

22 From *Swan Lake* to *Red Girl's Regiment*: ballet's sinicisation

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Chinese dance is a riot of identities – court, folk, ethnic and dynastic. It has a glorious history and is a topic on its own.¹ It draws inspiration from martial arts and “the art of sex” as the quintessential man of letters and leisure Li Yu wrote: “When people teach girls to sing and dance, they do not really teach them how to sing and dance but how to be sensual. If you want her body to be so, then you must have her dance.”² Several legendary sensual dancers rose to be Senior Consorts and Empresses during the Han (206 BC–AD 220) and Tang (618–960) dynasties. Yang Yuhuan, the most beautiful woman in Chinese history, was a sensual dancer. She captivated the Tang emperor Xianzong (685–762), became his favourite consort and came to shape Chinese history.³ The splendid history of court dance, like Chinese dance itself, waits to be researched. Chinese dance absorbed its properties and values from many cultures, especially Central Asia, during the Han and Tang dynasties. This pattern of assimilation continued as the Mongols conquered China in 1279 and the Manchus in 1644. It developed rapidly after the Opium War (1839–42) when China began to have direct intercourse with the world beyond greater Asia. This exposure not only dramatically changed China’s history but also the very fibre of Chinese culture. Dance in the form of ballet is a great example of such cultural change.

I cannot discuss the introduction and naturalisation of ballet without situating it in the landscape of late Qing, Republican and communist China. Art in general and ballet in particular had to develop within the larger political and socio-cultural framework. Many believe that the West viewed the East as exotic and stereotyped its culture; hence the impact of Western art and thinking has been labelled cultural imperialism. The study of China itself falls into four intellectual frameworks: impact-response, tradition-modernity, imperialism and China-centred. Chinese ballet would fall under any but the fourth paradigm. The story itself is, however, more complicated than that. Ballet, like opium and communism, was foreign to China. Important in its introduction and naturalisation, similar to the stories of opium and communism, were agents and mechanisms of transmission.

Mainland historians credit the introduction of ballet to Yu Ronglin, daughter of late Qing diplomat Yu Geng and sister of author Yu Deling.⁴

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Born in 1882, Ronglin followed her father to Japan where he served as China's ambassador in 1893. She was exposed to and began to learn ballet. The family moved to Paris in the late 1890s and Ronglin took classes from the famous Isadora Duncan. They returned to Beijing in 1903; she and her sister became the Empress Dowager Cixi's ladies-in-waiting. Ronglin performed ballet for Cixi and the court at large. She also began to use ballet techniques to choreograph Chinese dance; this can be considered to be the beginning of the naturalisation of ballet in China. One of her enduring works was *Dance of the Lotus Fairy Maiden*, inspired by the Zhongyuan Festival where lotus-shaped lanterns were set floating on water on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. The old Buddha, as Dowager Cixi was reverently addressed, took a liking to Ronglin's dance and to the two sisters.⁵ Imperial exposure and endorsement helped promote ballet among the late Qing elite and upper classes; it had set the tone for the twentieth century.

Late Qing (1842–1911) was a stirring time as imperial China disintegrated and something new was in the making. The Nationalist Revolution in 1911 ushered in the May-Fourth or New Culture movement where Chinese intellectuals criticised, if not abandoned, China's heritage in their effort to modernise the ancient culture. *Yangwu* or "foreign dance", as early newspapers and pictorials labelled it, did not mean ballet exclusively but included it.⁶ Along with other non-Chinese art forms, it was making its way into treaty port cities like Shanghai where early performances took place. Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova brought *The Dying Swan* to Shanghai in 1922, while a whole array of foreign dance companies and dancers, Denishawn and Irma Duncan for example, gave classic and modern dance performances between 1925 and 1928. They attracted the serious attention of native artists, both traditional and modern. Denishawn fascinated the master of Peking opera, Mei Lanfang, whereas Duncan attracted left-wing writers like Tian Han.⁷ This was significant as indigenous artists and progressive men of letters welcomed and began to explore Western art and dance. China's cultural elite appreciated, if not completely accepted, ballet in the 1920s. Soon, first-generation Chinese ballet dancers and choreographers emerged.

Most important among them was Wu Xiaobang, the founding father of Chinese ballet. Wu attended an American school in Shanghai in the 1910s and loved modern dance *and* ballet.⁸ He went to study in Japan in 1929, came back to found a dance school in Shanghai and gave China's first public modern dance-ballet performance in 1935. Wu choreographed and performed before and during the Japanese war; his works have become classic repertoire for ballet students in China. Another ballerina who was instrumental in the spread of ballet was Trinidad-born and London-trained

Dai Ailian or “Mother of Chinese dance”. She studied at the Mary Wigman and Jooss-Leeder schools and with masters like Rudolf Laban.⁹ Like many patriotic overseas Chinese, Dai returned to her ancestral land in 1940 or during the height of the Japanese war where Madam Sun Yat-sen welcomed her. Dai, Wu and Sheng Jie were the dynamic trio in the wartime capital Chongqing. They choreographed patriotic dances and helped mobilise the war against Japan in an extremely difficult time. Patriotism was injected into a performing art; this had set the precedent for the communist era. The trio threw their lot in with the communists at the end of the war. Dai and Wu became the Chair and Vice-chair of the National Dancers Association in 1949. The Beijing Academy of Dance was founded in 1954; Dai became its first Master and Dean. Between 1957 and 1960, the Academy mounted *La Fille mal gardée*, *Swan Lake*, *Le Corsaire* and *Giselle* with the help of such Russian artists as O. A. Yealina.

The 1950s gave birth to a new generation of outstanding ballerinas. Dance theatre in general, ballet in particular, flourished into the mid-1960s when the country was in a mood of revolutionary optimism and originality. Chinese ballet classics, *Hongse Nianzijun* or *Red Girl's Regiment* for example, emerged. It was choreographed and first performed by the Ballet Troupe of the Central Song and Dance Ensemble in Beijing in 1964. It tells an old story, set in the 1920s Hainan Island, Guangdong province. Slave girl Wu Qionghua was captured every time she ran away from Landlord Nan Batian. She was caught again, beaten badly and left to die in the coconut forest. Hong Changqing, Party Secretary of the Red Girl's Regiment who pretended to be a rich overseas merchant, was on assignment in close proximity. He saved Wu and led her to the revolutionary base where she joined the Red Girl's Regiment. After much struggle, Wu killed Landlord Nan and rose to become the Regiment's Party Secretary when Hong died.

Another, similar classic hit was *White Haired Girl*. It was choreographed and performed by the Shanghai Academy of Dance in 1965. It is also a tale of oppression and class struggle. It seemed ironic that Chinese drama and class struggle were told in a quintessentially imperialistic and bourgeois artistic form. It certainly enlightens us about the making of the communist performing arts and, more importantly, ballet's naturalisation in China.

Red Girl's Regiment serves as an excellent example of ballet's “sinicisation”. It used the language of ballet, a Western European vocabulary foreign to the Chinese dance dictionary, to tell a Chinese story in its indigenous customs and setting. It introduced ballet techniques into Chinese dance and enriched its dance theatre. First of all, the use of the unique ballet shoes and poses signalled a new style of dance even though the costumes and stage settings were still Chinese. Poses specific to ballet were used to portray Chinese characters whose circumstances were familiar to the Chinese audi-



Figure 42 Escape Scene from the ballet *Red Girl's Regiment*.

ence. Some ballet poses proved better suited to portray narrative moments than others. A great example is Slave Girl Wu's escape from Landlord Nan's estate. The forty-five degree mid-air pose with her two fists tightened in the air highlighted her hatred for the Landlord and her determination to escape (see Fig. 42). This was not a dance vocabulary which the choreographer could find in the dictionary of Chinese dance because oppression and class struggle had not been the focus of traditional dance theatre. The choreographer used ballet techniques to emphasise class struggle, dramatise the escape and build a strong character; this laid the foundation for the climax.

The following act, when Wu changed into the Red Army uniform and joined the Communist Party, was electrifying (see Fig. 43). To the classic ballet pose, the choreographer simply added a gesture every communist understood and millions wished to act out – holding the right fist high above the head to swear one's allegiance to the Party. It is a brilliant combination of

3. 红色娘子军乘胜追击敌人 (中国舞协供稿)

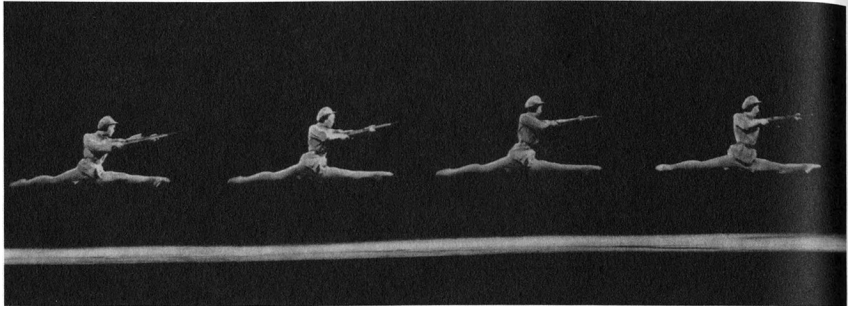


Figure 43 Shooting Scene from the ballet *Red Girl's Regiment*.

ballet and communist politics. Even more electrifying was the drilling scene. The all-female regiment with rifles in their hands and short hair in Mao caps and puttees conveyed the essence of “Red Girls”. This was breathtaking because it was something the audience could easily comprehend even in its foreign pose and gear. Traditional Chinese drama had featured female fighters but none with rifles and short hair in Mao caps, the emblem of liberation and revolution. Many such scenes in *Red Girl's Regiment* and *White Haired Girl* signalled the arrival of a different era with its own artistic language.

If innovation was key in ballet's sinicisation, even more important was the integration of traditional Chinese dance techniques that choreographers skilfully incorporated: the performance would have to be indigenous because the story took place in the ethnic *Li* minority village, hence the village scene, where young men and women gathered to dance, provided that native flavour. In essence, it is similar to the Chinese dance in *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker* and other ethnic dances in Western ballets and operas. Chinese martial art techniques and drama poses were embedded in the battle scenes when the “Red Girls” fought their enemies. Such integrating approaches made it easier for the ordinary Chinese to understand and accept ballet. The communist regime was injecting revolutionary ideas into the construction of a new China; their platform was to advance and uphold the interests of the proletariat. The regime and this unprecedented era therefore demanded new performing art styles. The introduction of new techniques was welcome and opportune; it brought new life to the Chinese dance theatre. It inspired and facilitated creativity in the process of character-building and storytelling. It enriched the vocabulary of Chinese dance and enhanced its *narrative* power. The process also transformed, if not modernised, Chinese dance.

Two years after *Red Girl's Regiment*, the Culture Revolution (1966–76) threw the country into chaos. Politically, it was a power struggle between

Mao Zedong, the ideologue, and his colleagues who were more pragmatic in their approach to the construction of a new China. The “cultural” aspect of the revolution involved Mao, his extreme supporters, his wife Jiang Qing among them, in a campaign to destroy old elements of Chinese culture and society in order to build a communist utopia in his lifetime. Mao believed strongly in the superstructure theory of Karl Marx whereas Jiang Qing led the “gang of four” to define and dictate what communist art and culture should be. Performing art classics like *Red Girl's Regiment* were turned into what was called “revolutionary model plays”. Jiang, originally an actress, had a personal interest in pushing forward the revolution in culture and refashioning the arts for the proletariat. She intervened in the making of “model plays”; that is the remaking of classics like *Red Girl's Regiment*. She will remain infamous for her destruction of Chinese art and culture. However, the Culture Revolution itself had undoubtedly contributed to the spread and indigenisation of ballet in China.

Dance was the best device because it could be reduced to a body language that was so basic that even a child would understand it. The “revolutionary model play” was directed towards the proletariat; it had to be simplified so that every worker and peasant could understand it. In the frenzy to popularise the “model plays”, hundreds of *Red Girl's Regiments* were produced around the country as the whole nation was thrown into a fervour of making revolutionary art. The “model play” politicised ballet and it spread the idea of the proletarian consciousness and its class struggle through ballet language. Many peasants knew about ballet; some could even name the “eight big revolutionary model plays”. The Culture Revolution on the one hand disfigured the original art and its sinicised form; on the other hand it helped to spread ballet among the masses. *Red Girl's Regiment* served more than just its artistic purposes. Like other artistic forms in the communist era, it helped popularise Marxist ideology and promote its key platform – class struggle – advance feminism and strengthen communist rule. It also bred a generation of outstanding dancers, some of whom have won the recognition of the international ballet community as we can see from Li Cunxin, one of the ballerinas handpicked by Jiang Qing's followers. The star, whose fame depended on the Cultural Revolution, defected while performing with the Houston Ballet in 1979 and continued her career on the global stage.¹⁰

The sinicisation of ballet had much to do with patriotism and politics. In the late Qing, it was limited to the court and elite. In the Republican era, it was embedded in the New Culture movement and in the war against Japan. Under the communist regime, it was used to popularise an ideology and deepen authoritarian rule. This government-sponsored political cultural extravaganza was most effective when it came to the indigenisation of ballet. It became a household name overnight during the Culture

Revolution. It is now part of a common Chinese vocabulary and artistic heritage. The sinicisation of Buddhism and opium consumption took a few hundred years, but the naturalisation of ballet, alongside communism, took only a few decades. The involvement of a political regime is key to the quick indigenisation of a foreign art and ideology. China was ready for a new political thought with which the communists could build a new state; it was ready for a new performing art genre with which the regime could educate and re-educate its new/old citizens. China provided the best soil for both ballet and communism to grow; it gave birth to the most brilliant dancers and choreographers. It enriched the language of dance and vocabulary of ballet. The post-Mao era has seen a revival of Chinese arts and culture. Chinese dance theatre in general and ballet in particular will undoubtedly continue to draw inspiration from other cultures in this age of globalisation.