

Dai Ailian's Founding of Chinese Modern Dance: An International History

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ABSTRACT

Dai Ailian was born in Trinidad, emigrated to London, to Hong Kong, and then to Mainland China. Each relocation added inspiration for her decades-long development of Chinese modern dance. Dai's early years in colonial Trinidad gave her a taste of a racially divided society organized hierarchically and rife with inequality. She experienced then acute results of similar racial hierarchies as an aspiring dancer in London in her twenties. In the run-up to World War II, Dai found herself in a position to contribute to benefits on behalf of China's defense effort, and around the same time, she discovered and embraced her Chinese heritage. This process would lead to her interest in Chinese folk and ethnic dance, while also incorporating her intensive training in ballet. Dai's cosmopolitan background uniquely positioned her to develop Chinese modern dance, and her career was shaped by international forces.

Introduction

Dai Ailian, born in Trinidad in 1916 and later a resident of London, Hong Kong, and mainland China, is widely regarded as the mother of Chinese modern dance. Although she initially struggled to gain employment—much less the widespread recognition she would later enjoy—in London as a young adult in the 1930s, she would later be understood as a luminary of ballet and folk dance simultaneously, and celebrated for her hybridization of those two forms after working to adapt her artistic output in response to radical changes in national politics in China. In 1981, after decades of success, several of Dai's pieces were listed as some of the best-known ballet performances in China since 1949 (Strauss & Liren, 1981).

Dai's origins are as important as her later accomplishments, as her work reflects the vicissitudes of a long and multifaceted career that reflected her background as a Trinidadian of Chinese descent in a colonial society. This essay traces those origins in an effort to synthesize an understanding of her contributions to Chinese dance as both a celebration of nationality and a preservation of ethnic and regional traditions. Dai's founding of Chinese modern dance was profoundly shaped by international political shifts as well as Dai's own geographic relocations. This argument does not discount Dai's instinct for innovation. On the contrary, Dai's responsiveness to international political conditions, and her cosmopolitan upbringing, positioned her to innovate modern dance and incorporate the artform into Communist Chinese society and establish herself as a pioneer of modern dance in China.

Colonial Roots in Trinidad

Dai was born in Trinidad in 1916. Trinidad at the time, like the 1940s Hong Kong to which Dai would later emigrate, was a colonial culture. This had significant implications for Dai's experience and social position, as well as her absorption of cultural and educational training in childhood and early adolescence. Trinidad's society was organized by legally sanctioned racial hierarchies (Brereton, 2002). Dai occupied a mixed position within

this social framework. Coming from an upper-middle-class family, she was able to study at a white school, and had early access to the dance techniques that would later shape her passion and life's work (Liu, 2024). At the same time, Dai's early exposures to racial inequality were formative for her understanding and exploration of her complex identity (Wilcox, 2020a). For example, when her skin became darker from the sun, her aunt rubbed Coty powder on her face to help her fit in with her white classmates (Wilcox, 2019, p. 18).

Dai's early education in Trinidad is crucial for understanding her later approach to Chinese identity and her embrace of a culturally informed nationalism. Indeed, Dai did not adopt the surname by which she was known throughout her career until her family's move to London in 1931, and was known before that point by the name Eileen Isaac (Dixon, 2014). Although the scholarship on Dai contains only rudimentary discussions of her upbringing in Trinidad, shorter biographies and obituaries from 2006 always cite this part of her life (e.g., Mattison, 2006). It would be mistaken to infer from this that Dai's contributions to Chinese modern dance were primarily influenced by Trinidadian culture *per se*. But at the same time, it would be mistaken to view her time in Trinidad as irrelevant in view of her later focus on Chinese identity. A hybrid interpretation is more accurate. Arguably, Dai's upbringing in a hierarchically divided society informed not only her later sympathies with the socialist ideology in China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but also primed her for the racialized inequality she witnessed and personally experienced in London when she moved there as a teenager (Roberts, 2024). As the next section elaborates, Dai's discovery of a Chinese identity in London was presaged by her time in Trinidad, in terms of both contexts' clear social and racial/ethnic divisions. Both contexts later informed her experience in Hong Kong, another colonial setting, and would contribute to her interest in rooting her artistic expression in a deeper history of diasporic identity (Ma, 2023).

Discovering Chinese Identity in London and Hong Kong

As indicated in the previous section, the social hierarchies Dai witnessed and experienced in Trinidad served as a preview of her experience in London when she moved there with her family at age 15. Having already demonstrated a talent for dance from a very young age, Dai's cultivation of her skills continued apace in London. She studied under several prominent figures in ballet and modern dance, including Marie Rambert, Anton Dolin, Margaret Craske, and Kurt Jooss (Chou, 2016, p. 63). However, it is crucial to keep in mind that these figures were only "big names" historically and after the fact. More precisely, even if they were regarded pioneers of dance by informed contemporaries at the time, they were operating from a marginalized and ad hoc position at the time. This element of Dai's evolution into a foundational cultural figure would, like her upbringing in Trinidad, prove influential on her artistic and political outlook. As Chou (2016) explains, "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'" (p. 64).

It was at the same time that Dai developed a clearer racial and ethnic identity. As noted above, Dai did not adopt the surname "Dai" until 1930 (Wilcox, 2019, p. 17). This shift coincided with her early experiences in England as a young adult seeking to launch a career as a dancer and choreographer. Dai found that the hierarchical culture, and all its racial exclusion, in which she lived was comparable to that of Trinidad. At the same time, her material and socioeconomic advantages did not immediately translate to her success and ascension in the burgeoning dance world of London. She was routinely rejected after auditions and struggled to establish a reliable income (Wilcox, 2019, p. 18). Dai's film debut did little to assuage her concerns about the racialized culture of London and dance more broadly. She was cast for a brief appearance in *The Wife of General Ling* in which she played an embodiment of the "Yellow Peril," symbolizing the threat of China and the East in stereotypical fashion (Wilcox, 2019, p. 19). Likely because of the offensive nature of the portrayal, this performance is excluded from Dai's archives and autobiographical writings.

The above example serves as a useful backdrop for Dai's emergent interest in Chinese dance as an outlet for her expression not only of her traditional ballet skills but also, crucially, her interest in her Chinese lineage and the culture surrounding it. As with the wider social context in Trinidad and later in England, major geopolitical trends served as a catalyst for Dai to move forward with her exploration of her cultural and racial roots. Not long after *The Wife of General Ling*, Dai became engaged with several performances funded by the China Campaign Committee (CCC) starting in 1937, whose mission was to raise funds in support of China's defense against the Japanese invasion (Wilcox, 2019, p. 21). The Second World War would continue to shape Dai's relocations in the coming years. This chapter of Dai's life particularly illustrates the international shifts that catalyzed her own movement across the world and the resulting shifts in her artistic interests and output.

Dai's involvement with the CCC quickly led to the opportunity to move to Hong Kong, where she could continue to develop her interests in Chinese dance and eventually develop Chinese modern dance out of a hybrid of folk and ballet styles. Within the vibrant urban environment of the cosmopolitan Hong Kong, Dai found herself immersed in a cultural melting pot that provided fertile ground for her creative endeavors. The city's dynamic environment offered Dai not only a platform to further explore her passion for Chinese dance but also a canvas upon which to experiment with the fusion of diverse artistic traditions. Embracing these diverse cultural traditions, Dai embarked on a mission to synthesize the rhythmic nuances of Chinese folk dance with the precision and fluidity of ballet (Wei & Jia, 2021). This endeavor was not merely an exercise in blending forms but a conscious effort to carve out a distinct identity for Chinese modern dance. Dai's artistic vision transcended the boundaries of convention, as she sought to infuse her choreography with a deep reverence for tradition while embracing the spirit of innovation inherent in contemporary dance.

In Hong Kong's artistic community, Dai found collaborators and kindred spirits who shared her passion for pushing the boundaries of dance. For example, this is where she met Peng Song (Chou, 2016) and Wu Xiaobang (Liu, 2024). Together, they embarked on a journey of exploration, drawing inspiration from the eclectic mix of cultures that defined the city's landscape. Through experimentation and collaboration with these other artists, Dai's artistic expression evolved. This culminated in the emergence of Chinese modern dance as a dynamic and captivating art form that captivated audiences both locally and internationally. Dai's legacy as a pioneer of Chinese modern dance is not merely confined to her innovative choreography but also encompasses her role as a cultural ambassador, bridging the gap between East and West through the universal language of movement.

In Beijing, Dai Ailian's artistic journey unfolded amidst a city rich with cultural depth and historical significance. Immersed in the vibrant tapestry of China's capital, she found herself at the intersection of tradition and innovation, where ancient customs intertwined with contemporary trends. Navigating the streets of Beijing, Dai absorbed the essence of a city steeped in artistic heritage. From the graceful movements of traditional Chinese opera to the pulsating energy of modern dance venues, she drew inspiration from the diverse array of creative expressions that thrived within the city's embrace. Driven by a relentless pursuit of excellence, Dai embarked on a quest to refine her craft and push the boundaries of artistic possibility. Immersing herself in the study of classical Chinese dance, she mastered its intricate techniques while remaining attuned to the evolving currents of the city's cultural landscape.

As Dai honed her skills in Beijing's studios and rehearsal spaces, she embraced the spirit of collaboration and experimentation. Working alongside fellow artists and mentors, she explored new avenues of expression, blending elements of folk dance, ballet, and contemporary movement to create a dance language uniquely her own (Zhang, 2023). Through her dedication and innovation, Dai left an indelible mark on Beijing's dance culture and its artistic culture as a whole, reshaping the contours of artistic discourse and inspiring future generations of artists.

Founding Chinese Modern Dance in the Early PRC and Beyond

During the formative years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Dai immersed herself deeply in the nation's cultural and artistic milieu. Aligned with the revolutionary ethos of the era, she dedicated her talents to the advancement of socialist art, despite not being officially a Communist. Renowned within the dance community at this point, Dai played a pivotal role in spearheading the development of ethnic Chinese dance forms hybridized with Western ballet, crafted to resonate with the principles espoused by the new socialist society. Through collaborative efforts with fellow artists and cultural luminaries, Dai championed the cultivation of a distinctly Chinese dance aesthetic that celebrated the nation's rich cultural heritage while embodying the revolutionary fervor sweeping across the country. Beyond her performances on stage, Dai engaged in educational endeavors aimed at nurturing the next generation of dancers and fostering a deep-seated appreciation for China's cultural traditions. Her activities during this period underscored her unwavering commitment to leveraging art as a potent tool for effecting social change and nation-building, laying a robust foundation for the flourishing of Chinese dance in the years to come.

At this juncture, the burgeoning movement of Chinese dance was caught within the tension between Yangge and modern dance. Wilcox (2019) notes that one of Dai's founding principles, presented in her *Plenary* performance in 1946, was to draw influence from multiple sites of local performance throughout China, which Wilcox terms "ethnic and spatial inclusivity" (p. 39). What thus emerged out of the tension between Yangge and modern dance was directly influenced by Mao Zedong's cultural ideas, which included "national forms" and "remolding" (Wilcox, 2019, p. 25; Wilcox, 2020b).

Case Study: *Plenary*

The full title of the performance mentioned in the previous article is, in fact, *The Frontier Music and Dance Plenary*. The multi-part product of collaboration became the crystallization of Dai's self-prompted immersion into Chinese cultural transformation, selfless research of both "high" and "low" movement languages from different Chinese regions, built on the foundation of her cosmopolitan dance education and vision. This way, presented in the tumultuous year 1946, this performance became an extremely popular connecting link between the valorization of folk forms of dance and storytelling, cutting-edge international cultural developments, and the complexities of sociopolitical processes, underpinned by Dai's own political ambiguity. Wilcox goes so far as to assert "Chinese dance as an amalgamation of Han and non-Han performance practices" and that "Dai's *Plenary* clearly employed dance as a form of wartime ethnopolitics" (Wilcox, 2019, p. 37).

Plenary "was a gala-style concert performance featuring fourteen dance, music, and theater works that represented six ethnic groups: Han, Qiang, Tibetan, Uyghur, Yao, and Yi", while also being a product of communal work between Dai and her students at China Folk Dance Research Group and Yucai School Music Group (Wilcox, 2019, p. 35). It is evident that this assemblage-type performance became a testament to Dai achieving a leading role in the articulation of modern Chinese cultural identity, at least in the realm of dance. In orchestrating this grandiose show, Dai occupies a trickster-type role, acting both as a foreign observer, who learned Chinese language simultaneously with its dance movement, and a cultural insider, who was already bringing up a generation of culture-makers.

The exaggeratedly collective approach to putting together *Plenary* is another element of defining Chinese cultural identity in the creation of modern dance. Dai has left the personality-oriented European approach of individualistic cultural production and dispersed the agency over the collective creative assembly — from students to the rural people who let her study their dance. As mentioned before, Dai's *Plenary* was born out of the tension between traditional folk-dance forms and modern dance. In fact, it landed in the territory of the new and crucial genre of "New Yangge", which "was developed through collaborations between folk performers and

communist intellectuals, following cultural directives of CCP policy” (Wilcox, 2019, p. 24). However, Wilcox underscores the multidirectional politics of this piece, as there are many fundamental elements of it that can be read as Nationalist and associated with Kuomintang, including support from the latter, its naming, and others. (Wilcox, 2019, p. 37). It is this emphasis on collaboration between academics and folk dancers, Communist and Nationalist worldviews, representing social opposites at the time, that makes this work outstandingly Chinese and artistically radical.

To add to that, *Plenary* also served as the foundational trigger for Dai’s theoretical work dedicated to defining Chinese dance. Accompanying the performance, Dai gave a lecture called “The First Step in Developing Chinese Dance”, where she spoke about the three major aspects of Chinese dance: 1) “movement vocabularies adapted from local sources”, 2) being inspired by “from Han and non-Han sources in every geographic region”, and 3) being “new and modern while also learning from the past” (Wilcox, 2019, p. 39).

Crucially, Dai’s influence on modern Chinese dance derived in large part from her unique grasp of Western forms, including Soviet ballet and other modern dance styles she had learned in England (Chou, 2017). As Hung (2005) explains, Dai was one of a small group of Chinese dancers who had familiarized herself with Western dance styles “both in practice and in theory” (p. 88). This had significant implications for the cultural side of the Communist revolution in China. Dai herself was not a Communist, but she was known to be sympathetic with socialism. Accordingly, she was courted by Chinese communists to incorporate Maoist principles into her compositions and performances (Hung, 2005, p. 88). Arguably, one of the features that makes her work so enduring is its avoidance of any doctrinaire quality. In fact, what made her work amenable to Maoism—until the Cultural Revolution, at least—was that she was both interested in and capable of assimilating Western elements into her choreography and dance style.

Since Dai’s original training came from ballet and her upbringing was distinctly cosmopolitan, Dai was uniquely positioned to incorporate Western elements into her style while also celebrating a markedly Chinese set of characteristics in her dance. This is what made Dai’s work so cross-cultural and yet, at the same time, so specifically Chinese (Wei & Jia, 2021). In this respect, Dai worked to manifest one of the core constituents of Mao’s vision for cultural output in a revolutionary China. Mao declared in “On New Democracy,” “To nourish her own culture China needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture [...]. We should assimilate whatever is useful to us today not only from the present-day socialist and new-democratic cultures but also from the earlier cultures of other nations” (Wilcox, 2019, p. 25). Mao went on to emphasize that no Western tradition should be assimilated uncritically, but should instead be digested into a nationalist and Communist project of nation-building to the extent that it serves those purposes.

With this in mind, the influence of Soviet ideology and aesthetics remains an important point of debate among scholars of Dai’s work. On the one hand, Soviet influence was an important part of China’s political and artistic trajectory during the decades in which Dai was developing Chinese modern dance. Chou (2017) documents this element of Chinese artistic history in the 1950s by noting that state visits between Mao and Soviet leaders during this period had a formative influence on Mao’s cultural policies. On the other hand, Wilcox (2020a) contends that Dai managed to distance her work from direct Soviet influence on the ideological level, while nonetheless drawing from her background in ballet to incorporate the aesthetics and politics of socialist artistic expression.

Conclusion

As this essay has argued, Dai Ailian remains a crucial figure not only in the history of Chinese modern dance, but of dance and ballet more broadly, and especially at an international scale. Dai innovated a hybrid of Western and Soviet Ballet, Yangge, and socialist aesthetics, while drawing on her background as a marginalized person in London and colonial Hong Kong. Her experience of relative privilege in Trinidad served as a backdrop against which to rediscover her Chinese heritage in London. This experience, in turn, spurred her artistic output in Hong

Kong and later on the Chinese Mainland during the early years of the People's Republic of China. In this setting, she drew on the folk tradition of Yangge and hybridized it with modern ballet, thus manifesting Maoist principles of assimilation of Western traditions. The shifts in Dai's career were largely shaped by international contexts, creating the conditions for cross-cultural synthesis and innovation. Dai will remain a central figure in the history of Chinese modern dance, and in the history of dance more broadly. Her work reflects a unique experience of colonial inequality, a struggle with unequal treatment in white, Western society, and an effort to combine Chinese cultural identity with socialist politics.

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