

DANCING ART IN CHINA

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Dancing is one of the art forms popular with the Chinese people. At happy celebrations or traditional festivals people, gathering together, sing and dance to express their joy. The song and dance gala party held on the evening of National Day, 1977, on Tienanmen Square in Peking, capital of China, drew as many as 200,000 people.

The history of dancing in China traces back to very early times. People in primitive society are known to have danced, bull tail or feather in hand, mirroring their hunting life. In ancient Chinese hieroglyphic calligraphy, the character that means "dancing" looks like a person dancing with a bull tail in his hand. A rather well-developed dancing art existed as early as the Han dynasty 2,000 years ago, judging by the dance formation and step, costume, make-up, the story of the dance represented and the accompanying orchestra which were portrayed on stones, bricks, bronze and pottery vessels unearthed since 1949, the year of the country's liberation. "Paihsi", literally meaning "a 100-variety show", which was a composite of dancing, singing, painting, acrobatics and other art forms, is known to have been performed at that time. In the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.), the dancing art was in full bloom with dancing, music, literature, painting and acrobatics combined into a whole. Many dances had been gradually assimilated into operas by the time of the Sung dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), while dancing had remained as an independent art. Folk dances popular among the masses of people which were not recorded in classic works have been handed down from generation to generation by the people themselves.

Folk dances handed down from generation to generation, which enjoy mass appeal, stem from life and work of the people. The popular "Yangko Dance" of Han nationality, for instance, has been worked out on the basis of movements of rice transplanting.

The "Lion Dance" and "Dragon Dance" current among the Chinese people provide an entertainment to the masses. The lion used to be a symbol of good fortune, happiness and friendship and the dragon a legendary

creature capable of summoning rains and winds. The "Dragon Dance" embodies a popular desire for favourable weather contributing to good harvests.

The "Lion Dance" is in two different styles: the graceful and the vigorous. The graceful style conveys the loveliness of a trained lion which makes various subtle movements such as listening, twinkling, panting, and scratching an itch. The vigorous style displays the animal's bravery and agility through such acts as turning round, rearing, lying down, leaping, and climbing up a high erected structure. The "Lion Dance" in different areas has its own characteristics. The dancers of Kwangtung, south China, excel in making the lion they play leap and climb up a pole. Those of Peking show high perfection in swooping, rolling round and other sweeping movements. In northwest China's Shensi province, the "Lion Dance" is noted for its portrayal of the animal's sprightliness. Since the country's liberation, the "Lion Dance", like the "Dragon Dance", has been performed on the stage as well as in the open air, with a considerable improvement in both presentation and technique. It makes a favourite item in the repertoire of many a Chinese art troupe touring foreign countries.

The "Red Silk Dance" performed by a single person, a couple or a group with long flowing silk scarves owes its origin mainly to the folk dance "Yangko" and opera, and draws on the techniques of the classic "Kerchief Dance". It gives expression to the animated spirit of the Chinese people and their joyful mood during festivals.

China has 55 nationalities of which many excel in singing and dancing. Their dances have different characteristics. The traditional "Andai Dance" of Mongolians, who engage generally in livestock breeding, has a strong rhythm and creates a grandiose atmosphere marked by vigorous mass activity. The "Stamping and Kicking Dance" of Tibetan nationality carries a light rhythm while conveying rustic simplicity and enthusiastic sentiments. The "Peacock Dance" of Tai people living in a southwest China border area presents vivid imitations of the peacock's various postures.

The colourful folk dances are an important component of China's treasured cultural legacy. But before liberation, a great part of the dances was on the verge of getting lost.

Since the birth of new China, the people's government has done a great deal to develop the folk dancing art. A national folk music and dance festival was held soon after liberation. Many artists were organized to collect, collate and refine folk songs and dances. They have gone to more than 30 areas inhabited by minority nationalities or Han nationality in Tibet, Sinkiang, Yunnan, Kweichow, Inner Mongolia, Fukien, Kwangtung and Kwangsi and revived over 2,000 pieces of music and dancing.

In accordance with the principles put forward by Chairman Mao, "Make the past serve the present and foreign things serve China" and "Let a hundred flowers blossom; weed through the old to bring forth the new", the Chinese choreographers have since liberation composed many excellent dances in praise of China's achievements in revolution and construction, including a number of full-length dance dramas. Outstanding among these is the "Small Dagger Society" depicting the Chinese peasants' struggle against imperialism and feudalism in the middle of the 19th century. Based on dance movements in traditional Chinese style and others drawn from the Peking Opera, it has a strong national flavour and pulsates with the spirit of the times.

The Chinese choreographers also pay heed to drawing on the essential in foreign dances. "The Red Detachment of Women", a revolutionary ballet portraying the growth of a contingent of women fighters during the new-democratic revolution, and "The White-haired Girl", a revolutionary ballet depicting a downtrodden peasant girl who at last joins the revolution, are among the popular dance dramas which Chinese choreographers have created by integrating ballet with Chinese dancing.

To learn songs and dances of the Third World countries, the government has set up a "Tung Fang (Oriental) Song and Dance Ensemble", whose repertoire now includes works from over 30 countries and areas.