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Folk Dance in China: The Dance Pioneer Dai Ailian, 1916–2006

Eva Shan Chou

I became interested in this topic through my work in the history of ballet in China, in which Dai Ailian was a vital figure, especially in the ballet's early years. Her role, undoubtedly major and yet enigmatic to a historian, drew my attention to how, a decade earlier, she had been an equally vital figure in the early years of folk dance in China, when knowledge of such dances first began to reach outside their indigenous communities. I perceived many parallels both in her energetic deployment of her talents and in the later portrayals of her role, and found that the existence of two rather than one such phenomena helped one to clarify the other. This paper focuses only on the earlier case, her pioneering role in folk dance.

I hope you will come away from my presentation with two points: (1) a clearer picture of one early and concrete instance of what we could call dance ethnography, and (2) by contrast, a quick view of folk dance on the large scale in which it exists today, supported by its largest funder, the government. This second part, juxtaposed to the first, addresses the title of this panel, "Questioning the Folk." The conclusion will contextualize Dai's pioneering role.

In China, the beginning of anthropology/ethnography—of the elite's systematic study of the culture of the common people—has been examined by the scholar Chang-tai Hung in his *Going to the People* (1985). The interest of this first generation of scholars was in gathering and studying the literature of the common people—tales, legends, folksongs, children's literature, proverbs. They published and analyzed their findings both in journals which they founded and in newspaper columns.¹ These activities began around 1918 and were centered on Peking University, a date and location that placed them among the many new social and cultural projects that came to be cumulatively called the May 4th Movement. As Hung pointed out, these early field workers, overturning millennia of cultural hierarchy, held that it was folk culture that "could best represent the spirit of the nation" (1985, 17). With such an approach, their projects soon became "linked with the concept of nationalism" (Hung 1985, 17) as they worked out intellectual justifications for promoting the vast, scarcely noted cultures of the common people. (It was the activist May 4th Movement that the 1989 demonstrators of Tian'anmen Square invoked. Two days

before this conference presentation, June 4, was the twenty-sixth anniversary of the massacre that ended these demonstrations.)

It is natural that the first efforts in fieldwork concerned genres like tales, legends, songs, poetry—genres that were based on words. The training of the elite, even the new elite of the early twentieth century, was based on words. Generally, these scholars would not have been trained in music or dance, which were the guild-style specialties of defined, lower classes of society. (Exceptions were the traditional scholar's zither and for the new elite, the entire category of Western classical music.)

This new elite, with its iconoclasm and incipient nationalism, was not, however, the background from which Dai Ailian emerged, although it is the background of her collaborator Peng Song, her husband Ye Qianying, and of the educator Tao Xingzhi, who encouraged her project to collect folk dance; all of them we shall briefly meet later.

Dai came from a wholly different context, for her training was in dance; moreover, it was in the unusual pathway of ballet and via a route unusual in nearly every context. I can sum it up by speaking its chronology: Trinidad, ballet; England, ballet and, later, modern; China, folk, then ballet. Dai was born in Trinidad of Chinese ancestry² (images of her are readily available online) and went to China in 1940, at the age of 24, during the Anti-Japanese War, where she remained for the rest of her long life. In Trinidad, she had taken her first lessons in ballet. When she was fifteen, her mother moved her and her two older sisters to London, leaving behind a feckless husband. There she studied ballet with, at various times, Anton Dolin, Marie Rambert, and Margaret Craske, and later she studied modern dance at Kurt Jooss's short-lived but famous Darlington Hall. In these activities, she was a part of the earliest days of ballet and of modern dance in England. The onset of World War II in Europe in 1939 scattered the dance scene in London.

During the later part of her time in London, Dai had begun to choreograph recital pieces for fundraisers held by the China Campaign Committee in aid of refugees created by the 1937 Japanese invasion of China. This committee to aid China was a mix of left-leaning intellectuals, clergy, and trade unionists, and sent the funds raised to Song Qingling, the widow of Sun Yatsen, whose relief societies were likewise left-leaning (Buchanan 2012, 22–28). Departing from her dance training, Dai created works on Chinese themes in Chinese costumes. Judging from their titles, some invoked standard images of an old China (*Weeping Willows*, *The Concubine Dances for the Emperor*) while others, such as *March* and *Alarm*, were clearly topical to the war, as were the modern dances she saw in the 1930s, such as Jooss's *The Green Table*. Once the war in Europe began, Dai, at the urging of many, “returned” to China (this was and is the word used of “overseas Chinese”). She landed initially in Hong Kong, which, as a British colony, was not yet in Japanese hands, where she was put in touch with Song Qingling.

Here I want to interrupt my account to comment about this unusual dance background and about the knowledge of music that Dai brought to dance. First, though this ballet and modern training is impressive and intriguing, people, led by Chinese accounts, think of ballet and even of modern dance as already establishment genres at this time, but this is not the case: Dai's connections were not with the prominent artistic powers

but with the future. The early 1930s were the early years not just of Dai's entering into the ballet world but of that ballet world in England: studios and dance spaces were makeshift; there were few ballet names earlier than those mentioned above; the Royal Ballet's predecessor Sadler Wells was not yet even named Sadler Wells, much less "Royal." By the same token, when Dai turned to modern dance in the late 1930s, these were the earliest years of that dance form in England, when many of its pioneers, including Jooss, had left Germany ahead of the Nazis.³ Accounts of Dai's background in this period do not emphasize enough the non-established nature of dance in London. To be aware of this context is to bring out even more Dai's energy, initiative, and talent. Another comment I want to make is about how the first 15 years in Trinidad are not sufficiently appreciated and especially not in terms of music. Trinidad is mentioned only to tell how Dai wanted to study ballet like the little English girls and was finally permitted to cross racial lines and join the class, whereupon she soon outstripped them and ended up teaching the class when the teacher returned to England. But I would have liked to know more, much more, about living in Trinidad. None of her many interviewers asked her about it; their focus was elsewhere. But to know that Dai was extremely musical is to need to know more about Trinidad. In Trinidad she had studied the piano—another England-oriented discipline—and progressed far enough to pass the intermediate level of the Trinity College of Music examinations (Glasstone 2007, 1). In London, through music, she was befriended by three young women connected with the distinguished piano teacher George Woodhouse; with one, Woodhouse's assistant, she continued her piano studies; another, a student of Woodhouse's, accompanied Dai's recital performances; and the accompanist's sister designed and made Dai's costumes (Glasstone 2007, 10). Her musicality must have been integral to what Glasstone called "her remarkable understanding of the art of ballet in general and choreography in particular" (2007, 8), one, incidentally, that he said was not fully appreciated by her Chinese colleagues. But to think about her musicality is to recall that an intrinsic feature of Trinidad is the music that must have been everywhere. V. S. Naipaul's family was Hindu, but his accounts of a Port of Spain childhood about a decade after Dai's, in *Miguel Street* (1959) for example, are infused with the varied and complex types of music to be heard in its streets. Peng Song describes one of the folk dances he collected in 1945 in Trinidad as "accompanied by the most complex drumming [he] had ever heard" (Glasstone 2007, 29). The complex rhythms that the young Dai encountered and absorbed must have prepared her for the folk dances with which she was to work.

To continue with Dai Ailian, she went first to Hong Kong, which, as a British colony, was still free. At this point, the central plains had fallen to Japan: Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai had been taken one after the other in 1937, and Guangzhou and the inland city of Wuhan in 1938. Many writers and artists had fled to Hong Kong, which was then a backwater locale; Dai married one of them, the Shanghai artist Ye Qianyu (1907–1995). There these artists reconstituted their societies, literary magazines, and artistic activities. To this ferment, Dai brought dance talents. She was soon recruited by Song Qingling for a fundraising dance recital. We see again her immediate receptivity to new dance influences, for one of the works she created now, *East River*, was based on a Cantonese folk dance. (The culture of Hong Kong is Cantonese [today Guangzhou].) Then on December 25, 1941, Hong Kong too fell, for immediately after Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces undertook a massive campaign, and within weeks the colonies of Hong

Kong, Burma, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and Singapore were seized. Many who had taken refuge in Hong Kong, including Dai and Ye, left for Chongqing, the wartime capital in China's southwest interior.

As the wartime capital, Chongqing was seeing a huge influx of people. Much of the national infrastructure followed the government to the interior: industry, colleges, publishers and newspapers, and museums and libraries. In this boomtown setting, Dai set to work learning and propagating with great energy. In her five years in Chongqing, she was in continual motion (Dai 2003, 121). She took on students and taught them in threadbare places, thus beginning her lifelong transmission of dance knowledge. She taught at institutions including the National Music and Drama School (Guoli geju xuexiao) and Yucai School, the famed school in rural education founded by Tao Xingzhi. Peng Song (b. 1916), a trained musician of her own age and later a colleague at Beijing Dance Academy and an authority on traditional dance history, began to study dance with her at this time. He was her age, mid- to late-twenties, but he always called himself her student (Dai 2003, 107–9; Glasstone 2007, 25). She created many dances for recitals, and she took them to the cities of Guizhou, Guilin, and Chengdu in the Sichuan basin. She no longer made dances like *Concubine*, but the topical themes of the London works continued in new works (*Sale, Air Raid*). Some works she choreographed to music composed by her contemporaries among wartime refugees. Most important, she also created folk dances from Miao, Uighur, and Yao ethnicities, drawing from a wide variety of sources: an intricate Miao skirt she had been given; a Uighur melody about a widow; and steps she asked to learn from a Xinjiang visitor, from Tibetan servants in the household of a trader, and from those whom they in turn knew (Dai 2003, 133–37; titles translated, Glasstone 2007, 96–7).⁴

At the end of 1944, an event took place that stimulated Dai to move beyond these happenstance sources for her folk dances and instead to study dances directly in their indigenous communities. This event was the visit to Chongqing of a troupe from Yan'an, the Communist Party stronghold in the northwest interior. The troupe performed *yangge* dances that they had collected in the countryside of the north. *Yangge* were folk dances, but they were the folk dances and songs of the Han Chinese (*yang* means “sprouts,” thus *yangge* means “sprout songs” and “song-dances”), an agricultural people in China, that is, as opposed to the pastoral borderlands of Tibet, Manchuria, Mongolia, or Xinjiang. Dai learned a *yangge* dance from the troupe and composed one as well (Dai 2003, 121). She and others, nearly all students of hers, resolved that they would do for ethnic dances what the Yan'an troupe had done for *yangge*.⁵

Soon thereafter, Dai determined to learn the dances of the Khampas Tibetans directly from them. Why she chose the Khampas Tibetans is not known. Sichuan lay in a high plateau basin surrounded by inaccessible mountains rich with peoples whose languages and cultures were only vaguely known to history. Perhaps there were contacts. This resolve and its outcome are the focus of this paper; I will go into more detail later, but I will say now that the actual outcome was small: she collected one dance, and Peng Song two dances. The small number of the dances, however, becomes part of my point. It not only highlights the logistical difficulties of their project, but also motivates us to distinguish between this first, small, concrete gain in knowledge and the vast deluge that is folk dance today.

(For example, the massed dancers in the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics in Peking are widely accepted as composed of folk dances from many ethnic parts of China.)

The response in the Chongqing dance world to *yangge* understood *yangge*'s counterparts to be the dances of the non-Han ethnicities. But there are important differences that will affect our interpretations of Dai's pioneering role. The two main differences are in the goals of the collecting at this time and in the fates of the two categories after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Regarding the first, from the beginning, the collection of *yangge* was a purposeful, political project (Hung 2011, 75–77). In 1942, in his Yan'an Talks, Mao Zedong, addressing the urban intellectuals who had gone to Yan'an (as opposed to Chongqing), had laid down the ideological axiom that all the arts needed to serve the people. His corollary was that artists and writers needed to learn from and use the arts of the masses in order to reach them, and reaching the masses was the goal. *Yangge* was one of these arts of the masses. The teams sent out, made up of musicians and dramatists, ultimately evolved into "a very large propaganda troupe" (Holm 1984, 21–22).

The same could not be said of ethnic folk, at least not at this stage. Though the context of those studying dance with Dai and of the wider ethnography movement regarding ethnic folk dance was left-leaning, political policy did not then determine the study of ethnic dance. The visit of the *yangge* troupe was of course leftist: it had been invited to Chongqing by Xinhua Publishing Company, which published *Xinhua*, the official paper of the Communist Party. (Guomindang had its own official newspaper.) Zhou Enlai, who from the beginning promoted the political usefulness of art, was headquartered in Chongqing during the war, and he also encouraged this project. Nonetheless, the collecting of ethnic dances was not yet political policy. Moreover, as we shall see, the initial dances that supplemented the three collected by Dai and Peng from mountain communities were all attempts to reflect the lives of their cultures. By contrast, *yangge* soon became Struggle *Yangge*, which were collected for restaging for a political message (Hung 2011, 75): one of the dances brought to Chongqing was titled *Brothers and Sisters Open Up the Wilderness*, meaning they opened grasslands to agriculture.

Second, the fates of ethnic dance and *yangge* were polar opposites. *Yangge* reached its height in the first years after the 1949 Revolution brought the CCP to power, when, in the words of *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, it was the Carmagnole of the revolution (3: 199, entry for "Tai Ai-lian"). *Yangge* was danced and sung in every village, on every occasion, and it was performed by schools in groups of thousands in the huge processions on National Day (Hung 2011, 77–88). But *yangge* was fading by 1951, and as it declined, ethnic dance rose. Soon a division was created for the dance of ethnic minorities within the Beijing Academy of Dance. The identities of ethnic dance were defined by the academy's nomenclature, and their propagation and transmission were institutionalized. These developments mirrored the central government's concurrent streamlining of ethnic classifications and its provision of histories for the ethnicities that were thus recognized.⁶ Topics in this dance form are the subject of three papers on another panel at this conference.

Dai's project was encouraged by Tao Xingzhi, who organized a benefit performance to raise funds for her. Tao (1891–1946), the famed educator and reformer, would be a natural member of Chang-tai Hung's *Going to the People*, a member of the new elite who valued the common people. Yucai School, where he invited Dai to found a dance section and where she taught many students and teachers, was an innovative school in rural education that he set up in Chongqing.

In June, Dai Ailian, her husband Ye Qianyu (who was to make notes for costume design), and Peng Song (who was to notate the music) set out from Chongqing for Chengdu where they were to meet their guide, a trader between China and India who “thus was familiar with Xikang” (Dai 2003, 127). The city of Chengdu lay closest to the mountain ranges that rimmed the Sichuan basin. It was summer. In a broiling Chengdu, they waited three months for their guide. During this time, news of Japan's surrender came (August 15, 1945), but they continued to wait. According to Peng, in an account given to Glasstone (2007), their guide finally came, and the three set out. In steep mountain country, they moved on foot, on horseback, along dry river beds in deep ravines and on crumbling, slippery footpaths before reaching Xikang, a journey which Dai, when describing it, called one of the most hair-raising she had ever experienced (Dai 2003, 129). In Xikang (Peng continued), Dai learned the “little-known Batang xuanzi Dance” 巴塘 弦子舞 (Glasstone 2007, 27–29).⁷ This was the dance she brought back. Peng Song recounted how he then collected two further dances when he continued on to the Qiang mountains, initially with a guide and a university student, then alone. He walked along another dried river bed, essentially lost for days, until he came upon a Qiang village, of huts strangely (to him) built upon stilts. Here he collected a Qiang shaman dance that he described as “of wonderfully complex drumming” (Glasstone 2007, 29). Later he collected a Jiarong Tibetan drinking dance, in which “the villagers sing as they dance around a large wine jar, drinking wine through bamboo straws” (27–29). Upon Peng's return to Chongqing, he taught both dances to Dai. So there were three dances altogether.

Dai likewise recalled the long wait in Chengdu (staying with Ye's friend, the famed artist Zhang Daqian), but she then described her and Peng as collecting their dances separately. She said that while they were waiting in Chengdu, people from Peng's alma mater, Huaxi University, came who wanted to do fieldwork among minority cultures, so he accompanied them to the Qiang and Jiarong territories, and there he collected the Qiang shaman dance and the Jiarong drinking song. After waiting some more, she and Ye went on to Xikang by themselves, on the perilous journey described above, and after earning their trust, she able to learn the Batang xuanxi Dance from the villagers. The three dances she named are the same as in Peng's account. The difference between their narratives is difficult to explain; perhaps it is owing to the lapse of sixty years for both participants.

What might these dances be like? A program that Dai produced the following year, “Music and Dance of the Borderlands,” gives a sense of how Dai might have conceived of the dances and also provides some photographs and sketches of these and other dances. The program contained ten items, the first eight arranged by Dai, including “Batang xianzi wu,” and the last two by Peng, which were the two dances he collected. The evening concluded with group dances by Tibetans (two dances) and Uighurs (one) living in

Chongqing.⁸ Dai characterized Peng's two works as "arranged" (*bian*) by him, and six of her eight dances as "arranged" by her. Her other two works, which were earlier Chongqing pieces, she characterized as "re-choreographed" (*congpai*) (Dai 2003, 131). Although three of the dances were learned from direct participation, her chief goal was to stage them all so that they could become known (Dai 2003, 135). Thus Peng's shaman dance should be a dance for two (the shaman and the soul), but presumably because she was the only one who could perform at a certain level, it was performed as a solo. The other pieces on the program of her arrangement or re-choreography were not lesser, either to her or to the audience. Starting March 6, 1946, "Music and Dance of the Borderlands" was presented for eight performances over five days at Chongqing qingnian guan (possibly similar to the YMCA) and 11 further performances at Mingzhong jiaoyu guan (People's Education Hall, established by the government). A photograph of Peng's "Jiarong Wine Party" is reproduced in Dai's memoirs showing two men (including Peng) and two women (including Dai) (Dai 2003, 130). Dai's costume is shown more clearly in a sketch of her by Ye (Glasstone 2007, 35) and in a studio photograph of Dai in costume (Dai 2003, 134; Glasstone 2007, 31).

This is all the information I have regarding the performances. What to make of this? You might feel that I have taken you through many steps to give you one—or three—items of folk dance, plus their performance in an evening filled out with supplementary pieces. But this is exactly my point. Many factors converged to make this moment: the new elite's esteem for folk life, war-time exigencies that brought the new elite to a part of China with populations hitherto largely unknown to them, and the unusual factor of Dai's talent and training. This convergence produced only the beginning. More might have been done next, but the war finally ended, and those who could do so returned to their home cities. Dai went with Ye to Shanghai, and from there they soon left for a year's tour of the U.S. at the invitation of the U.S. Department of State (though she gave the "Borderlands" program for four performances in Shanghai in August).

This beginning, small but concrete, is often described vaguely in ways that conflate it with folk dance's much larger, later history. From the 1950s on, as an important public face of dance collecting, Dai went on many field trips, all centrally organized and officially photographed. Published photographs are captioned along the lines of "Dai Ailian collects folk dance material from China's ethnic minority peoples." Similarly, a lengthy online, obituary-like summary of her life says that she went among the Bai people (in Yunan) "six times" to collect dances.⁹ Even for the 1946 trip, she and Peng are said to have gone into the mountains and after "more than a year's hard work," they prepared an evening's dance performance, giving the impression that they were in the mountains for more than a year. When folk dance of the cultural minorities became a piece of the national project, this slender, though admirable, work was inflated and institutionalized as history.

In fact, while the word "ethnic" has the potential to be anthropologically debated, the official term today is "cultural minorities" (and, sometimes, ethnic minorities). That is, they are *minorities* within the territory China claims. Relatedly, the peoples in Tibet have been supplied with lineages that be traced back to written Chinese history so that they can belong to China in the present (see note 6). Thus the Qiang village where Peng Song collected his drinking song is, he tells Glasstone, a "true Qiang mountain settlement," and

that “the Qiang nationality are descended from one of China’s most ancient peoples, the Xia dynasty [about 2000 BC].” This is because in ancient times, “the Xia-dynasty Emperor Da Yu lived near the Jia Shan and the mountain settlement” (Glasstone 2007, 28). In other words, though this ethnic group forked off at an early point, it is actually from the same lineage as one recorded in (Han) Chinese history. Moreover, though there was a divergence, later there was a re-integration into Chinese history at a less distant point in history, for through “widespread intermarriage with the Zhou dynasty [about 800 BC],” the result was that “there are now very few pure ethnic Qiang people to be found” (as told to Glasstone 2007, 28).

What “Batang xianzi Dance” has become is startling. From the shoestring operation that marked the first transfer of “Batang xianzi Dance” outside its community through the Beijing Dance Academy’s curriculum organization to today, we look only at today. If you type into a search engine the name of this dance, many stills and some YouTube videos come up (“Songs of Tibet: Batang xianzi” 2010). In the videos, look past the emcee’s international-style cavorting; even look past the stagey folk dances, which must be very different in scale and expense from what Dai and her companions found in the remote mountain village. Consider instead that with this scale of undertaking (and this is visible in the stills as well), an audience is required, and accordingly, an audience has been secured. The people who completely fill the camera’s viewfinder in this vast outdoor space are waving small red flags and are wearing ethnic-style clothing and accessories, while the whole performance is, as the emcee says, “to celebrate the 61st anniversary of our ancestral country” (zuguo). The purposeful use of ethnic dance for territorial goals is explicit.

Dai Ailian’s role in the 1940s history of ethnic folk dance in China was an early, hard-won initiative. This was also true of how she came to play a vital role in the early years of ballet in China in the 1950s. In ballet as in folk, the nature of Dai’s role through the decades of the past was retroactively defined for her. In both areas, she has been re-fashioned into a symbol, though what she symbolized altered during the course of her long life. Her role as an authority in ethnic dance we saw above. Regarding ballet, after the Cultural Revolution, in the 1980s, when ballet could be talked about again, she was routinely called “the mother of ballet in China.” A decade or so later, when it became possible to acknowledge the formative Soviet role in Chinese ballet, open pride was then expressed in this lineage. As a result, at this point, the invocation of one source often displaced the other, with no synthesis being attempted. Today Dai’s connection to ballet is at the fore, an example being the Dai Ailian Foundation set up in 2011 at the National Ballet Company. She never had a chance to tell her story as she lived it, though the stories she told to the clear-eyed Glasstone were a partial exception. Her oral memoirs contain valuable information, but their emphases coincide too well with official interpretations of incidents and people to be memoirs in mental or psychological terms. Large historical movements took Dai to China at age 24, and large historical movements kept her there from 1940 to her death in 2006. As much as folk dance and ballet may each merit their dance histories, they are equally integral parts of social and political development in China. This paper has attempted to extricate and contextualize a kernel of historicism in these large canvases.

Notes

1. Hung's title *Going to the People* quotes a slogan of its practitioners, who were in turn inspired by the going-to-the-people movement of young intellectuals in 1870s Russia.

2. According to Dai, her paternal grandfather emigrated to Trinidad as a youngster, while on her mother's side, her great-grandparents were the immigrants (2003, 1). She says nothing of the subsequent marriages. To my knowledge, no interviewer has asked her, but the descriptor "of Chinese ancestry" leaves the situation more open, shows more sensitivity to the West Indies context, and is less Sino-centric. An example of the complexity of being Trinidad-born are the brother and sister Jack and Sylvia Chen, artist and dancer, with whom she had multiple familial connections over decades, whose father was advisor to Sun Yatsen, and who were Chinese, Creole, and French. Also worth noting is that the Sino-centric term for Dai and others is "overseas Chinese," where the English usage would be "Trinidadian-Chinese."

3. Richard Glasstone's (2007) life of Dai is rare in its informed, detailed account of her London years. Glasstone had a distinguished teaching career, including as teacher of boys at the Royal Ballet School. He came to know Dai when he was invited to teach at the National Ballet of China in 2000 and again in 2005.

4. I give Glasstone as source where possible and use his translations of the titles.

5. "Concert of Dances of the Border Regions," <http://baike.baidu.com/view/15069818.htm#9999>. Accessed May 30, 2015

6. Thomas Mullaney (2011) analyzes the central government's 1954 census classification of ethnicities in Yunan as a procrustean and nimble project aimed to fit this population within the national goal of 56 ethnicities. The development of criteria based on ethnographic and linguistic criteria was not a priority. For dance, similar criteria might be ethnographic and musical.

7. Labanotation of this and other dances were made later, in 1984.

8. The program is in Dai (2003, 131).

9. An extended online entry updated after Dai's death. http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E6%88%B4%E7%88%B1%E8%8E%B2&prd=so_1_doc. Accessed July 18, 2015.

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