

# The reinvention of tradition—in contemporary Chinese classical dance creations (1980–2010)

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## Abstract

Over the past thirty years, Chinese classical dance has developed in parallel with the explicit social process of the search for and the construction of Chinese modernity. Unlike the dismissal of tradition which tended to characterize the western process of modernization, Chinese dance practitioners embrace Chinese national and cultural characteristics for the purpose of cultural continuity as a matter of principle, subscribing to the political slogan ‘inheritance and development.’ This logic of constant change in the nature of Chinese cultural traditions leads to variation in Chinese dance vocabulary and the hybridisation of different dance styles in contemporary Chinese classical dance works. Therefore, this paper proposes that the idea of a reinvention of tradition, based on the premise of the academic establishment of Chinese classical dance as the ‘invention of tradition’, may produce new understandings about the phenomena of variation and inherent contradiction within contemporary Chinese dance creations.

Keywords: reinvention of tradition, Chinese classical dance, Chineseness, modernity, identity

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The understanding of tradition (*chuantong*) in the Chinese cultural context refers to the transmission of ideological culture, beliefs, practices, institutions, customs and habits from the past into the present in terms of the continuity of time (*chuan*) and the expansion of space (*tong*). Traditions as constructions of the processes of history penetrate people’s lives and contribute to the evolution and diversification of human civilisation. In regard to the transmission of traditions, Edward Shils (1981) proposes that a specific marker of tradition is the re-enactment and rethinking of an idea or a practice through at least three consecutive generations. Changes or modifications in tradition are incessant and inevitable, because of tensions between the endogenous desire of tradition to overcome its limited power, and the exogenous pressure from alien traditions and changes in the circumstances in which tradition operates and is directed (Shils, 1981).

[Tradition’s] essential elements persist in combination with other elements which change, but what makes it a tradition is that what are thought to be the essential elements are recognizable by an external observer as being approximately identical at successive steps or acts of transmission and possession. (Shils, 1981 p.14)

Therefore, it is widely recognized that tradition is neither an immutable fossil nor an ancient form existing without re-creative flux, especially amidst the constant currents of assimilation and variation of the overarching tradition of Chinese history. The book,

*Tradition is a river* written by Huang Peng-Xiang (1990) that depicts the image of Chinese music tradition as a continuous but ever-changing river seemingly resonates with Chinese people, especially in the ongoing processes of modernisation.

Attitudes toward tradition in the west and China have been different across the course of modernisation. Since the Age of Enlightenment (in the west), tradition has been regarded as unable to be proven and/or tested rationally and scientifically and, consequently, traditional beliefs have been seen to conflict with reason, the guiding principle of becoming modernised: “Modern” not only signifies that it is superior to the past—“tradition”—that it defines itself: the “tradition/modernity” binary is constructed upon a linear conception of time containing a teleology of “progress” (Wang, Hutters and Ebrary, 2011, p. 270). The remoteness and unfitting-ness of tradition to contemporaneous settings are seemingly the main reasons for tradition’s dismissal and rejection in modern times but, at the same time, innovators may not anticipate that the cost of their victories lies in the new practices also becoming traditional, thus ignoring the truth that the present is ‘in the grip of the past’ (Shils, 1981, p. 45).

The argument about relations between ‘tradition and modernity’ has dominated critical theory in China throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the critique and reflection on Chinese traditional culture giving rise to the label of the century ‘as one of criticism and enlightenment’ (Chen & Ryden, 2009, p. 355). Chinese scholars did not contest whether to accept modernisation, reformation or western culture, rather the core of their discussions was invariably concentrated around how to treat tradition. The argument can be summarized by two opposite opinions: the radical view of completely dismissing Chinese tradition in contrast to the moderate view of selectively inheriting the ‘excellent’ parts of traditional culture. Compared to the relatively singular evolution of western modernisation, the impact and external pressure from western civilisation and internal desire to achieve a nationally legitimised modernisation are interwoven in the construction of Chinese modernity. Therefore, arguments concerning the perception of Chinese culture inevitably involve the issue of how to treat influences from western culture. In the 1990s, Chinese scholars formed a consensus on the issue of tradition and modernity, which claimed that ‘tradition is not something that we can simply disregard. To refuse or reject tradition is not possible ... the meaning of tradition depends far more on how we interpret and implement it, how we creatively transmit its meaning’ (Chen & Ryden, 2009, p. 358).

## The reinvention of tradition

During the development of Chinese dance, especially for Chinese classical dance, the discernment and evaluation of dance tradition has always been a major issue for the community. The slogans that consider the value of tradition vary from ‘taking the essence and discarding the dregs’<sup>2</sup> to ‘inheritance and development’ which is still projected today. The contradictions/tensions between tradition and innovation directly influence every aspect of dance development. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, political institutions and cultural organisations needed to be rebuilt urgently. In 1951, the Ministry of Culture issued a new policy called ‘Instruction to Consolidate and Strengthen the National Theatre Work’, which

indicated that past literary and artistic propagandists should be developed into professional troupes to construct theatre arts. The general assignment was directed towards 'striving to develop new opera, new drama, new music and new dance, to educate people with revolutionary spirit and patriotism' (Feng, 2002, p.6). Under instructions to construct a new Chinese dance art, the Beijing Dance School (BDS) was founded in 1954 and initially set up four teaching and research groups: Chinese classical dance, Chinese folk dance, ballet, and foreign representative folk dance (character dance). 'The highest priority for the preliminary Chinese dance art at that time was to cultivate qualified professional dancers as early as possible; this was also the starting point of creating a dance curriculum' (Li, Gao & Zhu, 2004, p. 3).

From the standpoint of creating a national dance to promote traditional culture and demonstrate national features, the notion of 'Chinese classical dance' (*gudian wu*) was put forward by Ouyang Yu-Qian in 1950. Although the imperial dance as an independent form in China had been almost lost after the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960–1279), its legacy had been inherited and extracted into living traditions such as traditional opera and martial arts. Therefore, Chinese classical dance refers to the dance in Peking opera (*jingju*) and Kun opera (*kunqu*) at that time (Ye, 1986). The syllabus for Chinese classical dance subsequently involved an absorption and reference to Chinese traditional opera, martial arts and ballet. Li Zheng-Yi (2004) explains that Chinese traditional opera is regarded as an artistic form that preserves rich Chinese ancient dance and is often adopted as an ideal teaching resource. Ballet training is viewed as an effective and scientific system that is relevant to physical training for all kinds of professional dancers worldwide, and is expected to offer advanced experience and methodology for creating a Chinese national dance training system. In other words, the combining of traditional opera with ballet was under consideration for temporal and practical reasons. This training system was constantly modified and improved, and became the hegemonic dance training system, greatly impacting on the aesthetic criteria and physique of Chinese dance practitioners for nearly half a century. As Jiang Dong (2008, p. 111) argues, 'no matter which form of dance you study, all dancers regard the Chinese classical dance training system as a foundation ... and this perception has never wavered'.

With the changes in social, political and cultural environments after the difficult time in Chinese dance development during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), dance practitioners realised that there were problems pertaining to the confusion of dance styles and the lack of intrinsic national dance features occurring in Chinese classical dance. Tang Man-Cheng (1987, p. 20) explains the considerations of creating teaching material based on refining training elements, rather than learning traditions through routines and movements:

we as a Chinese nation recognise that the so-called tradition refers to the accumulation and formation of the overall aesthetic tendency throughout history .... So we transform the idea from the inheritance of tradition formally to possess it aesthetically.

Therefore, establishing the national dance identity and exploring particular national characteristics became major issues for the development of Chinese classical dance in the 1980s. The creation of 'body rhyme' (*shenyun*) was seen as a necessary stage in the perfection of Chinese classical dance training and also as an aesthetic symbol

of Chinese classical dance breaking away from the traditional opera completely (Li et al. 2004). According to Wang Pei-Ying (cited in Wilcox, 2011, p. 158), a professor of Chinese classical dance at the Beijing Dance Academy (BDA):

The creation of *Shenyn* was about preserving the essence of Eastern culture in our dancing ... We asked ourselves, what is that unique gaze, that movement of the hand, or that twisting of the back that makes Eastern beauty so unique?

Regarding the construction and development of Chinese classical dance, dance scholars gradually achieved a common view that Chinese classical dance is not a copy of ancient Chinese dance, but is the inheritance, understanding and promotion of ancient forms by contemporary people with their spirituality and aesthetic pursuits. Li (cited in Jiang, 2008, p. 5) argues that

we do not have enough information to preserve it intact; we can only reconstruct it. Reconstruction is an action of contemporary people so inevitably, changes are made ... apart from the inheritance of tradition, reference [to other dance forms] is also unavoidable.

Most importantly, the significance of Chinese classical dance is to demonstrate the essence of traditional dance culture and to seek to preserve and continue the 'Chineseness' in bodily form. Wilcox (2011, p.176) argues that 'the realness of Chineseness as an actually existing quality of a cultural tradition or group of people is never questioned, and the continued promotion and preservation of Chineseness is taken for granted as an absolute value'. The institutional training system becomes not only the hotbed for constantly refining, abstracting and innovating traditional dance elements, but also a place for transmitting these invented traditions through generations of dance practitioners.

The perception of tradition for most Chinese dance practitioners and scholars means an acknowledgment of tradition as dynamic and changeable in order to maintain the vitality of the cultural tradition itself. This phenomenon corresponds to the idea of 'tradition is a river' mentioned above by Huang Peng-Xiang (1990). Furthermore, according to Shils (1981, p. 15):

Traditions are not independently self-reproductive or self-elaborating. Only living, knowing, desiring human beings can enact them and reenact them and modify them. Traditions develop because the desire to create something truer and better or more convenient is alive in those who acquire and possess them.

Since the mid-1980s, dance scholars have demonstrated how performers invent and reinvent ethnic and national identities through movement. As Reed (1998, p. 526) argues, 'patterning and principles of continuity exist across domains of movement, space, material objects, music and verbal play'. These theories regarding tradition and its change provide a theoretical framework for the idea that 'the reinvention of tradition' proposed in this article, is based on the premise of the academic establishment of Chinese classical dance as an 'invention of tradition'. The logic of constant change in the nature of Chinese cultural tradition leads to variations in

dance vocabulary and the hybridisation of different dance styles in contemporary Chinese classical dance works. This paper seeks to analyse the philosophical background and articulate the approaches and reasons that make the variations and innovations of Chinese traditional dance in our current context.

### The philosophical basis for the ‘Reinvention of Tradition’

In 1993, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1993, p.1) published their influential anthology *The invention of tradition*, which analysed the emergence of new ‘traditions’ in the west, colonial India, Africa and Pacific in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with Hobsbawm arguing that these constituted ‘the invention of tradition’. According to Hobsbawm’s (1993, p.1) introduction,

“in-vented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

At the same time, he pointed out that the continuity of invented tradition is largely ‘factitious’ (Hobsbawm, 1993, p.1). Moreover, Hobsbawm (1993, p.13) argued that the invention of tradition is universal, in that all cultures, to a certain extent, invent tradition and that this inventing process performs a social function in establishing social cohesion and community membership: ‘one specific interest of “invented traditions” ... highly relevant [is the] comparatively recent historical innovation, the “nation” with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest’. Arguably, the establishment of BDS was the result of aspiration to reconstruct national culture and identification for Chinese people after a long period of social unrest. The creation of Chinese classical dance as an ‘invented tradition’ in the 1950s has been viewed as a symbol of national dance by dance practitioners, which aims to build cultural continuity with the historical past, demonstrating its authenticity, and emphasizing its contemporary significance for keeping abreast with the times as well. Hobsbawm (1993, p. 2) proposes that ‘the object and characteristics of “traditions”, including invented ones, is invariance’. However, the perception of Chinese cultural tradition for most dance scholars is dynamic and changeable. Chinese dance scholar Luo Xiong-yan (cited in Wilcox, 2011, p. 94) suggests that ‘it is the capacity of Chinese culture to constantly change, to adopt foreign elements, and to recreate itself constantly new which gives it a continued existence and vitality’.

Emily Wilcox (2011, p.114) also considers Chinese dance is an invented tradition, ‘I argue that the dialectical epistemology of Chinese dance has a strongly postcolonial component, which makes ... the invention of tradition ... take on different meanings in the context of Chinese dance practice’. From the perspective of global politics, the state and representative characteristics of the Chinese dance tradition do indeed manifest a postcolonial-like component, driven by the desire to preserve the dignity of national cultural identity through the renewal of Chinese cultural traditions, as well as being open to develop relationships with the global (western) community. However, it should be clarified that China has never been colonised in the strict sense of the word. Continuity of Chinese cultural tradition has been disrupted at times by interference from foreign powers, as well as by domestic cultural radicalism.

Like some other non-western countries or nations (India for example), the concept of 'tradition' appeared in China in the modern era in response to a perceived loss of tradition. Wilcox (2011, p.114) says that 'Chinese modernity was from the beginning a project set up in explicit confrontation with European modernity'. This view coincides with the prevailing views about the Chinese historical course since the mid-nineteenth century, but it is still questionable. Is modernity destined to be incompatible with tradition? According to Yu Ying-shih (2012), the so called modern is the modernisation of tradition; the modern not only contained in the tradition but also transformed from it, so there is a dialectical relationship between the traditional and the modern. Therefore, I suggest that the 'invention of tradition' pursued in Chinese modernisation is largely derived from a national awareness of self-innovation rather than from resisting western pressures of modernity. In fact, the concept of the 'reinvention of tradition' seems more appropriate in this situation. The very process of the reinvention of tradition is the process of Chinese modernisation.

## Approaches to the 'Reinvention of Tradition' in Chinese classical dance

### *Establishing 'Classics' in institutional dance training*

Since the emergence of Chinese classical dance as a national dance form established in 1954 at the BDA, a continual process of reinvention has occurred whilst still investigating and promoting Chinese dance traditions. Apart from theoretical research in dance history that provides understanding and materials for dance creation, the main approach to formalising Chinese classical dance is institutional training. Jiang (2008) proposes that the making of Chinese classical dance is a classroom process. He argues, 'classical dance developed from a non-classical to a classical state and has been undergoing a process of classic-making [*gudianhua*], which means how a certain dance form is formalised' (Jiang 2008, p. 12). By this Jiang means that the classroom is a place for refining relatively unstructured classical styles of movement, indebted to traditions usually associated with a particular region or to Chinese opera styles, into a formalized classical status under the generalised term of Chinese classical dance. And so, classical dance continued to uphold the philosophical premise of a tradition in a constant state of invention and reinvention.

In the common understanding of classical dance for Chinese dance scholars, 'classical' contains double meanings: ancient origins (*gu*) and the notion of being exemplary (*dian*), which makes a distinction between perceptions of a generalised ancient dance belonging to the past and classical dance developed in contemporary terms. According to Sun Yin (2006), for a classical dance piece to be considered under the umbrella of classical dance, it is not enough to be perceived as ancient but the dance also must contain what might be understood as the essence of an ancient dance culture. No matter whether a classical dance practitioner believes that classical dance authentically captures another time or is a reinvention of that purported authenticity, its point of inspiration must lie in maintaining the inheritance of many generations for national cultural identification. As Shills (1981, p. 24) analyses, 'What are called "classics" have normative consequences within literature and art; they provide models for the aspirations of subsequent authors and artists ... this normative transmission ... links the generations'.

The major approach of establishing ‘classics’ in Chinese classical dance has been to refine what might be considered the essential elements which are infiltrated into the syllabus design, basic training and choreography. The aesthetic principles of the Chinese classical dance have been refined into actions described as ‘twisting, leaning, circular and curved’, while the routes of moving follow the horizontal circle, vertical circle and the figure of eight. In the ‘body rhyme’ class (*shenyun*), Tang (1987, pp. 21–22) explains that all ‘the refinement of elements is not a dead movement, but can be derived, evolved and developed continuously; and it is also able to assist contemporary people to reflect their spirituality’. In addition, there is a very close relationship between basic training and choreography within the institutional training system. The classical dance basic training is a foundation for many Chinese choreographers, inspiring them to create dance works with novelty. The basic foundation steps or movements allow for creative innovation, offering material that is either the embodiment or the abstraction of an existing cultural tradition.

### ***From deconstruction to reconstruction***

If a new set of classical training styles has been established and treated as norms to evaluate the authenticity of Chinese classical dance through continuously refining and developing essential elements in an institutionalized training system, then choreography has played an important role in the reinvention of the tradition during the development of Chinese dance. When innovation was strongly advocated in Chinese dance practice in 1990s, a course called ‘deconstruction of movement’ (known as deconstruction) was designed for the Choreography Department in BDA. In the Chinese dictionary, deconstruction is composed of two words: *jie* and *gou*. *Jie* means separation, decomposition and disintegration, while *gou* refers to formation, combination and structure. In an interview I conducted with the founder of the course, Sun Long-Kui in 2014, he explains that ‘deconstruction means disintegration and reconstruction. Every element could be disintegrated into its original pattern and reconstructed in terms of the figure, image and personality required in the work’. That idea derives from the Chinese traditional philosophy *Yi Jing (the Book of Changes)*, which aimed to reveal the significance, harmony and dynamic creativity of the ceaseless transformation of things and situations. According to Sun, the intention of the *deconstruction* course is to search for the essence of Chinese classical dance and create dance works with unique Chinese characteristics. *Deconstruction* takes body rhyme as a movement reference and innovates the form through changing the dancer’s sense of expression, direction, speed, force, range, weight and so on, a process through which to discover the potential of every body part and break or unsettle the original stereotype of classical dance. After realizing the extent to which ballet and traditional opera influenced classical dance’s basic training, *deconstruction* emphasizes the natural state of the body that comes from *Tai Chi*, to enrich the classical dance body’s language based on an exploration of form and style.

The idea of ‘disintegration and reconstruction’ has had a marked impact on Chinese choreographers since the 1990s. Although the subject matter and style represented in each work is different, the choreographic processes have similarities to some extent. Choreographer Gao Cheng-Ming (1997) argues that there are two modes of deconstruction of movement. One leads to metamorphosis, which refers to

the transformation of traditional movement, to change its original body dynamic and moving direction as well as to abstract concrete movements for the purpose of creation. The other one is reconstruction, which means the readjustment of movement and rhythm in order to generate fresh feeling while keeping the basis of the traditional movement. It is evident that the former approach is more open and inclusive to innovation than the latter. Under the pressure of expectation and passion for novelty, the postures, body dynamic and transitions between movements have been transformed and, I feel, have greatly enriched the original body language. These changes have consistently influenced the aesthetic perception among Chinese dance practitioners.

The term deconstruction appeared as a concept in linguistic philosophy in western scholarship initiated by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s and became an important research approach which gradually penetrated many other fields of humanities and social sciences in what is now known as the postmodern movement. Even though Chinese choreographers might not fully comprehend the background and philosophy of this idea/term, there is a wide application of the idea of deconstruction in Chinese choreographers' approaches to their work. However, Sun claims that understanding deconstruction for Chinese dance choreographers is different to the idea put forward in deconstructionism, and people are not supposed to apply the term deconstruction to explain Chinese choreographers' works mechanically (personal interview, at the Central Institute of Socialism, Beijing on 15 January 2013).

The so-called 'deconstructionists' aim, on the one hand, was to break the original system and its closed structure, as well as to eliminate its unified center and on the other hand, to try to combine various factors freely in order to generate a kind of unlimited network of possible meanings in their works. All experience and knowledge is treated as uncertain in deconstruction, which seemingly corresponds to the moving nature of dance, in the Chinese deconstruction context. On the surface, the deformation of movement is similar to the idea of deconstruction in form, but the different aims of operation are destined to generate different outcomes. For example, for deconstructionists, the free combination after disintegration is still in a state of constant motion, the center of the temporary structure is not fixed. However, within the Chinese use of deconstruction in a dance context, deconstructing traditional body language is not the ultimate purpose, rather the purpose is to seek possibilities of renewal together with the continuity of tradition. Just as choreographer Jiang Jing-Yi (2005, p. 51) argues, 'reconstruction is the motivation and purpose of deconstruction'. The idea of ceaseless transformation of things to create the unforced harmony developed from *Yi Jing* to Daoism has infiltrated the minds of Chinese people and is regarded as a part of cultural tradition over time. Undoubtedly, the Chinese have been exploring the *Dao* (rules) of change for far longer than Derrida.

Whether approaching composition through body rhyme or the deconstruction of movement, these choreographers seem to tacitly admit that there are inherently normative elements of Chineseness embodied in traditional culture which are 'possibly even locatable in the genetic make-up of all Chinese people' (Wilcox, 2011, p. 161). It is as if the case for innovation of tradition must be made and is always being made, because maintaining the continuity of tradition has been regarded as a

responsibility for most Chinese dance practitioners with their cultural pride and self-awareness.

There is no doubt that since the establishment of Chinese classical dance, the BDA and institutional training have played a major role as bearers of the creative propensity of transformation involved in the promotion of traditional dance. This nationally-managed dance academy is endowed with public authority and its special position is widely influential. In addition to the establishment of classics, the institutional training system also leaves open the possibility of addition, innovation and improvement for its new works. According to Shils (1981, p.179), 'It is these institutions which make possible a continuous extension of the traditions of their subjects and the continuous accumulation, not just of fact, but of deeper analytical penetration, which reaches further and further into the nature of the universe'.

## Conclusion

Following this line of argument, it is proposed that Chinese classical dance tends to be conceptually and practically innovative, in spite of following the rule of maintaining Chineseness as its essential core. Practitioners expect to maintain cultural continuity by persisting in the combination of new elements and ideas, but the potential problem which might occur is a suspicion about the authenticity of invented traditions. In contemporary times, heated discussions have been raised about how to define and categorise an increasing number of new Chinese classical dance works, which have significantly departed from traditional aesthetic characteristics and language.

Rather than the negation of tradition as in European history, modernity in China is not a result of a break from tradition but from carrying tradition forward alongside modernisation. Therefore, for the Chinese, cultural self-awareness stems from a sense of pride in the reinvention of tradition and is derived from the dual capacity to preserve a national cultural identity whilst making new and meaningful contemporary connections with the world. As well-known Chinese painter Wu Guan-Zhong (2009, p. 97) argues:

Tradition is a current, like an endless river. That river is flowing against the current, metamorphosing along with the different landforms and changing direction continuously .... Actually flowing through the long river of tradition is not water, but blood. The descendants have been infiltrated by that gene, that blood and spiritual temperament. Variations in tradition are like the ups and downs of the river.

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1. All Chinese quotations in this article are translated by the researcher.

2. In 1940, Mao Ze-Dong put forward the idea of critically inheriting the traditional culture in his *Xin Minzhu Zhuyi Lun (Theory on New Democracy)*, which emphasised the principle of eliminating feudal dross and assimilating a democratic essence. In 1942, Mao gave an influential "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art", calling for literature and the arts to serve the masses. In 1960, the third China National Literature Figure and Artists Conference reaffirmed the guiding principle of the inheritance of cultural tradition as critical and summed this up as 'taking the essence and discarding the dregs'.

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This article has not been published, submitted, or accepted for publication elsewhere.

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## Biography

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