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Fall 2015

Ballet Review



**The First Chinese
Swan Lake from
Ballet Review Fall 2015**

Cover photo by Zoran Jelenic,
Ballets Trockadero: Yakaterina
Verbosovich (Chase Johnsey) and
Vyacheslav Legupski (Paolo
Cervellera) in *Don Quixote*.

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Cover photo by Zoran Jelenic, Ballets Trockadero: Yakaterina Verbosovich (Chase Johnsey) and Vyacheslav Legupski (Paolo Cervellera) in *Don Quixote*.

The First Chinese *Swan Lake*

Eva Shan Chou

The first full-length *Swan Lake* by Chinese dancers took place on July 1, 1958. It was the graduation performance of the first class of the Beijing Dance School's ballet division and also the first public performance of any classical ballet by Chinese dancers. In 1950, there had been a spectacle-pageant for the first-year anniversary of the People's Republic of China, *Doves of Peace*, but that had contained only short passages of ballet and only one pointe role. There was also a *La Fille Mal Gardée* given in 1956, but it was not a public performance.

The Beijing Dance School had been founded in 1954 with divisions in ballet, "traditional dance," "folk dance," and "folk dances of other nations" (the character dances in ballet). Then, in 1957, the school was reorganized into just two divisions: ballet, including character dance, and "national dance," which included folk dance and the dances of China's ethnic minorities.

The year after the first Chinese *Swan Lake*, the Beijing Experimental Ballet Troupe was formed, with twenty-two graduating dancers and teachers from the school and an eighteen-member orchestra. This company became, through intermediate stages, the National Ballet of China of today.

Swan Lake was well known in China through the ballet companies that the Russians frequently sent in the 1950s. The January 1958 inaugural issue of the official magazine *Wudao* (Dance) featured on its back cover a color photograph of the Swan Queen and Prince of the Novosibirsk Ballet. Ulanova performed in China in 1952 and again in 1959, on the country's tenth anniversary, and the newsreels of her performances were shown repeatedly in theaters for a long time afterward. For the Chi-

Eva Shan Chou, professor at Baruch College in New York, is at work on a history of ballet in China.

nese, the Soviet connection gave *Swan Lake* great cultural prestige, and, in China, it came to uniquely exemplify ballet.

Even so, a Chinese *Swan Lake* at that time was an ambitious undertaking, as well as an ideologically and thematically incongruous choice for a newly and zealously socialist country. But there were important factors in its favor. Perhaps most important was Premier Zhou Enlai. He had seen the Russian ballet companies in China and, on an official visit to Moscow, in 1957, had attended a performance by Maya Plisetskaya at the Bolshoi. He mentioned *Swan Lake* on a number of occasions and finally specifically asked whether it was possible for the dance school to prepare a *Swan Lake* for performance.

As the third highest-ranking government official, Premier Zhou regularly used his influence to promote and direct the arts and its institutions, often taking a detailed interest in individual projects. Given his support, this *Swan Lake* was able to draw on musicians and the set and costume designers from other art schools, while the lighting, props, and more drew on personnel from every corner of the school. During the years of famine Zhou saw to it that the dancers and staff received adequate food and clothing.

The person to whom Zhou made the request concerning *Swan Lake* was Pyotr Gusev, the most prominent of the half-dozen Soviet experts who came to Beijing beginning in the mid-1950s. Gusev was born on December 29, 1904, in St. Petersburg, graduated from the former Imperial Ballet School, and joined the Mariinsky company in 1922. He worked with Fyodor Lopukhov in the 1920s, was a member of Balanchine's Young Ballet group, married Olga Mungalova, and then joined the Bolshoi in 1935, where he partnered Ulanova and Plisetskaya. After retiring from the stage, Gusev was director of the Mariinsky (1946-1951), Bolshoi (1956), Mikhailovsky (1960-1962), and Novosibirsk (1963-1966) ballet companies.

Between 1958 and 1960, Gusev taught at the Beijing school and helped set up ballet academies in Shanghai and Guangzhou. In this brief

time, he brought to the students and teachers the ballets he had set and coached in Russia: *Swan Lake*, *Le Corsaire*, *Giselle*, and, possibly, excerpts from *Les Sylphides*, while *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* and *Esmeralda* came into the repertory soon after.¹ Moreover his production of *Swan Lake* lasted essentially unchanged until 2007, when Natalia Makarova, who has staged the ballet around the world, was commissioned to make a new version for the company.

An unusual occurrence for ballet in China involves the 1939 Russian film *Lenin in 1918* about the Russian Civil War, which contains a sequence set in what is meant to be the Bolshoi Theater during a performance of *Swan Lake*. (The entire film is on YouTube, ballet: minutes 18-22). In the Chinese-dubbed DVD and in the IMDb entry online, the dancers are not credited, but the Odette is Irina Tikhomirnova and Prince Siegfried is Mikhail Gabovich. Imported into China some time before 1956, the film was shown widely in cities and in the countryside.²

The camera arrives in the theater during act 2 when the famous pas de quatre is being danced (by six cygnets!). It cuts away from time to time to follow three foreign dignitaries in their theater box plotting against the Bolsheviks, while sailors and ordinary citizens sit in the stall seats. Then the film returns to the White Swan pas de deux. Near the end of the act, just as Rothbart has swooped down on Odette, a uniformed man steps onto the stage, stops the performance, and announces that Czar Nicholas II and his family have been executed. The sailors clap; the men in white ties are visibly perturbed.

Among Chinese who were young adults at some point in the 1966-1976 decade of the Cultural Revolution, this is a very well-known four minutes of film. When I mention my interest in *Swan Lake*, many people spontaneously tell me of this bit of the movie. Some of them are recalling it for the first time, prompted by my question.

I have been told that because only a very limited number of foreign films were import-

ed, and there were few windows into the outside world, many people went repeatedly to this movie just to hear again the passages of Tchaikovsky's music or to watch the dancing, often leaving after the sequence was over. Others I have talked to saw the film as "sent-down youths," when the film was brought to the countryside by teams of cadre who travelled with movie projectors and portable generators.

Despite the difficulties, a Chinese *Swan Lake* was a natural, indeed overdetermined, choice. Rehearsals began soon after Zhou's request. As a piece for a fledgling dance school, the ballet has the advantage of having only two major roles, while having many soloist roles and dancing in each act for the corps. As *Wudao* magazine noted with pride in July 1958, it will "need more than 100 performers."

The principal roles were taken by Bai Shuxiang (b. 1939), then a fifth-year student, and Liu Qingtang (1932-2010), who had entered the ballet program only two years before, at the late age of twenty-four. Typical of dancers in a first-generation ballet world, both had begun in another type of dancing. Bai, who is of Manchurian descent and whose family had returned to the northeast, was selected in 1952 for the Children's Division of the Northeast People's Arts Academy. With them, she went to North Korea in 1953 on a "friendship visit," one of the youngest among the dancers. The following year she was accepted into the first year of the ballet program at the Beijing Dance School.

The dance preparation of Liu, the Siegfried, was less direct and showed remarkable perseverance. Also from China's northeast, he was chosen in 1948 for the first class at the region's Baishan Arts School. He applied for admission, he told school officials, because he was hungry and, at sixteen, was too young for the army. By 1951, he had the solo male role (with six women) in *The Dance of Fans*, which was chosen to represent China in the Moscow-organized Third World Youth Festival in East Berlin.

The dancers stayed in Europe for fifteen

months, visiting the Warsaw Pact countries and Austria. During this time, Liu saw classical ballet for the first time. On the dancers' return, they were instructed to remain in Beijing, and, in December 1952, they became the

on to principal roles in *Le Corsaire* and *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, and she danced *Giselle*.

Bai and Liu were also the two leads in *Red Detachment of Women* when it was given its premiere, in 1964. Thereafter, their fates diverged.

From the beginning, Liu had taken an active political role in the dancers' ranks and in the Communist Party unit attached to the school and the company. During the Cultural Revolution, he retained the lead in *Red Detachment*, an important fact given that it and *White-Haired Girl* from Shanghai were the only ballets permitted until late in that decade.

Liu became de facto head of the company, carrying out the orders of Jiang Qing and her allies, and, in 1976, he reached the rank of vice minister of the Ministry of Culture. That same year, however, his patrons fell from power, and Liu was arrested, tried, stripped of Communist Party membership, and sentenced six years later (the delay was common) to seventeen years of imprisonment, from which he emerged in the early 2000s.

By contrast, Bai lost her role in *Red Detachment* after two years when her father's past with the Nationalist Chinese government in wartime Chongqing came back to

taint her. She was "struggled," bowing deeply before her massed critics; behind her were big-character posters stating her crimes. Bai was sent for reeducation to Cadres School, where she performed subsistence work during the day and attended self-criticism sessions at night. Recalled in 1974 to fill the thinning ballerina ranks, she is still active today and much



Bai Shuxiang and Sun Zhengting in a photograph from a 1962 issue of *China Pictorial*.

nucleus of the new Central Dance and Song Company. When the Beijing Dance School was founded, Liu, already twenty-four years old, overcame the objections of his superiors and entered as a student in the ballet division. It is said that he was selected for *Swan Lake* because he had the strength for the many Soviet-style lifts. After *Swan Lake*, Bai and Liu went

interviewed as a living link to the founding days of Chinese ballet.

Liu, who died in 2010, is seldom mentioned. Brief footage of Bai and Liu in undated *Swan Lake* productions is shown in the third and fourth of eight-minute sections in a Chinese ballet documentary.³ He can also be seen as the male lead in the 1971 film of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

Rehearsals for *Swan Lake* began in February 1958, barely months after the arrival the previous fall of Gusev and specialists in variations, partnering, and character dancing. *Wudao* reported that soon after they began, students and teachers “under the encouragement of the Great Leap Forward and in a burst of revolutionary fervor. . . greatly shortened the rehearsal time” and “moved up the performance date” “by more than a year.”⁴ The result was that after five months of rehearsal, the performance of *Swan Lake* took place on July 1st.

The originally planned premiere of “more than a year later” must have been intended for the tenth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. At the time, the imperative for speed was pressed upon all social and economic activities. Following the Soviet model, the government’s centralized planning had set yearly goals in industrialization in a First Five-Year Plan and then, in 1958, in a Second Five-Year Plan.

“The Great Leap Forward” was the motto by which individual and group efforts on every level were bent toward universal participation in that effort. “Backyard furnaces” – real ones in the backyards of communes – exemplified the fervor urged on each and every person. All the arts, including dance education, were also asked to increase productivity. In addition, students went out to learn from ordinary people. The January 1959 issue of *Wudao* carried a photograph of a furnace being tended by a dance student, and the magazine said that, in ten days, the dance troupe had learned some of the skills of the smelters, who were themselves amateur metal workers.

There are only five published contemporary

photographs of the *Swan Lake* rehearsals.⁵ They show the following poses: Swan Queen in bent-leg arabesque, balanced on the thigh of the kneeling Prince; Gusev adjusting a pas de deux; the corps de ballet of eighteen swans in a semi-circle and four cygnets in front; Swan Queen in arabesque plongée; and, finally, another pas de deux pose, this of a kneeling Prince supporting with his outstretched arms the Swan Queen in arabesque penchée. Liu is identified as a teacher, which perhaps he was in the national dance division.

The photographs’ publication in *Wudao* must constitute a semiofficial record of the progress that the ballet division was seeking to document. Overall they provide insight into many of the project’s practical difficulties; the pictures clearly do not represent the dancers at all well. The lighting is unflattering, especially in the first and last images, with a semi-circular glare of light and the dancers’ stark shadows.

The photographer is listed as Wu Huaxue, who was with the government news agency Xinhua and appears to have been both a reporter and photographer on his stories. He was probably also sparing with the film for his camera. Resources, even among government agencies, were extremely scarce. Stills and footage available online today, such as in the Chinese documentary mentioned above, show the dancers to better advantage, but those resources rarely provide dates. We can only be sure they predate January 1965, when the last *Swan Lake* before the Cultural Revolution was performed, and that those that include Gusev predate mid-1960, when he returned to Russia.

At this point, the most dramatic supported pose that the dancers could project seems to be the one in the first of the photographs in *Wudao*, that of the Swan Queen balanced on the thigh of the Prince, probably from the final moments of act 2. This guess is reinforced by the fact that there are two other staged photographs of this pose (one in color printed in *China Pictorial*), and movie footage is preserved of this part of the staging in what

must be a later rehearsal, with Gusev making adjustments.⁶

Costume and makeup, especially for the prince, make a difference in the viewer's impression and also are possibly a reflection of improved skill, even over a short period of time. In the *China Pictorial* picture, the costume is vaguely medieval (crenellated edges at the tunic's bottom). In the other photograph (not shown here), it is vaguely Chinese (in the neckline), so we see there was some experimentation with the look of the ballet.

The graduation performance was given in the prestigious venue of Tianqiao Theater, still the company's theater today, and was attended by Zhou and by Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Chen Yi. This endorsement signaled the arrival of a force on the Chinese cultural scene and began a pattern of high-level official presence at the ballet on significant anniversaries of the ballet or of the nation. Soon after this performance, ballet was added to the capital's sights for the yearly convention of the three thousand or so members of the National People's Congress.

This first performance was enthusiastically received. Zhou's personal commendation of Bai Shuxiang was widely and often quoted. "It has not been easy for you to prepare the dance in such a short time. I hear that you worked very hard. I hope you will become outstanding in this field!" Beijing's *Theater News* expressed the prevailing view that the Chinese did in three years what normally took others many years to achieve, and they did it with the sine qua non of ballets, *Swan Lake*.

Theater News staff writer Zhu Qing clearly states the official support for the production as well as for the classical and foreign ballet repertory, just years before the xenophobic Cultural Revolution:

"The success of the performance of the famed *Swan Lake* by the Beijing Dance School moved us and gave us a great sense of pride. This was not only because this was the first performance in our nation of a ballet that has been regarded as the acme of European classical ballet, so much so that whoever can put

it on is capable of performing all classical ballets. The further reason for our pride is that this *Swan Lake* was executed by the students at the Dance School. This is unprecedented in the history of world dance – there has never been a dance school in the world that has performed this ballet in its entirety. Usually the graduating students of a dance school must be trained for a great many years before they can undertake a role like Odette, and usually members of even the corps de ballet have all already graduated from dance schools. But in this performance of *Swan Lake* are students from the second, third, fourth, and fifth years. The earliest among them could have entered ballet school only in September of 1954, and would have only studied for something over three years."⁷

What might have been drawbacks from a ballet viewpoint – the brief years of training, the large number of dancers needed, the shortened amount of rehearsal time – were exactly the points of national pride. (The orchestra is not mentioned.) These views are of a piece with the Great Leap Forward, the ideology that willpower and motivation can replace other factors.

What of the performance itself? We do not know how much of the ballet was presented, but the essentials were there. The thirty-two fouettés, for instance. As the *Beijing Review* wrote in a 1961 profile, "Many student-dancers . . . vividly remember how . . . they all forgot themselves and silently but tensely counted 'one, two, three . . .' until, with great relief and satisfaction, [Bai] finished all 32 to a tremendous burst of applause."

As noted earlier, a rehearsal photograph shows a corps of eighteen swans and four cygnets. The inaugural program also lists a jester, a "pas de trois for swans," and, in act 3, Spanish, Neapolitan, and Hungarian dances and a mazurka. Later Zhang Yuanshao also danced the Swan Queen role. In the 1962 *China Pictorial* photograph, the Prince is identified as Sun Zhengting, the inaugural Colas in the Chinese *La Fille Mal Gardée*. Wu Zuting was a third Seigfried.⁸

More detailed information on Gusev's staging and music is given by the English ballerina Beryl Grey, who was guest artist in Beijing in 1964 and who knew the Bolshoi's *Swan Lake* from her 1958 performances with the company. She describes the Chinese act 3 as having been reset by Gusev on the Beijing dancers and writes that the music for the Black Swan pas de deux now uses "Tchaikovsky's original music for this number"; "the prince and princess dance directly to the court as well as to the audience"; and "the entire company takes part in the coda and forms a semicircle during Odile's thirty-two fouettés, which heightens the excitement and drama." Of Gusev's act 4, she writes that Odette has a pas de deux with the magician and a solo, "but she neither dances with nor meets the Prince." "I did not care for this Goussiev version," she concludes.⁹

Swan Lake was performed again in October. Before that, on the first of the month, the dancers had a float in the National Day parade. On the flat roof of a tall vehicle, protected by a low railing, a rim of swans repeated a moment in act 2: the corps with their arms and upper bodies lifting and falling. Along the center line were two pairs of Swan Queen and Prince, he supporting her in attitude. That section of the parade marched under the banner "Arts in the Service of Politics" and included bands and twenty-foot-high reproductions of art works.

Swan Lake in its early years raises an interesting question for us today, visible in a detail in *China Pictorial* image, published in 1962: the cap worn by the Prince, dark yellow in the reproduction. At first glance, and probably from the distance of the audience, this large cap, which covers two-thirds of the hair, looks like a head of hair – dark blond hair. Beryl Grey mentions in passing a "jeweled headband across the front of [her partner's] wig."¹⁰ So it is a wig. (This is not visible in the performance photographs in Grey's book.)

One wonders if other such details existed. The bleaching of the hair is even today common premier danseur practice in Russia. We might, however, also read in this blond wig a struggle in an earlier time with the idea of

an all-Asian company in a classical work. As Marie Rambert says in an article written after her company performed in China, "With make-up they manage to look at least as Western as our artists become Eastern, by careful lines and shades of make-up."¹¹

Rambert's comment is frank regarding the expectations of her world (and no less candid regarding ballet's customary impersonation of exotic Easterners from "Tartars" to "Chinese"). Grey's remarks are along the same lines: "Even in stage make-up, Wang [the Prince] looked very Oriental with his slanting eyes and high cheekbones. The majority of the company, however, looked more European in stage make-up with eyebrows and eyes drawn on the lines we use in the West."¹² To look more European must have been an explicit goal and, it seems, an expectation on all sides.

Today, the National Ballet of China's prince does not wear a yellow wig, but I noticed that in one set of costumes for *Swan Lake* (I think from 2012), in act 1 the women at court wear, not inappropriately, snoods over their hair – but they are dark-yellow snoods, also moderating the overall non-European look of a classical ballet.

I will leave the story of the birth of *Swan Lake* with a quick look ahead to its role in later years. There was one *Swan Lake* when ballet was new in China and *Swan Lake* equaled ballet as it largely did, and, to some extent, continues to do everywhere. There was no *Swan Lake* when all the arts were suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, except for the handful officially permitted. Finally, after the reforms of Deng Xiaoping began, in 1979, the ballet, along with everything else in China, began to mix with the world at large.

With the company's international emergence, the ballet became an important element in the company's self-definition and a part of its history of itself. *Swan Lake* was the first ballet to be revived in its entirety (single dances from *Giselle* were also revived), and it was performed, surely deliberately, at the school's first post-Cultural Revolution graduation, in

1979. In its first tour outside the Soviet bloc, in 1986, the company took act 2; and, by the 1990s, it was touring the full-length ballet. Today *Swan Lake* is prominently featured on

the company website, a deliberately chosen signature of the repertory, as the company consciously lays claim to the central tradition of classical ballet.

NOTES

1. Zou Zhirui names the first three ballets in *Xin Zhongguo baleiwu shi* [*History of Ballet in New China*] (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2013), 36, while Beryl Grey groups all the Chinese ballets she knew as Soviet in origin (*Through the Bamboo Curtain* [London: Collins, 1965], 72).

2. Elizabeth Souritz identified the dancers, with the assistance of film and dance scholar Vladimir Kremen. Independently, the Bolshoi Theater confirmed the identifications.

3. www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmTr6uEvOMs and www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehYsFAFGU6o.

4. Xinhua News Agency, "The Beijing Dance School to Perform *Swan Lake*," *Wudao* (July 1958): 28-29.

5. *Ibid.*, 28-30.

6. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehYsFAFGU6o, 1'04"-1'23".

7. Zhu Qing, "Swan Lake and the Beijing Dance School," *Xiju bao* (*Theater News*) no. 15 (1958).

8. Zou Zhirui, *Xin Zhongguo baleiwu shi*, 34.

9. Grey, *Through the Bamboo Curtain*, 39, 70. Grey watched a rehearsal of act 2 but did not comment on differences except to say they were worked out in her rehearsals with the company. Grey danced the *Swan Queen* with the Bolshoi in 1958, the year Gusev went to Beijing. About Moscow, she writes that Chaboukiani, initially to be her Prince, "had been away from the Bolshoi for six years and his version of *Swan Lake* was the old one. In the interval a new, immensely successful version had been staged by the Bolshoi ballet master Messerer. So there were three different ones – the two Bolshoi ones and mine." She danced the *Swan Lake* by Asaf Messerer, "ballet master and choreographer of the new Act IV," and later called it a "difficult last act with the different choreography" (*Red Curtain Up* [London: Secker & Warburg, 1958], 15, 16, 23).

10. Grey, *Through the Bamboo Curtain*, 52.

11. Marie Rambert, "Chinese Ballet School," *Dancing Times* (Jan. 1958): 173.

12. Grey, *Through the Bamboo Curtain*, 52.