

BOOK REVIEW
Emily Wilcox,
*Revolutionary Bodies:
Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*
(Oakland: University of California Press, 2019)

Brian DeMare, Tulane University

A mong the books on Chinese history published in 2019, few grabbed my attention as quickly as Emily Wilcox's *Revolutionary Bodies*. Having written about drama troupes and their role in the Chinese revolution, I had long been aware of the many connections between the theater and dance worlds. Because my understanding of the centrality of dance was matched, or more accurately eclipsed, by my ignorance of this artistic form and its practitioners, I knew that Emily's book was both a milestone for the field and essential reading for myself.¹ And *Revolutionary Bodies*, furthermore, was one of the first books published as an open-access manuscript. I rushed to download a copy and started reading the introduction, marveling at the power and sense of place created by the book's opening lines. I found the book's colorful photographs equally eye-catching. Noting that some images were accompanied by something called a "QR code," I learned how to use my phone to conjure up videos of decades-old dance performances.

I had hoped on returning to the book in 2020. That year, however, proved particularly difficult for careful reading. Which is to say that I was thrilled when Yidi Wu asked me to pen a belated review of Emily's groundbreaking study on Chinese dance for *The PRC History Review*. As I have long suspected, this is a highly readable and impeccably researched account of the historical development of contemporary Chinese dance. At every turn the book benefits from Emily's background as an anthropologist turned cultural historian. With the benefit of first-hand ethnographic research, she brings a rich understanding of the dance world to her prose. This sensibility provides the framework for her study, a chronological investigation based on a diverse set of textual sources. Emily balances an eye to narrative with a clear set of arguments concerning the development of Chinese dance before 1949, the relationship of Chinese dance and ballet during the Maoist era, and the legacies of the Maoist years for contemporary Chinese dance.

While not an explicitly narrative history, the author's ability to weave together a sprawling set of sources and characters results in a highly engaging overview of Chinese dance. Historical figures, most notably Dai Ailian, serve as threads to connect disparate events over the decades. More important to the story at hand, I would argue, are the theoretical concepts that Dai promoted and Emily uses to frame these decades of change: kinesthetic nationalism, ethnic and spatial inclusiveness, and

dynamic inheritance. By putting the spotlight on the importance of movement, the broad understanding of "Chinese," and the tension between research and innovation, Emily effectively connects wartime dance to the latest reality television competitions.

Revolutionary Bodies begins with an introductory chapter that clearly lays out the book's key arguments and theoretical concepts. The following numbered chapters follow the chronological development of contemporary Chinese dance, a story that interweaves seamlessly with the larger narrative of modern China. In Chapter One, an exploration of the transnational origins of Chinese dance, Dai Ailian navigates from Trinidad to Beijing, finding a patron in Song Qingling as she maneuvers between the Nationalist and Communist parties. Chapter Two covers the years immediately following the founding of the PRC, when war in Korea brought famed dancer Choe Seung-hui to Beijing. Her fascination with *xiqu* dance performance helped spur the creation of "classical" dance, now understood through a comparison with the "folk" dances performed by peasants. The resulting golden age of Chinese dance, the focus of Chapter Three, brought classical and folk performances to ever greater stages, until the rise of ballet during the Cultural Revolution. As detailed in Chapter Four, Jiang Qing's all-out push to popularize ballet, previously an afterthought in the dance world, threw a wrench in the decades-long development of Chinese dance. Thus the move away from ballet in the post-Mao years seen in Chapter Five is not a rejection of the Maoist-era, but a quick and steady return to the performance styles that had dominated dance stages in the 1950s and early 1960s. Chapter Six offers some concluding thoughts, peering into the twenty-first century and finding strong links between socialist era dance and contemporary practices.

Having finally had my chance to read *Revolutionary Bodies*, my first set of questions concerns an issue that all cultural historians must wrestle with: audience reception. I am curious to hear how the book has been received in two different ways. First, as someone who has long worked the margins between political history and cultural studies, I have come to believe that different readers see the research differently, and some have difficulty engaging with it at all. I must imagine that theater scholars and historians approach the book from divergent perspectives, and wonder if Emily has any thoughts how the two camps have read

Revolutionary Bodies. Second, as I noted above, the book's publication was particularly interesting because it was released as an open-access manuscript. But that must bifurcate the reading experience between digital and analog approaches. Some and perhaps most readers will approach the text online but others, such as myself, much prefer to hold an actual book in our hands. Does the *way* people read the book affect *how* they read the book? I can imagine that reading the digital version, one might be inclined to skim the text and focus on the videos. Conversely, in my reading Emily's expert description of the dances, informed by her ethnographic research, was far more enlightening than watching the actual videos.²

My second set of questions concern the relationship of politics and art. This is, again, an issue near and dear to my own research agenda. One of the more insightful reviews of my drama troupe book took me to task for my cynicism over land

reform and, by extension, the rural dramas that were staged in support of land reform campaigns.³ A well-deserved criticism, but here I want to go the other way and ask Emily to be a bit more explicit about the relationship between the development of Chinese dance and Maoist revolution. To be sure, the book notes the political elements found in Chinese dance. But the term "propaganda" is notably missing from this study. I am not going to ask Emily to be cynical, but what happens when we view Chinese dance, especially during the days of Maoist revolution, as propaganda? What of the cadres overseeing these artists? What, finally, are the political implications of dance for the PRC state?

¹ While many cultural studies scholars have written about Chinese dance, few historians have followed suit. Those that have investigated dance have typically done so through exploring the links between *yangge* dancing and *yangge* operas that were staged in support of the Communist revolution. See Brian DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

² This really came home to me when reading the description of Yang Liping perform "Spirit of the Peacock." According to Emily, watching the performance is "like seeing a master magician at work" (174). I would suggest, however, that it takes another magician to understand the trick and properly explain it to the uninitiated.

³ Emily Wilcox, "Review of *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution*," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (February 2019), 171-172.

Response

Emily Wilcox, William & Mary

It brings me great joy to read this review of *Revolutionary Bodies* by historian Brian DeMare, whose own book *Mao's Cultural Army* was a great inspiration to this project. I am a bit of a latecomer to the field of PRC History. As Brian notes, I began the research for *Revolutionary Bodies* as an anthropologist and only after finishing graduate school decided to retool methodologically from an ethnographer into a cultural historian.¹ Like many PRC History scholars, I was seduced to the field by collecting primary sources. The materials used in *Revolutionary Bodies* range from published writings like newspaper and magazine reviews to ephemera such as performance programs and personal photographs to rare documents in the form of popular dance manuals, dance periodicals, and teaching curricula. The discovery of dozens of never before studied extant dance films dating from the late 1940s to the early 1980s was probably what clinched my decision to rebuild the project as a historical study. With a desire to make these materials more widely available, I also worked with University of Michigan Asia Library faculty Liangyu Fu to create the University of Michigan Chinese Dance Collection, now the largest body of primary sources on PRC dance history outside China.² As an adopted member of PRC History, it is extremely meaningful to have my work featured in this venue.

I greatly appreciate Brian's careful reading and adept summary of main points in the book. As Brian accurately conveys, one of my key interventions in *Revolutionary Bodies* is the discovery that the classical European dance genre of ballet in fact was not the primary focus of PRC dance creation and promotion during the Mao years, although this remains a widespread misconception among scholars in both Chinese studies and dance studies. Although ballet briefly gained prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the context of Cultural Revolution arts policy, like many aspects of the Cultural Revolution it was not reflective of wider trends either before or after this period. As I show in *Revolutionary Bodies*, what actually dominated the attention of PRC dance artists and the cultural establishment during the majority of the Mao and post-Mao years was what I focus on in the book—the effort to create an entirely new and uniquely Chinese dance form based on indigenous source materials, what became known as Chinese folk, ethnic/national, and classical dance, or simply “Chinese dance.”

Scholars of PRC culture will recognize this trend as one that ripples across many creative fields since the early PRC years—in efforts to devise and promote “national forms” in music, theater, architecture, visual arts, design, films, literature, etc., as well as in the post-Mao resurgence of interest in ethnic minority and folk culture, “national learning,” and other forms of cultural nationalism and roots-seeking. Although obvious in the

sources, this trend has failed to fundamentally shift our understanding of arts and culture during the Mao era, which continues to be widely understood as a time of blanket hostility toward indigenous cultural traditions. This notion of course aligns with narratives about Chinese socialist culture promoted by the ROC during the Cold War, as Taiwan's leaders styled the island as the “true” inheritor of Chinese traditional culture (an argument that continues to be parroted by anti-PRC groups, perhaps most ridiculously the Falun Gong-affiliated New York-based Shen Yun Performing Arts, today). In *Revolutionary Bodies*, I reveal instead a history of intense commitment to the study, adaptation, and promotion of local culture and artistic practices by Chinese dance artists and cultural leaders during both the Mao and post-Mao eras. Moreover, I argue that this commitment to studying and promoting local dance practices was not a form of resistance or an exception to broader trends of the Mao era. Rather, it was a fundamental component of the ever-shifting politics and ideology of Chinese revolutionary culture and Chinese socialist aesthetics.

I appreciate Brian's attention to the question of readers of *Revolutionary Bodies* and how those in different fields have responded to the book. I am pleased to report that *Revolutionary Bodies* has been received enthusiastically by scholars in diverse disciplines and is being assigned in undergraduate and graduate courses across a wide spectrum of fields, including PRC history, dance studies, theater and performance studies, and Chinese literary and cultural studies. The Open Access format has certainly been an asset in the book's promotion. At the Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME) Stakeholders Meeting in October 2020, an analysis of the download statistics of sixty-eight books published during the three-year pilot of TOME funding in 2018-2020 showed that while average print sales were in the range of 400-450 per book, the average total downloads were over 2,500 each. Among these, *Revolutionary Bodies* came in third place overall for engagement indicators, with the report citing “Twitter attention in East Asia, interdisciplinary citation pattern, [and] enriching English-language bios of artists” as notable impacts. As of July 1, 2020, *Revolutionary Bodies* reportedly had 2,644 book downloads, 6,166 chapter downloads, and 329 print sales.³ When I began writing about PRC dance history, some (including myself) questioned whether audiences existed for such research. Publishing Open Access has been extremely helpful not only for gaining *Revolutionary Bodies* a broad readership, but also proving the wider interest in PRC performance studies.

I was delighted to see Brian's question about where the issue of PRC dance as political propaganda fits into my study, especially since it returns a concern I raised about the author's political positionality in my review of his book. How should we, as scholars, approach the explicitly political dimensions of

histories of PRC performing arts? In my case, I situate handling of the politics of dance in the PRC alongside scholarly writing about dance in the United States. US modern dance and ballet were both highly politicized during the Cold War, were subject to US government funding and surveillance, and were used by the US State Department to promote American ideology abroad. Yet, it remains rare for dance scholars writing about US dance history to refer to Cold War-era American modern dance and ballet as “propaganda.” Although the historical circumstances are of course not the same, my intentional choice to not frame Chinese dance as propaganda was meant as a provocation to the US dance studies field to take seriously Chinese dance as art, just as it does hegemonic US dance forms such as modern dance and ballet, while acknowledging that all of these dance forms are deeply entwined with state politics on both sides.⁴ One of the main ideological tenets of American modernism is that it is “apolitical,” and yet this is itself a deeply politicized claim. Maoist cultural ideology made the connection between art and state politics explicit and refused to deny its political intent when supporting the arts. However, this does not mean that Maoist art is reducible to its political function or that it can only be productively analyzed in light of state intentions and goals (not that this is what Brian is implying, but there may be others who think this way).

That said, I do regard every chapter in *Revolutionary Bodies* as implicitly addressing the role of state politics in Chinese dance. Dai Ailian’s journey from Trinidad to Beijing was possible because of a political agenda that actively recruited the Chinese diaspora to participate in China’s national construction. The persistent centrality of rural and ethnic minority images in PRC dance choreographies and the careful inclusion of diverse geographic and ethnic groups in PRC dance repertoires and teaching materials directly reflects the importance the Chinese Communist Party has placed on China’s territorial integrity and

the important symbolic role of rural communities and ethnic minorities in the national body politic. The decision to invite artists from foreign countries to train Chinese dancers at particular early historical junctures—North Korea in 1951-52, the Soviet Union in 1953-1960, and Indonesia in 1957-1959—clearly corresponds with China’s international politics, from the Korean War, to Sino-Soviet alliance, to Bandung diplomacy. Similarly, the attacks on Chinese dance during the Cultural Revolution, the rehabilitation of Chinese dance as part of late 1970s denunciations of the Gang of Four, and the continued evolution of socialist-era dance concerns and lineages in the twenty-first century all aligns with dominant political trends. I perhaps left too much of the burden on the reader to draw these connections between dance and high politics, assuming they would be redundant for audiences familiar with PRC history and culture and perhaps distracting for those who are not. My main goal was to draw out the historical narratives and patterns in Chinese dance history, with dancers and dance practices at the center. However, thinking more about the political implications of dance for cadres and for the PRC state more broadly are welcome challenges, and I hope to give them greater attention in my future work.

I am so grateful to Brian for his generous and provocative review, as well as for his work to bring the study of performing arts into PRC history. I would also like to thank Yidi Wu and all the editors at *PRC History Review* for their tireless support of the field. It is so important to have these opportunities for authors to share our work and to engage in scholarly community.

¹ The dissertation version of this project was based on more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork in China, including three semesters as a student at the Beijing Dance Academy, China’s premiere dance conservatory. Readers who are interested in comparing the earlier ethnographic project to the book can consult Emily Wilcox, *The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-2009* (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2011). The two projects not only have entirely different structure, content, and arguments but are also based on two different sets of primary and secondary sources. They offer an interesting methodological case study for anthropological versus historical approaches to the study of PRC culture.

² For more information, see <https://global.umich.edu/newsroom/creating-a-world-class-chinese-dance-collection/>.

³ Peter Potter and Charles Watkinson, “Progress Report Year 3,” Toward and Open Monograph Ecosystem Stakeholders Meeting, October 22, 2020. Online access: <https://www.openmonographs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/TOME-Accessible.pdf>.

⁴ For a longer discussion of this issue, see Emily Wilcox, “When Place Matters: Provincializing the ‘Global,’” in Lorraine Nicholas and Geraldine Morris, eds. *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*, 2nd Edition, 160-172 (Routledge, 2018).