

CHINESE MINORITY DANCES:  
PROCESSORS AND PRESERVATIONISTS  
PART II

Many of my informants, both processors and preservationists, expressed deep concern over the mismanagement and misrepresentation of valuable field data on the minjian wudao. They disagreed, however, about which branch of the national collection project was to be assigned blame for these mistakes. Some researchers felt that poor teaching techniques and skills of observation were responsible for the loss of nuance and subtlety. Others felt frustrated by the demands of government directives, saying that certain minority dances simply could not be staged for mass consumption without considerable alteration, yet they were compelled to stage them regardless of the distortions involved. The opinion was also expressed that Chinese mass audiences in general were not particularly interested in folk and minority dances in the first place, making it even more difficult for the dance community to remain popular and entertaining in the public's eyes. All these issues are being debated openly and in private, and no dance professional remains untouched by the many controversies.<sup>1</sup>

The preservationists form a substantial group of researchers who devote their time exclusively to the collection and documentation of minjian wudao. Over the years, these researchers have independently developed their own techniques and methods of collecting and recording field data, much like the processors, although with substantially different aims in mind. Recently, writers in professional journals and symposia on the subject have encouraged more systematized techniques and a lingua franca of human movement that would unify and coordinate their efforts. Systems of documentation are being devised that satisfy at least to some degree, both the Chinese and the international dance communities.

Several methods of notation have been adopted and developed, including a 1984 innovation said to be as effective as Labanotation (See Appendix III). The techniques used until now for general publication and distribution include standardized pictographs, some photographs, Chinese musical notation,<sup>2</sup> a notation of directional patterns and gesture direction, as well as illustration and description of costumes, settings and props (See Appendix II in Part I of this article, for example). Some video recording is done, and to my knowledge, approximately thirty ethnic dances in their original settings have been documented in this manner.<sup>3</sup> There is generally no account of the motivations or meanings within these dances other than superficial explanations as to their 'purpose' in the tribe. This is the general tendency of most documentation of this type and is certainly not a problem unique to the Chinese.

In 1982 a large scale research project was started that involved hundreds of specialists in the dance. The central headquarters of this massive research endeavor is located in Beijing at the Arts Research Institute (Yishu Yanjiusu).<sup>4</sup> It is hoped that by the year 1990 a comprehensive series of volumes recording all the "representative" dances of the minority peoples and tribal Han will be published for educational and archival purposes. At the time of my visit, two provinces, Hunan and Jiangsu, had been selected as models prior to a nationwide effort scheduled to begin in 1985. Editorial boards had been selected in each province along with the central editorial board in Beijing, and decisions are being made at this time concerning standardization.<sup>5</sup>

A leading researcher in Hunan informed me that Hunan province had been given five years and 200,000 yuan (about \$100,000) to conduct extensive research and to pioneer techniques to be utilized nationally. She was impressed with the amount of money and apparent status given to this project by the central government. What she found, however, was that in order to fulfill the directive, it would cost more time and money than had been scheduled. In one district of Hunan<sup>6</sup> alone, her research team had spent over 2,000 yuan collecting and documenting available data. The process of collection she described includes the following stages and procedures:

- (a) A survey is sent to all districts and villages in order to locate available materials and local dancers who could remember older dances. Oftentimes the rarest dances are found either in the remotest regions, which are difficult to reach, or in the memories of dancers who could no longer execute the movements. In Hunan, given the inherent problems involved, this procedure alone took over a year to complete.
- (b) Local dance troupes in each district are directed to conduct investigations, learn dances within their districts, and generally aid in the process of uncovering dance materials.
- (c) Local cultural bureaux and minority commissions are directed to open up channels of communication with remote tribes in order to encourage their cooperation. Until recently religious dances have been prohibited and labelled anticommunist, and it is necessary to reverse these prohibitions and erase fears of retribution.<sup>7</sup>
- (d) Research teams are then sent to areas already investigated and surveyed by the local authorities and research aides. Over a period of several months local dances are observed and notated in each district. Interviews are held with informants and notes are taken on the general format and cultural significance of each dance. Although every attempt is made to witness the dances in context, this is often not possible as the ritual itself may have been discarded and only the memory of the dance remains. In this instance, I was told, a performance of the event is sometimes

re-enacted by the local inhabitants on request of the research team in order that photographic and video documents can be made. The research team, in such cases, pays the dancers and provides money for the costumes to be re-created. Sometimes these artifacts have been buried or destroyed by the minorities themselves in order to conceal evidence of religious activity from the government police during the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, much of the past has been destroyed just since the founding of the PRC, and it is this kind of cultural tragedy that the present government is so eager to rectify.

(e) Research teams from the Beijing Arts Research Institute have recently been sent around the country to document certain dances and rare festivals on video-tape. The more common dances are not generally video-taped, as this is an expensive procedure and it is felt that this method should be used only in such cases where there is danger of immediate extinction. The national research and documentation conducted by the Research Institute eventually will be added to the appropriate volume for each province.

(f) The provincial research teams, on occasion, conduct special conferences in order that rare artists may convene in one place. The wupo, or 'sorcerers' conference in Hengshan held in 1983 is an example of this method of field research. It is believed that in this way, more in-depth research can be conducted and by a greater number of researchers. Participants in this event felt some of the inconveniences, hazards and expenses of field work may be eliminated in this manner and that a more systematic and thorough exchange of ideas among informants and researchers can take place. This method seems further to remove the performers and the events from their original contexts. It is commonly felt among many anthropologists that this practice will inhibit adequate analysis.

(g) Once the materials have been initially observed and documented, it is then the responsibility of the provincial team to organize and categorize the data (xheng-li) according to ethnicity, district, style, type, and such. It will be necessary to standardize the material according to the guidelines set by the central editorial board in Beijing. Description, terminology, musical scoring, illustration style and print format all must be centrally coordinated for purposes of continuity and accessibility. On the one hand, this kind of thing can be seen to represent sensible bibliographic procedures and the spirit of systemization is to be commended. On the other hand, there is the danger that these materials will be oversimplified so as to suit the format and goals of the research project and that they will be changed beyond recognition.

(h) Finally, each province will ultimately be responsible for printing its own finished volume, once it has been approved by the central editorial board. It was pointed out to me that "unhealthy" and "feudal" elements will have already been weeded out and only those dances felt to be "healthy" and "representative" of its people will be included in these volumes. It is not clear to me whether or not the dances had also to be aesthetically pleasing according to Han tastes. It must be assumed, however,

that those dances not included in these volumes will be left to suffer their own fates and to survive or perish as cultural traditions have done in the past. Certainly no attempt that I know of is being made by the government either to preserve or to eliminate them.

The first draft of these initial model investigations in Hunan and Jiangsu will have been completed by the end of 1984. Experts from different parts of the country will be invited to comment upon and criticize these efforts some time in 1985, prior to the initiation of the project on a national level. Hunan and Jiangsu provinces were chosen as models for this national project both because of their rich ethnic dance materials and because of the calibre of the researchers in those provinces. Other provinces not so fortunate will be assisted by specialists from the Arts Research Institute. Already, video-tape crews and research teams have been sent out to document rare materials. Each researcher usually has a particular area of interest and 'expertise' that, it is hoped, will be called upon during this major collecting procedure. One researcher in Hunan, for instance, specializes in the dances of the Dong people and Hunanese religious dances such as those of the wupo, while her husband is more interested in the dances of the Tu Jia and Miao peoples. Both have spent the better part of their lives pursuing these interests. Certainly many of the 'preservationists' are dedicated and experienced researchers, each with a particular insight. Unlike the 'processors', they have a professional interest in preserving this ethnographic material in its original state so far as the government directives will allow.

One preservationist explained to me that the purpose of this national project is twofold: (a) to provide materials for choreographers and teachers, and (b) to give scientists materials to study in order that the minority cultures and people become "better understood". Ultimately, there is but one goal towards which all of this research is directed: "to develop a dance form which expresses modern life in a nationally unified country" (Fieldnotes, 1983).

When prescriptions are placed upon the investigation (even in initial stages) such as the censorship of "unhealthy" elements, there is clearly a conflict of interest between the scholarly research community and government policy towards this data. The interests and efforts of researchers and scholars in China are directed towards national economic equality and active social change. In the words of the noted sociologist, Fei Xiao-teng,

Genuine applied anthropology must be a science serving the interests of the masses... China has many nationalities and is doing her best to reduce and eventually eliminate the cultural and economic differences among them in order to achieve modernization (1981:18, 26).

Western anthropologists would, on the whole, reject these claims and although it is not my intention to provoke controversy, it is important to be aware of the profoundly different viewpoints on the issues at hand.

There are no departments of anthropology in Chinese universities due to the Chinese socialist point of view; therefore, any discussion of anthropological theory is generally not understood by most researchers involved with this collection project. My own interests and concerns regarding the approach to these ethnographic materials held no interest for my Chinese peers. There were areas of mutual interest and concern: I believe that the Chinese dance-collection procedures can be scrutinized and constructively criticized by the international dance research community without political bias. Suggestions made to the Chinese researchers concerning these issues were received with great interest, but it is extremely important for non-Chinese and non-socialists to recognize the specific interests and goals of the dance research community in the PRC.

Although this dance collection project is as thorough and widespread as any in the world -- perhaps more so -- and more ambitious in scope, there are many problems that must be addressed, both from an anthropological point of view and from the perspectives of the international dance research community. The goal of the Chinese project is twofold: to disseminate the ethnic dances as formalized dance-art and to create a homogeneous culture. As a result there is a predisposed viewpoint to the research endeavor which jeopardizes the scholarly (and 'scientific') aspects of the project from the start.

"Art need not necessarily be an interface to dance. In fact, more often art is not an interface to dance. There can be powerful and dissonant side effects from the insistence of including art as an interface to dance. The manipulative attitudes of super-ordinate peoples can force adaptation by subordinate peoples that is not the same as an internally developed evolution"  
(Keali'inohomoku, 1980:42).

Although Keali'inohomoku speaks specifically of the treatment of Hopi dances in America, her comments could well apply to the situation in China today. When certain dances are forced onto the public stage, the world loses (as this anthropologist points out) as much as it gains. Since many dances are simply not "aesthetically pleasing" to the general audience in the contexts within which they belong, the PRC has taken it upon itself to "beautify" this dance material. At the same time, much valuable, informative and significant material is being destroyed or lost. In principle, a scholarly investigation of ethnographic materials should not be aesthetically biased or politically controlled. Keali'inohomoku also reminds us that (western) "Anthropologists study dance as non-art because the discipline of anthropology is committed to the principle of cultural relativity" (1980:41). The dance seen only as "art" is mere ethnocentrism -- a label the Han are eager to avoid. However, one cannot speak of anthropology and ethnographic research with the same assumptions in a socialist government as one

could in a non-socialist one. As one informant put it, "The government directives and goals have confused the various issues at hand. They want these dances to be modern and beautiful while at the same time, they want authenticity" (Fieldnotes, 1983). Perhaps it is the case that some cakes cannot be 'had' and 'eaten' at the same time.

Clearly, the Chinese value this cultural data of dances and they are investing an enormous amount of time, money, thought and effort towards their maintenance and survival. At the present time, the government appears to have a political use for the materials, which explains much of the sudden interest and investment. Minjian wudao is both a viable bridge to the numerous minority cultures and an essential factor in the creation of a unified Chinese culture. The issue at stake is whether or not the prescribed methods and procedures, plus the lack of a sophisticated theoretical approach, are adequate for the preservation and documentation of this rare material. Will it be possible in years to come for the research community, Chinese or otherwise, to study and analyze these cultural traditions? Indeed, we may well ask, 'whose cultural traditions are they -- the minorities, or the Han?'

Chinese thinkers from the beginning saw art as a way to influence behavior. Confucius even explored the ethical impact of good and bad music. So when the Maoists set strict rules for painting, film, music and dance in the 1940's and again in the 1960's, no one was very surprised (Mathews, 1983:267).

Even before the 1949 socialist take-over, China had been a great believer in using the arts for purposes of diplomacy and propaganda. At first, Chinese policy was to allow cultural exchange to take place only with other third world countries and within its own borders. For example, the Eastern Song and Dance Troupe in Beijing was established in the 1950's at the suggestion of the late Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in order to introduce some Asian, African and Latin American dances to China. But since 1979 and the overthrow of the isolationist Gang of Four, there has been a tremendous increase in international exchange. The Minister of Culture, Mr. Zhu Muzhi, states the official position:

Films, paintings, music, dances and other performing and visual arts are more effective than books in enhancing mutual understanding among nations...since they are images of living people (Li Xing, 1983).

There are various avenues by which processed minjian wudao can reach the public. Institutions directly involved with the dissemination of dances include professional dance schools, amateur dance teams within the education system, amateur dance troupes found in nearly every factory, production team and work unit, local and provincial cultural bureaux, and local and provincial professional dance troupes.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from these channels of dissemination, another form of dance exchange that takes place is that within the army of Red Guard performance troupes stationed in or transported to underdeveloped areas. Every 'banner' or district in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (See Appendix I in Part I of this article) has its own Ulan muchir or revolutionary cultural troupe. These troupes tour the scattered settlements of the area, performing songs and dances usually created by the troupe's own members. In most cases, traditional dances of the region are utilized in these recreations, along with politically appropriate narrative. For example, 'Patrolling the Border' was created in 1977 and performed by the Red Guard Troupe throughout Outer Mongolia<sup>9</sup> to the resident Mongolians, in an effort to encourage their cooperation in military matters. Many of my informants began their careers as Red Guard performers during the turbulent years following the revolution.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976) there have been several choreographer's competitions: all those choreographers who received prizes in the 1980 competition were subsequently invited to participate in an unprecedented choreographer's conference held in Beijing. During panel discussions and lecture demonstrations, each choreographer explained what the conceptual premise of his or her prize winning piece had been and how he or she had gone about making it. Also, experts in the field gave lectures on choreography and dealt with such subjects as 'How to develop folk dance for the stage'. The formats developed at this conference are now in standard usage by choreographers everywhere in China.

Many choreographers, my informant explained, had never received any choreographic training, although they had been choreographing professionally for many years. This event offered the first opportunity for professionals in the field to come together to discuss their craft, and most were grateful for the formal guidance and ways in which they were taught to adhere to government standards and requirements. As an example: my informant demonstrated a minority dance which involved movements performed close to the ground, but then explained how the 'beautification' process develops these movements into ones which enable the body to remain erect (a more beautiful and 'noble' posture, according to the government, as well as the public at large). "This gives a more positive, healthy look to the authentic steps without changing them completely", he told me. Chinese classical dance vocabulary has also been expanded at this conference, and various ways in which group dances could best be presented on stage were discussed. The methods and procedures for jiagong have evidently been codified by the eminent choreographers of the country as well as the Ministry of Culture, who oversaw this event.

Genuine creation is precisely that for which we can give no prescribed technique or recipe; and technique reaches its limits precisely at that point beyond which real creativity is called for -- in the sciences as well as the arts. But it is just at this point in the arts, where technique ceases to be sufficient,

that we catch a glimpse of the meaning that is central to technique-technology. A technique is a standard method that can be taught. It is a recipe that can be fully conveyed from one person to another. A recipe always lays down a certain number of steps which, if followed to the letter, ought to lead invariably to the end desired. The logicians call this a decision procedure (Barrett, 1978:22).

Clearly, the recipes for Chinese dancing in any form have been established. Within this framework, there is a great deal of opportunity for interpretation by choreographers, as long as the most basic guidelines are followed. There is, however, also a great potential for unintentional distortion of original materials because so much depends upon the individual abilities of the teachers, researchers and dancers involved in each step of the process. Observations lead one to conclude that professional dancers in China (and in particular the teachers) are skilled mimics with remarkable abilities to perceive subtle gestural characteristics within different forms. Chinese classical dance forms emphasize attention to detail and stylization, thereby affording these professionals a useful training ground.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, it must be assumed that a great deal of movement information as well as meaning and content is lost or misunderstood with each stage of the dissemination process.

Principally, there are two main factors to blame for this: first, there is the problem of 'general transference', where, with each stage of translation and re-creation, the movement material is potentially rearranged or lost. Many dance specialists swore that they were able to recognize inauthentic material instantly and claimed to be very familiar with the original materials they had observed in the field. In general, however, one has to assume that the formulae used for recognition are stereotyped; that they are 'recipes' that are influenced by cultural biases and political pressures.<sup>11</sup>

Second, there is the problem of misapplication. As is the case with most folk and traditional forms of dance, the original context and purpose is removed once they are mounted on a proscenium stage, which was designed for a different purpose than the performance spaces in the folk contexts. In China, this removal is further amplified by the fact that the proscenium stage is decidedly non-Chinese and was imported from the West only within the last century. Royce alludes to the underlying issues thus:

What, if any, is the significance of context in determining meaning in the dance? ... If we want to learn how and what dance communicates, then this is a question that must concern us (1977:208).

This author indicates that there are at least two levels of context, one referring to the "context of individual steps and combinations of steps within the totality called a dance", and the other referring to the context within which the totality of the dance takes place -- or the occasion of the danced event.<sup>12</sup>

Few dance researchers in China are knowledgeable of the customs of the minorities or the contexts in which their dances take place. Even though they might possess a certain familiarity with the cultural context of these dances, they usually do not speak the languages and cannot gain access to information that has not been screened by the government. The minorities themselves are in a great state of transition within their own cultures and 'authentic' cultural artifacts and/or information is often buried, disguised or simply lost, even to the members of the minority group concerned.

Cultural exchanges of folk and minority materials serve a normative purpose as far as the Chinese government is concerned. It is said that,

The study of folklore is used now to help people change customs where it was once used to serve the interests of the ruling class to oppress labour classes (Anon. Pamphlet, 1984).

In 1983 and 1984 there existed what was called an "exchange of customs" campaign popularized by the central government by means of wall posters and pamphlets. This campaign exemplified the Dong people, for example, as being especially polite to one another, and the Han population was encouraged to adopt this favorable trait. Reciprocally, the Dong people were reminded that traditional superstitions and religious rituals were essentially feudalistic in design, and that their lives would be greatly improved if modernizing techniques introduced by the Han were utilized instead (Anon. Pamphlet, 1984).<sup>13</sup>

The beautified dances of the minorities, performed by smiling dancers are fundamentally political in this same manner. The meihua process simultaneously enables the government to control the image of the minorities (to the Han as well as to the minorities themselves), while at the same time providing entertainment and 'cultural enrichment' to the Chinese mass audience. Chinese audiences on the whole expect dances that they see on stage (the only place they are likely to see dancing, as social dancing is discouraged) to be colorful, straight-forward, and to tell a simple narrative. There is very little or no room for ambiguity, abstraction or unemotionalism on the popular stage in China.

People want the folk dances to be charming, especially because they provide one of the few forms of relief in their otherwise drab lifestyles. It might be useful to point out here that the Chinese experience of the dance is almost entirely vicarious because there is no social dancing allowed. Furthermore, the government believes that symbolism, iconography, obscure references and internal meanings (other than those produced by the government itself) have no place on a stage intended for mass education.

Some choreographers and processors feel trapped by the government directives handed down to them, and they were oppressed by the demands of the Chinese public for light entertainment. These men and women with whom I spoke did not want to compromise the ethnic materials, and yet they felt they had to. Two researchers made the following points when I asked them what they felt some of the problems of the system consisted of:

- (a) Weaknesses in the method of dance revival and preservation were to be found mainly at the staging process, and not so much at the level of collection.
- (b) There is too great an urgency to bring this ethnic material into the 1980's before it is lost. Consequently, damage is being done in the process, and material is being lost in the rush.
- (c) The Chinese audiences are willing to sacrifice their own cultural heritage and that of others in exchange for something 'new' and 'contemporary'.
- (d) There must be a more clear distinction between what is done to preserve folk culture and what is done to modernize China. To this time the efforts towards the two endeavors have been combined, resulting in failings on both counts. This is an issue that is currently very alive in the Chinese artistic community.

The controversies in the situation appear to revolve around the issue of purpose. The processor's challenge comes in knowing how to provide variation without upsetting the established and popular mode of entertainment, or challenging the current political line concerning the minorities. The preservationists involved with the analysis of this ethnic material have other challenges, and perhaps even greater obstacles to overcome.

Human action sign systems<sup>14</sup> such as dance and ritual are notoriously difficult to maintain and preserve partly because the cultures in which they exist are constantly evolving and because they are manifestations of human expression and cognition which have been greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted in the past.<sup>15</sup> The artistic interpretations of minjian wudao produced by the Chinese processors have their place in Chinese society and it remains for Chinese critics to establish their place in China's culture and history.

What is at issue here are the methods used to protect and preserve this material for posterity and analysis. As is so often the case in dealing with human movement, the difficulties lie within the theoretical foundations of the research itself. It is essential to recognize the distinct properties of these human action sign systems: to view them as language-based, semantically laden systems of expression of thought,

which cannot be separated from their cultural milieu during analysis without losing significant meanings and content. A worthwhile study of human movement should enable researchers to decode the messages within each idiomatic system, much in the way languages are decoded and investigated. The methods and procedures would not be the same, although both systems (conventional language and body languages) are of equal complexity.

There are various notation systems for movement which can enable a researcher to record and codify the basic elements of a movement language, much the same way an alphabet is devised as building blocks of a spoken language (See Farnell, 1985, for further discussion).<sup>16</sup>

Problems of misinterpretation and faulty research arise on two counts: (a) the methods used to categorize and notate the material and (b) the analysis of the movement event itself. In either case the movements and their meanings may be lost through transcription and transliteration. The first of these problems can be avoided by using a notation system which has already been internationally recognized and tested (See Farnell and Durr, 1984, for further discussion). Even 'reliable' systems such as Labanotation, for instance, are potentially culture-bound, depending on the understanding of the notator, and care must be taken to maintain accuracy and to protect the meanings generated by the movements and the intentions of the agents themselves.<sup>17</sup>

In the second instance (point 'b' above), I submit that a significant analysis of a danced event can only occur with the usage of anthropologically informed theory and related methods of field inquiry.<sup>18</sup> At the present time, dance researchers in the PRC are not equipped with either of these foundations.<sup>19</sup>

It will be clear that the possibility for misjudgement and misinterpretation...is very great in 'non-verbal' matters. Character, emotional states and changes of mood, are judged and expressed according to a great diversity of non-verbal 'semantic' phenomena including bodily posture, gesture, stress or rapidity or pitch in speech, frequency and rapidity of movement of the body, avoidance of seeking bodily contact and so on. All these things are semantically loaded, rule-governed and category based, and vary greatly from culture to culture. There is not, however, any serious popular conception that such things require 'translation' from one culture to another. Most people, when faced with an unintelligible foreign language, will recognise the need for translation; non-verbal 'language' gestures and generally semantic use of the body, of the person or groups of people, are not usually granted the same status as languages in this respect. In general, an 'English-speaker' will interpret the gestures of, say, a 'Breton-speaker', or a 'French-speaker', or a 'Gaelic-speaker', according to an entirely English set of rules of interpretation without feeling any need to go to the bother of translating (Chapman, 1982:133-134).

These problems are not, of course, limited to the People's Republic of China, and it is hoped that this discussion will be of value in drawing attention to similar problems world-wide. The problems of preservation of indigenous culture and ethnic identity is foremost in many countries at this time. Currently, the PRC, due to a change of leadership and world view, is encouraging greater international communications, economic trade and cultural exchange. Chinese researchers have expressed great interest in international dance research methods, but dance researchers in China are not in a position, politically or intellectually, to comment on the minority situation in their country as a whole. Unfortunately, western anthropology is often considered to be a "Capitalist invention that looks down on primitive culture and treats it as inferior, with no feeling of brotherhood and equality" (Fieldnotes, 1983), thus creating a barrier to discussions of the present state of the art in the discipline with regard to human movement studies, based on the mistakes and ethnocentrism of the discipline in the past.

The Chinese have seen fit to borrow western methods of fieldwork in order to obtain information, but the methods remain proscriptive and prescriptive rather than 'descriptive', in an enlightened and 'neo-objective' sense of the anthropology of human movement.

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NOTES:

1. Some young choreography students told me that they felt restricted by the directive to stage ethnic dances, saying, "Old dances should go to research and new dance forms must be developed that speak for our times -- students don't learn the minority dances well enough to retain their distinction or their subtleties. As a result, these re-created forms don't resemble the originals any more, so what is the point of doing them?" (Fieldnotes, 1983). This is what I, too, had wondered. Older informants were more concerned with "following the party line" and withholding personal opinions. On the other hand, these young people were particularly concerned with contemporary life and national modernization and, as a result, could not, perhaps, recognize the value of restoring dying traditions.
2. The musical notation used most frequently in Chinese dance manuals is a numbered code which corresponds to the notes of the western musical scale, i.e.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
do re mi fa sol la ti do

The following is an illustration of this notation, taken from a 1983 dance magazine published in Beijing. There are three songs notated on the page. Under each title is information concerning the key, meter and tempo for each song. In song no. 1 (shown below), the key signature is B<sup>b</sup>, the time signature is 4/4, and the metronome speed is 70 M.M. The numbers 1-8 underneath the dots, refer to the pitches of the heptatonic scale (do, re, mi, ...), with 1 equalling do and so forth. The Chinese characters beneath the numbers are the lyrics.

## 音 乐

曲 一

1-<sup>b</sup>B  $\frac{4}{4}$

$\text{♩} = 70$

$\dot{3} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{3} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{3} \dot{2} \mid \dot{3} \dot{0} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{3} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{2} \mid \dot{3} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{3} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{3} \dot{2} \mid$ 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七
$\dot{3} \dot{0} \dot{1} \dot{7} \dot{6} \dot{5} - \mid \dot{0} \dot{0} \dot{1} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{6} \dot{6} \dot{3} \mid \dot{2} \dot{7} \dot{6} \dot{5} \dot{6} \dot{7} \dot{5} \dot{6} - \mid$ 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七
$\dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{2} \dot{1} \mid \dot{5} \dot{0} \dot{7} \dot{2} \dot{0} \dot{7} \dot{6} \dot{5} \mid \dot{2} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{3} \mid$ 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七
$\dot{5} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{0} - \mid \dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{5} \dot{2} \dot{7} \dot{6} \mid \dot{6} \dot{6} \dot{3} \dot{5} - \mid$ 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七 多 七

Dance teachers use this system when teaching a dance step that has a song accompanying it. This method of counting and keeping track of the musical accompaniment simultaneously is a standard teaching technique. It is a method of training singers common throughout Han China.

3. The Arts Research Institute in Beijing is responsible for all video projects of this kind and has begun a library of videotapes related to the arts. I was able to see only five completed dance tapes but was told that at least twenty others are in the process of being edited. A number of traditional ethnic events were scheduled to be taped in 1984 and methods of taping were being revised to improve the documentation of this material.

4. The Arts Research Institute is comprised of seven sections including opera, music, dance, art, film, drama and literature. The dance section has been established only since 1980. Before that, it was located in the music section. There are currently two divisions, one involving dance theory and the other, dance history in China. There are thirty research specialists connected with the entire dance section, most of whom have at one time been professional dancers themselves. The following lists items of special interest during my stay in 1983: (a) the basis of dance, (b) the situation of dance, (c) the history of Chinese classical dance, (d) modern and contemporary dance forms (national and international), (e) ethnic and folk dance forms in China, and (f) foreign dance forms.
5. As of November, 1983, the central editorial board in Beijing had decided upon the format to be used for all volumes published in this national project. The results of the decisions were not available to me at the time and have not been sent to me yet. It is possible that some revisions concerning the notation system have been changed due to the recent invention of a viable notation system by a Chinese couple (See Appendix III).
6. In Hunan province there are eleven districts in all. Each of these districts contains at least seven counties, and in each county there are numerous villages and communes. Every level of authority throughout Hunan had to be notified about the dance project. One of the difficulties for the research teams was to maintain coordination among these various levels of provincial government.
7. One preservationist explained that local authorities often do not allow minorities to practise their religious rituals because they believe them to be mere superstition and/or 'counter-political'. Therefore, when research and video teams arrive in a village, it is frequently difficult to enlist the cooperation of the villagers and to organize the event. Some of these ritual dances have been sanctioned only for the purposes of documentation and research, after which time, they will be prohibited once again. The researcher went on to say that, even if permitted, many tribes might not be interested in re-creating their rituals. These people are eager to modernize and improve their standard of living on the whole, and they have dropped many of their traditional activities from the calendar. It is often the job of the local minority commissions to encourage these people to cooperate with the dance research teams. Techniques of this kind were developed during a recent national campaign to document indigenous musical forms.
8. An example is relevant here -- one of hundreds, that concerns a dance called 'Along the Silk Road', originally choreographed by the Gansu Song and Dance Troupe, and recently aired (1984) on Chinese national television. Following a government directive,

the choreographers from this provincial level dance group researched the local history and culture of the province and created a dance drama based upon their findings. They drew their inspiration for new dance movement primarily from the ancient images of dancing figures to be found in the Dunhuang murals of Gansu. It is said that these choreographers also borrowed movements from Chinese classical dance, various folk dances of the region, the martial arts and ballet vocabulary (exercising, unconsciously, the procedures of Lévi-Strauss's famous "bricoleur" with a vengeance!). 'Along the Silk Road' was praised by critics both for representing traditional culture while at the same time further developing the Chinese dance vocabulary. One review commented that these choreographers "...have made new additions to the style" (China Reconstructs, March, 1984).

9. It was recorded that one Red Guard performance troupe travelled 3,500 kilometers and performed 'Patrolling the Border' two hundred thousand times for the Mongolian audience ('China's Minority Nationalities', 1977).
10. Many movement idioms, including a large number of China's minority dances, possess very little stylization, nor do they emphasize gestural detail in the ways that the Chinese classical dances do. These 'skilled professionals' therefore (in an honest effort to appreciate these idioms) may, and often do, read into the indigenous materials what they have developed in themselves so well. An illustrative, and apposite experience is relevant here: I was invited to teach some 'disco' dancing to a group of teachers and researchers at an informal gathering. During the session, I placed little stress on the specifics of the movements and much stress on the over-all rhythms and phrasing of the danced actions. The attention of the class participants was primarily on my hand gestures and foot patterns. To them, these elements were those which fundamentally distinguished one idiom from another, and, they were the features of movement which had been focused upon in their own training. The concept of improvisation (being able to choose at will from a basic resource of step patterns) was entirely new to them. I was later to learn that improvisation is commonly used among the minority peoples in their own rituals and danced events, thus, we can conclude that processors will organize any 'raw' movement material in order to comprehend it. Clearly these features of collection and preservation already incorporate a culturally biased standpoint. But, such well-meaning, but naive, approaches to movement analysis undermine the entire effort to preserve the original material.
11. I saw no firm evidence that convinced me otherwise. Whenever a minority dance is taught or performed within the system I have described, it has already been manipulated in order to suit other

- needs. Certainly this is not a basis for criticism in and of itself, but what is destructive is the way in which this material is perpetuated as authentic to the general public and to the international dance research community. Chinese Han aesthetics penetrate every level of the process. I believe that they are not aware of their own cultural biases, so that the processing and "weeding out of unhealthy, unbeautiful elements" undoubtedly begins even before formal methodological or procedural steps are taken.
12. Royce gives an example in which these elements clearly come to bear: "The standard gesture for helplessness, chih hsiu (in Chinese classical opera) if performed while the actor is singing, means that the song is about to end, rather than conveying helplessness" (Strauss, 1975:36-37). She goes on to point out that "Meaning seems to change with occasion as well. (There is the) Haitian example where whole choreographies or dances are perceived as being different phenomena in different situations. The same choreography done in a voodoo ceremony will be referred to as 'religion'; when it is performed in a cabaret, it will be called 'dance'. Other obvious changes occur when dances are removed from their original setting to be performed as theater pieces (Royce, 1977:208-209).
  13. Dreyer brings up this point concerning this issue: "Even after a minority group individual decides to opt for the wider opportunities offered by participation in the Han socialist Chinese system, difficulties may arise. Having sacrificed one's ethnic identity to the degree necessary for this participation, one may find that the system that was presented as universalistic and based on impersonal criteria of merit is in fact discriminatory in practice (1976:275).
  14. "Human action sign system" is a phrase used by Williams (1979) to describe any system of human body actions which conveys meaning. Farnell describes it in this way: "Action sign systems are structured systems of human movement which are conventional, which exist and are best understood in a socio-linguistic sphere of human life. They are not 'behaviors' or 'raw' physical data of some kind, the result of biologically triggered impulses, nor can they be separated from the capacity of humans to create multiple levels of meaning" (Farnell, 1984). This phrase is often more accurate than the word 'dance' in describing some human movement systems because 'dance' is a western language term with specific grammatical properties and associated meanings and definitions which often do not apply to non-western systems of movement.
  15. In a projected work, still in progress, but used for teaching materials, Williams (Nine Lectures on Theories of the Dance; mss.) discusses the many misguided theories of dancing, 'a dance' and 'the' dance which have been generated by dance scholars and researchers over the years.

16. The technology of dance preservation is still in its infancy although much brilliant work has been done in this century. Pioneers of dance and movement notation include Laban, Benesh, Eshkol and Wachmann. As useful and often accurate as these various notation systems are, there are many problems inherent in the notion of movement literacy which have yet to be resolved to the satisfaction of an internationally concerned community, but the subject is beyond the scope of this paper.
17. See bibliography for the work of Farnell and Durr on the subject of cross-cultural usage of Labanotation.
18. The theoretical and methodological approach to movement analysis which more adequately deals with problems of meaning and content is the anthropologically based theory of Williams, called 'semasiology'. "Whilst many (of the properties of dance) can be described with words, many cannot, and it is here that the question arises as to whether or not forms of recording human action to date have provided adequate records of the complex reality of human action sign systems" (Farnell, 1984:1). Williams (1983) notes that anyone can observe a performance, a film of a dance or a notated score, but this is only the beginning and constitutes only the empirically observable aspects of the dance. "Now, we are confronted with the problem of what (the movements) mean. Here, we are obliged to interpret and explain the material, and here, of course, is where the 'anthropology' begins -- or does not, as the case may be. The inobservable 'code' is what gives the observable messages their sense and their meanings, and it makes no difference what movements, positions, dances, ceremonies and the like that we examine. All of the positions and movements in any idiom of dancing, or any form of body language are simply the visually perceivable signifiers of a rule-structure, a 'code' or the signified concepts that are not visually perceivable; thus when we try to consider what 'description' of movement amounts to, it is important that we understand that the investigator must be able to speak the language of those to whom the code belongs" (Williams, 1983:9-11).
19. In 1982, Ms. Dai Ai-lien, in connection with the Chinese Dance Association, conducted a workshop in which 17 dancers received certification in intermediate Labanotation. Subsequently, more workshops have been implemented and it is hoped that at least some of the research professionals in the field of dance will be equipped with an internationally approved system of movement notation. It is projected that by 1985, China will have their first specialists in Labanotation; however, it must be understood that having such technology will not alter the gravity or the nature of the problems discussed in this paper. A writing system is not itself a 'theory' or a method.

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# First modern dance notation in China

APPENDIX III

by our staff reporter Qi Ming

While three systems of dance notation are competing in the West, a Chinese couple — the wife a former dancer, and the husband a musician — announced last week at a conference in Beijing that they have invented another written language for the dance.

The new dance notation is the first in modern China. To represent the torso, it uses a 4-line horizontal staff. Beneath it are a series of crosses resting on a "ground" line on which limb movements are indicated. Musical notes above the staff show timing. The first eight capital and lower case English letters and the numbers from 1 to 8 indicate movements and positions.

A few other abstract symbols and letters in the notation show various kinds of footwork and other movements. For instance, a line of dots may mean quick steps; a shortened bottom line of the cross indicates a leap.

"According to our calculation, these letters and numbers can record about 49,500 billion dance movements," Wu Jimei, the wife, who is a staff-member of the Chinese Dancers' Association, told the conference, which was attended by dancers, experts and reporters.

For centuries, written notations for dance were invented, discarded or lost. The Tang Dynasty (618-907) left us notations using Chinese language characters to record dances. "But the records are incomprehensible to us now," said Dai Ailian, vice-president of both the Chinese Dancers' Association and the Conseil International de la Danse (CIDD).

Throughout the world, the three major systems are Labanotation, Benesh Notation and Eshkol-Wachmann Notation. Eshkol-Wachmann Notation is known for its anatomical analysis of movement in terms of degrees of circular movement in a positive or negative direction with positions determined according to two co-ordinates. Benesh Notation, which has been adopted by the British Royal Ballet, uses a 5-line horizontal staff to represent the body and has musical notes written above to show timing.

Labanotation, which is considered by many experts around the world as the most thorough system, uses a 3-line vertical staff to represent the body. The basic symbol is the rectangle, which,

placed on the staff, indicates the part of the body that moves. The symbol's shape indicates direction of movement; its length stands for duration — timing or rhythm; and its shade represents level. The staff is read from the bottom up.

Dance experts here note that like Labanotation, the Chinese couple's system shows the dancer's relationship to space and to other dancers with its emphasis on flow of movement. Time sequence as well as direction of movement can also be indicated. Based on fundamental laws of human motor activity, the new system's letters and numbers work in terms of degrees of circular movement in positive or negative directions with positions determined according to co-ordinates.

"Our notation is not confined to a particular dance form," explained Wu Jimei. "It can be employed to record a wide variety of dance styles."

The geometric staves and legions of tiny rectangles, triangles and diamonds that make up the Labanotation representations may intimidate beginning dancers. The new Chinese notation offers an easy way of learning and notating.

At a special course in Hangzhou last May, Wu and her husband, Gao Chunlin, who is a staff member of the Chinese Musicians' Association, taught their method to a group of dancers. After more than 30 hours of classes, the learners finished the course by recording Uygur and Dai nationalities dances in the new system. A teacher from the Central Dance Troupe notated "Lotus Dance" choreographed by Dai Ailian after 15 hours of lessons.

But some dance experts note that the new system has not indicated either the relationship between the dancer and the prop he uses or movements of the prop. Some doubt that dancers of future generations can translate the symbols accurately into movements as easily as they could the symbols of Labanotation, which are more visual.

"We hope that the new system will lay a foundation for scientific research of dances in our country," Wu said.

The couple has been working on the new system in their spare time for the last two years. For most of the time, they had to have copies of their work printed at their own expense.

## CULTURE AND SCIENCE

# Chinese Couple Develops New Dance Notation

A new dance notation using a co-ordinate system invented by Wu Jimei, an editor of *Wudao* (Journal of Dance), and Gao Chunlin, her husband, is being popularized among Chinese dancers.

The new notation is based on the fundamental laws of human movement. It visualizes the space a dancer occupies as a globe. This globe is indicated by two circles: an azimuth circle for the parallels and an angular circle for the meridians. The dancer's location in space can be represented by points on the two circles, which serve as co-ordinates. For example, the point on the azimuth circle shows the direction of the torso, while the point on the angular circle indicates the direction of the dancer's face, turned up or down.

Since every section of the body moves on an axis, their positions can be indicated by the points on the two circles. In addition, some sections of the body, such as the wrist, rotate and make their own circles.

Each of these circles is divided into eight equal parts, which are represented by the first eight English letters in capitals and in lower case, and the numbers 1 to 8. Along with other simple symbols, the letters and numbers on the circles record the positions of all parts of the body accurately at any given moment.

To represent the torso, this notation uses a 4-line horizontal staff. Beneath it are a series of crosses resting on a "ground" line, on which limb movements are indicated. Musical notes above the staff show timing.

Other abstract symbols and letters indicate movement, the relationship between the dance and the music, and between the leading dancer and the other performers.

There are about 100 dance notation systems in the world, with three in wide use. But none have ever been popular in China. "Our notation is not confined to a particular dance form," explained Wu. "It can be employed to

record a wide variety of dance styles."

After learning the new system, young dancer Zhao Xiang of the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble performed some difficult nationality dances following the notation. The inventors believe it takes only 3-6 hours for most dancers to master their notation. Even laymen can understand it after a quick study. Wu, together with her students, has recorded a dozen classical, folk, and modern dances, as well as foreign ballets.

Wu is a former dancer with the Central Song and Dance Ensemble. Since 1978 she has been a dance critic and reporter. Her husband Gao Chunlin is a music theorist with the Chinese Musicians' Association. Both 40 years old, they began to develop this dance notation in 1979.

Drawing on her 20 years' experience as a dancer, Wu analysed and studied more than 60 dances she had performed. Gao read volumes of materials on Labanotation and Benesh Notation—two systems widely used in the West—and a notation recorded in pictographic characters by the Naxi people in southwest China.

A computer expert studied the new dance notation and concluded that its design is reasonable and can be used in a wide scale to record movement in operas, sports and acrobatics. The couple calculate it can record about 49,500 billion movements. The expert also said the notation is suited to computer use, with its simple recording method. He is now experimenting with a programme.

Wu Jimei (standing) explaining her new dance notation at a conference. Beside her is her husband, Gao Chunlin.

