance, and urban square dance.

I interviewed Liu Qingyi, Jiang Dong, and Yu Ping, who are three of the most influential dance scholars in China and whose work has laid the foundation for the direction that dance studies in China has taken today. I asked one question: “What is Chinese dance?” I asked this one question because as an outsider-insider, I have discovered contrasting understandings of “Chinese dance” in the West and China. By translating and presenting the responses of Liu, Jiang, and Yu, I hope to let their voices be directly heard in Anglophone academia.

Dr. Liu Qingyi (刘青弋), Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Shanghai Theatre Academy, former chair of the Department of Dance Studies at the Beijing Dance Academy, states:

Chinese dance cannot be defined as aesthetic forms, because the movement vocabularies and what those vocabularies express stay together. This tie is the founding logic of dance production in the People’s Republic of China. In addition, I don’t think ballet is completely a foreign culture for us now, especially after over seventy years of localization. The contemporary works created by the National Ballet of China, such as *Dunhuang* (premiered in 2017), are nothing if not Chinese dance. And it is difficult to reject the idea of red ballet as China’s national dance. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the red ballets, such as *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White Haired Girl*, dominated dance concerts as an emblematic representation of the nation. Third, Chinese dance embraces Chinese classical dance, Chinese ethnic and folk dance, Chinese ballet, Chinese modern dance, etc. Chinese modern dance is the localization of Western modern dance in China; whereas modern Chinese dance, such as unconventional works of Chinese classical and folk dance, refers to the experimental innovation of China’s cultural tradition in contemporary time.

(Liu 2022)

Dr. Jiang Dong (江东), Distinguished Professor Emeritus and former vice-director of the Dance Research Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, states:

We do not name any single genre of dance in China as "Chinese dance." Rather, the word represents a collection of many diverse dance genres, such as different styles of Chinese classical dance, Han Chinese folk dance, and ethnic minority dance. In addition, based on my ethnographic research across the Asia Pacific and the West Coast of the United States, 'Chinese dance' refers to a global phenomenon and its meaning differs among the Chinese diaspora living in cities such as Singapore and Los Angeles. In all, Chinese dance is not a genre, but an open-ended reality.

(Jiang 2022)

Dr. Yu Ping (于平), Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Nanjing University of the Arts and former vice-president of the Beijing Dance Academy, states:

We cannot distinguish dance genres only based on the external forms of their movement vocabularies because this will confine the choreographers within the limits of "style authenticity."

(Yu 2022)

Chinese dance exists as an unstable reality and requires continued contestation instead of a single definition. As an elastic concept, Chinese dance extends a time duration beyond the twentieth century and embraces geographic locations outside China. The extinct ancient court dance counts as Chinese dance although it existed long before the 1940s. The reinvented cultural dances of the Chinese diaspora are Chinese dance although those people do not live in China. In the West, English-language-based scholars are developing a rising field of Chinese dance studies, and this development needs to include the work produced by dance scholars in China. This essay asks for genuine and honest scholarly conversations between dance studies in the West and China.

Author Biography

Dr. Fangfei Miao, international dance scholar, choreographer, and dancer, is Assistant Professor of Dance at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she teaches both seminar and physical practice courses. Miao's research interests include dance and performance studies, Chinese and East Asian studies, and critical inquiries of globalization. She is working on her book project that examines the "mis-steps" that cross-cultural dance transmissions engendered in post-Mao Reform Era China (1978–the present). This project has received grant support from the American Society for Theatre Research and the University of Michigan Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies. Her scholarly research has been featured in leading journals in both English-speaking and Chinese-speaking academia. With extensive professional training in modern dance, Chinese classical and folk dance, and Tai Chi Quan, Miao has toured internationally and staged her experimental choreography in New York, Los Angeles, Auckland, and Beijing, among other locations. She received her PhD in culture and performance from UCLA and her MFA and BA from the Beijing Dance Academy, China's premier dance conservatory.

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