China's Guangchang Wu

The Emergence, Choreography, and Management of Dancing in Public Squares

Chiayi Seetoo and Haoping Zou

Those who have followed the trends of contemporary Chinese mass culture are probably familiar with the phenomenon of dancing in public squares. A literal translation of *guangchang wu* (广场舞), "public square dancing," differentiates the form from the "square dance," a type of American folk dance. In Chinese cities and in the countryside, every morning and evening, as long as it's not raining, groups of mostly middle-aged and elderly women dance together in the open air. Accompanied by recorded music, they dance in park squares, in lots outside of buildings, in shopping malls, and even on the slightly wider corners of sidewalks—basically in whatever outdoor space is empty, flat, and accessible. It has been estimated that nearly 100 million people participate in dancing in public squares in China today (Guan J. 2014). This phenomenon has even attracted the interest of Apple, which includes a song list named "Square Dancing" for users of its latest exclusively Chinese music streaming service, recognizing a huge potential market in the millions who find the dancing essential to their daily lives (Yang J. 2015).[1]

Dancing in public squares has also caught the attention of China's central government. In March 2015, the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Culture of China introduced the *Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines* (*Shier tao guangchang jianshen caowu*

1. All translations from the Chinese, unless otherwise indicated, are by the authors.

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十二套广场健身操舞), a series of complete instructional videos freely accessible online. The goal was to promote public square dancing nationwide (Lu 2015). In late August 2015, the Ministry of Culture, the General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development jointly issued the *Circular for Guiding the Healthy Development of Public Square Dancing* (*Guanyu yindao guangchang wu huodong jiankang kaizhan de tongzhi* 关于引导广场舞活动健康开展的通知). The *Circular* officially recognizes dancing in public squares as

> a cultural and sports activity deeply appreciated by the public that has flourished nationwide in recent years, and has had positive effects, enriching the spiritual and cultural lives of the common people in the cities and the countryside, improving the citizens' health and fitness, and demonstrating the pleasant spirit and outlook of the masses.

The *Circular* includes an outline of specific principles and ways to manage this kind of dancing (Ministry of Culture 2015).

Why is dancing in public squares so popular in China that it has attracted both commercial and government interests? Both Chinese and foreign media have paid lots of attention to this kind of dancing. But, contrary to the "positive" designation of the *Circular*, the press coverage mostly revolves around the civic problems and controversies generated by dancing in public squares. In the Chinese media coverage, dancing in public squares is most often reported for its noise pollution and the conflicts it causes between dancers and local residents. Some of the most notorious expressions of hostility from annoyed residents include throwing feces at the dancers, firing a gun into the air to frighten them, unleashing big dogs to scatter the dancers, and purchasing a 260,000 RMB (about US$41,000) sound system to play even louder music back at the dancers (*Netease Henan Vision* 2013; Ji and Wei 2014; *Guangming Online* 2013). As for foreign media coverage, it tends to treat the phenomenon as unfathomable, an exotic curiosity.

The middle-aged Chinese women who make up the majority of the dancers are often called *dama* (大妈), literally, "big mother." The phrase "Chinese dama" first appeared in the press outside of China in a story about Chinese women in the same age group who once shocked the world for their influence on the global gold market. The *Wall Street Journal* used the word "dama" in their story about Chinese women who, over a 10-day period in April 2013, purchased massive quantities of gold—300 tons worth 100 billion RMB (US$16,025,641,025)—after the price of gold plunged (Yap 2013). A report by He Huifeng in the *South China Morning*

Figure 1. (facing page) Morning practice of Jing's Troupe, a troupe of student dancers led by Wang Jing, at Xiqing Park, Qiaoxi District, Shijiazhuang, June 2015. (Courtesy of Wang Jing)

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Post also conflated somewhat the middle-aged Chinese women dancers and the gold-buying women of the same age group. The term "dama," for non-Chinese speakers, now refers both to the Chinese dancers and the phenomenon of panic buying (He H. 2014). Whether in the Chinese or international press, the now stereotypical designation "dama" (or "grannie," also used in the foreign press) has come to indicate a certain age and gender, sometimes with subtle pejorative connotations.

Dancing in public squares has even crossed national borders. Large groups of Chinese women tourists have danced on the square of the Louvre in Paris and in Moscow's Red Square; their photos and videos have gone viral (*China Youth Network* 2014; *Observer* 2014). One of the Chinese women who danced in Sunset Park in Brooklyn, New York, was arrested after neighbors complained to the police about the noise (Cui 2013). The relatively positive foreign coverage includes Sydney mayor Clover Moore's remark in May 2014, when she visited Guangzhou, the sister city of Sydney, that she'd like to bring this kind of dancing to Sydney. Moore appreciated the vitality and uplifting energy that the dancing brings to public spaces. Mayor Moore's statement appeared only in Chinese newspapers and the English versions of some Chinese media. Moore's wish was met by sarcastic responses from Chinese netizens—revealing the conflicts between the dancers and local residents (Tan Q. et al. 2014; *Guangming Online* 2015; Wang N. 2014). If Sydney were to bring dancing to their own public spaces, they should be prepared for a range of responses, some less than positive. Chinese media mostly support the dancing, but some expressions they've used in response to the published *Circular*, such *chengyao* (backing, 撑腰), *fuzheng* (righting or supporting, 扶正), and *li guiju* (establishing rules, 立规矩), in Chinese convey subtle attitudes toward the grassroots activity's sudden rise in status reflecting at best ambivalence or even implicit scorn (Shi X. 2015; *China Jinyun News* 2015). These reports reveal, just barely, disdain for the dancing and the women dancers, and seem to reflect the perspective of a certain (male) element of the intellectual middle class.

Some people have expressed that despite the release of the central government's *Circular*, there is still a long way to go before implementation of its recommendations. Questions such as "which department should be responsible for the management of public square dancing," and "how can we solve the space problems" remain unanswered (*Hefei Online* 2015; Yang P. 2015). Young people also complain: "We beg you not to take away our basketball and badminton courts," reflecting the threat they feel about the potential loss of venues for their preferred activities (*Xinhua Net* 2015). To Moore, proposing dancing in public squares in Sydney is an inspired response to what she saw in Guangzhou. However, in China, the situation is more complicated: the mass phenomenon emerged, grew, spawned controversies, and called organizational and managerial measures into existence. The dancing is a process that has led to myriad interactions among individuals, dance groups, local governments, and the media.

How do we engage the grand social performance of dancing in public squares beyond the level of spectacle? It is important to ask: who are the dancers, why do they dance, and what do they dance? The answers trace specific social, gendered, and generational psychological histories of contemporary China. In fact, dancing in public squares is one activity among many mass cultural sports and recreational activities (*qunzhong wenti yule huodong* 群众文体娱樂活动) in China. Other similar activities include choral singing, playing an instrument, Chinese martial arts, Chinese opera, modern drama, etc. Still, it's worth noting that the dancing is exceptionally popular; so popular that it is now openly supported by the government. Many dancers dance for health, social, and economic reasons. But what is unique about the dancing is that it is peculiarly situated between exercise, personal pleasure, and staged performance for an audience.

Today, the dancers in public squares perform in a variety of showcases and contests sponsored by private companies as well as by different levels of government. As the dancers satisfy their desires for performing, they also affirm their place as individuals participating in the group/community. This synergy is linked and adapted to government management and support, enabled by specific historical and social conditions unique to China. The relationship between

the dancing community and the government fosters collaboration that gradually reduces the civic problems of noise pollution and fighting over space. The dancing also offers an opportunity for Chinese governance of community activities that support and channel energy to align with the state's positive ideals, in this case the discourse about and the performance of "national health and fitness" (*quanmin jianshen* 全民健身).

Combining textual research, fieldwork, and interviews, we address here the specific historical, social, gender, generational, and psychological discourses surrounding dancing in public squares in China, as well as the particular aesthetic and social choreographies generated. As a mass culture activity that is now officially supported, public square dancing is a kind of social performance shaped by grassroots organizations in tandem with government mobilization and management. The dancing, still problematic for many, remains vigorous and promises to remain relevant during the coming years.

Origins and Historical Trajectory of Urban Public Dancing

It is evening, the hours after dinner for most Chinese families. The Zhongshan Park in Changning District, Shanghai, is crowded with people. Men and women, young and old, jog, run, walk, or work out in their own ways, filling up the winding paths that snake across the greens of the park. The Park area is also a prime site for square dancing, among many other community group activities.

*Facing the metro exit on Changning Road is a large, flat pedestrian area right next to Zhongshan Park. Every evening beginning at 6:45, a big line dance (*paiwu 排舞*; dance done in lines, not the line dancing popular in some parts of the US) practice takes place here. After 7:30 the space becomes the dance floor for ballroom dancing (*jiaoyiwu 交谊舞*), and women arrive in dresses, high heels, makeup, and elaborate hairdos, sparing no effort to make themselves appealing. After 9:00 p.m. another line dancing group gathers, this time with maracas. By this time the park itself is closed, but this pedestrian area outside of the park remains lively with dance activities. Lots of bicycles and electric scooters park in-between the trees and benches that surround the area, where an equally large crowd of non-dancing people of all ages and genders gather, watching the dancers or waiting to join when the music or dance activity they prefer starts.*

Two middle-aged men play bamboo flutes on the narrow path leading to the park entrance. Every night, they carry their own stereo, which plays the orchestral accompaniment of the music pieces they are working on. They are a quite accomplished duet. In front of the park entrance is a small public square dance group of about 20 people, dancing to the Mandarin popular songs that most middle-aged Chinese people listen to. A few steps away, under a big tree, a group of teenagers also bring their own audio equipment to practice street dances of their own invention. A lead dancer teaches his routines to the other teens, a practice also found among the public square dancers. The structure of the practice session is the same in both groups—only the steps, rhythms, and degree of effort required vary. The teen dancers practice solo before dancing together as a group, and every night, they attract a considerable crowd, including many middle-aged men.

At the first crossroads inside the Park a self-absorbed group practices health exercises. They slowly move, breathe, and stretch with utmost concentration, following the vocal instructions coming from a recording. Further inside the park, another dance group of about 30 to 40 middle-aged women vigorously perform intricate footwork to the latest hits of Korean and Japanese dance songs. They appear especially light and deft, and are especially attractive (Seetoo 2015a).

This dance scene in Shanghai's Zhongshan Park is just a small tile in the mosaic of the collective public dance culture in China. Many other sites of dancing in public squares exist in Shanghai—and in every other Chinese city. All the participants—the dance leaders, dancers, and the professional dance teachers who are occasionally involved—have their unique life stories and reasons for joining a group. As they step, turn, stretch, and sway each day during their scheduled hours, they exert a powerful presence and energy in the public spaces of China, a corporeal performance that also harbors a generation's unique psychophysical history and memory.

The dancers in these groups are usually women between 45 and 65 years old; there are sometimes a few men in the same age group, but women are the great majority. Typical dance groups range from as few as 3 to 5 people, and as many as to 70 to 80 people; in some cities there can be hundreds, even a thousand people dancing at the same time. There is usually a dance leader (*lingwu* 領舞), whose movements the participants follow, as they dance in spontaneously formed lines. This kind of dancing is sometimes called "line dancing" (*paiwu* 排舞), distinguishing it from the ballroom dancing (*jiaoyiwu* 交谊舞) that also happens in squares and other public open spaces. Even before dancing in public squares gained its current popularity, "paiwu" referred to unison dancing done in simple formations, that featured movements similar to fitness exercises. Currently, both guangchang wu and paiwu are performed, with guangchang wu encompassing a wider range of dance styles.

Most of the dancers in public squares claim that they dance to stay healthy. Some research shows that this kind of dancing can improve not only physical health but also the dancer's sense of well-being and happiness (Wang J. 2014). Dancing also satisfies the need for a social life. Most of these middle-aged women are facing both retirement and their single child moving away from home.[2] A typical dancing group usually includes two "circles." In the inner circle are the organizer and some dedicated participants; all the others are in the less well organized outer circle. People in the inner circle are familiar with one another; they interact with each other. In their daily lives they pursue common goals and support each other emotionally. The participants outside of the inner circle relate through exchanging conventional greetings and occasional physical contact during the dances—a touch on the shoulder or holding hands—giving them a sense of being in a community (Granovetter 1973).

Dancing in public squares became popular also due to its minimal skill set and low cost. It is easier to learn and practice these dances than traditional Chinese physical forms such as *tai chi quan* and *qigong*. This ease of learning is appealing to short-term and occasional participants. Dancing in public squares costs about 10 RMB (approximately US$1.50) per month, and the money collected is used to purchase and maintain audio equipment. The fee fits the budgets of most retired Chinese women. All in all, given the high population density in most Chinese cities, collective dancing is the most economical way to participate in an organized form of exercise.

Dancing in public squares is also related to the emergence of the squares themselves. These open spaces were part of the urban construction projects that swept through China's cities in the 1990s. While the first public park had opened in the late 19th century, these newly built or renovated squares provided additional space for the dancers who had been performing cha-cha, ballroom, and *yangge* (秧歌 "rice-sprout song" dances) in groups in city parks.

The media's use of the term "guangchang wu" can be traced back to 1999 when *Ningxia Pictorial* published an illustrated news article, "Highlight: Large-Scale Public Square Dancing" (Jujiao: daxing guangchang wu 聚焦: 大型广场舞), that covered the Love China—Large-Scale Public Square Dancing Performances event held by the Federation of Trade Unions of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Popularity increased over the next decade; however, guangchang wu only occasionally received a mention in the media and attracted little attention until late 2013 when guangchang wu suddenly became a hot topic with several hundred pieces of news in the media every day (Ling 2015).

The stories of the dancers themselves disclose a longer history. Take Yang Xiufeng of Shanghai as an example. She is over 70 years old. Since 1979, Yang had practiced tai chi quan in the Zhuanqiao neighborhood of Shanghai, but because certain tai chi movements hurt her

2. According to Chinese law, the retirement age of males is 60 while that of females is 50 for workers and 55 for professionals (State Council of China 1978). From the 1960s to 1980s, the average age of a woman's first childbirth was between 22 and 24 (Chen 1991).

knees, she began practicing *mulanquan* (木蘭拳), a form of martial arts exercise practiced by women. Even when she suffered a partial paralysis in 1994, she practiced diligently. Then she led a tap dance group for a while, before becoming a dance leader for several public square dance groups. Yang is experienced in rehearsing for performances and competitions involving large numbers of people. When Yang led the mulanquan group, they regularly attended the Women's Day (8 March) celebration in Shanghai that involved performances by up to 10 thousand people; they also did large-scale performances for the openings of sports games held by the city government. "Everyone had a good time, and we wore uniform costumes; then things snowballed," Yang recounted in an interview (Yang X. 2015). She pointed out that since the 1990s there have been large-scale competitions and events for physical exercise performances. In 1994, she obtained a certificate for teaching line dancing in Shanghai. During the research period for this article, Yang was rehearsing a public square dance performance for the celebration of the Chongyang holiday (the 9th day of the 9th lunar month) in the Minhang district that would involve more than a thousand people in the final performance. Clearly, collective mass sports and dance events involving large numbers of people are not new (Yang X. 2015).

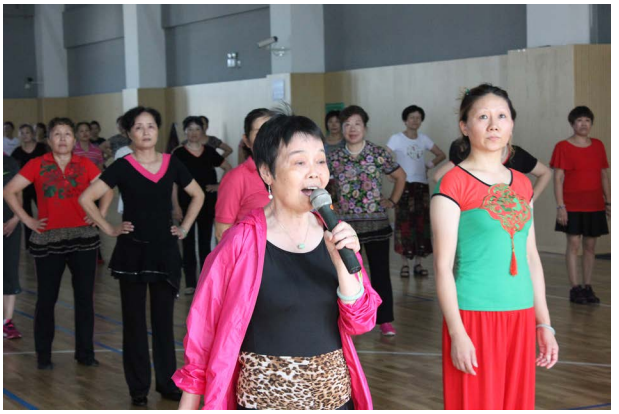


Figure 2. Yang Xiufeng coaching dancers at the Zhuanqiao Cultural Center, Shanghai, 19 August 2015. (Photo by Chiayi Seetoo)

Another dance leader, Wang Jing from Shijiazhuang, a "second-tier" city that is the capital of Hebei Province, also gives clues to the emergence of dancing in public squares.[3] Wang, now in her early 60s, has been a talented performer since her youth. She was a *yu* opera (*yuju* 豫剧, regional opera of the Henan Province) performer as a child and a member of her school's literature and art propaganda team. Later, at her

Figure 3. Wang Jing (fifth from left) and her troupe attending the first Shijiazhuang Guangchang Wu contest in early October 2015. (Courtesy of Wang Jing)

3. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen are cosmopolitan first-tier cities (*yixian chengshi* 一线城市), which have the most resources and are the most developed cities in China. Shijiazhuang as the capital city of Hebei Province belongs to the second-tier cities (*erxian chengshi* 二线城市), which are greater in number and offer insight into what Chinese urban life is like for most people.

work unit, she was an "enthusiast" (*jiji fenzi* 积极份子) passionately involved in the unit's annual song and dance performances. In 2008, when she retired and closed her restaurant business due to health problems, she began looking for new ways to exercise. She came across a physical training group (*xingti dui* 形体队) in the park that practices "broadcast exercise" (*guangbo ticao* 广播体操), exercises done to recorded instructions broadcast over loudspeakers. "Broadcast exercises" comprise a series of prescribed exercises designed by Liu Yizhen of the Preparatory Committee of All-China Sports Federation that were laid out in illustrated booklets with musical recordings, first published by the Chinese government in 1951, with a ninth set published in 2011. These exercises were widely practiced not only in elementary and middle schools, but also in work units as part of the nation-building project to improve citizens' physical health (see Zhang 2013). Wang performed a set that incorporated movements extracted from different sports such as swimming, archery, and horse riding. She stood out from the crowd and was asked to lead the group when the previous dance teacher left. In the beginning, she searched for dance videos online, which brought her attention to guangchang wu, made up of routines considered simple and easy to learn. At present, Wang choreographs and leads several groups—one geared toward the general public looking for everyday exercise, one composed of experienced senior dancers already winning many awards in competitions, and one "modeling troupe" (*mote dui* 模特队) whose members include both men and women aged between 60 and 70 who model clothes for local brands, practicing the poses and walk of fashion models. Wang also leads a singing choir and teaches Xinjiang Uyghur dance, Mongolian dance, and Chinese classical dance. For five years, she has organized joint performance events to celebrate Mother's Day at the Xiqing Park of Qiaoxi District in Shijiazhuang, and other local performances. She leads the Red Maple Art Troupe (*Hongfeng yishu tuan* 红枫艺术团), which has participated in all kinds of competitions, holiday celebrations, and community events since the 1990s, including for Army Day (1 August) and other events of the Chinese Communist Party and government departments. Since 2010 when Shijiazhuang began promoting health and fitness, Wang helped stage a series of large-scale performances that involved up to 500 performers (Wang J. 2015).[4]

The stories of Yang and Wang reveal that although currently most people join dancing in public squares for a range of health, social, and economic reasons, the ways it is taking shape—from self-organization to cooperation with governmental departments and its evolving form and content—suggest even deeper historical influences. These are rooted in the traditions of Chinese agricultural society as well as the history of mass performance under Chinese Communist governance, influences we will reflect upon towards the end of this essay after describing the current practices in more detail, from their aesthetic and social choreographies to their organization and management.

Aesthetic and Social Choreographies

When the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC) and the Ministry of Culture introduced the *Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines* in March 2015, doubt (if not outright criticism) erupted in both foreign and Chinese media and public discourse. Foreign presses associated the government with imposing militaristic dictates on how the damas should dance (Agence France-Presse in Beijing 2015; Chin 2015). Chinese netizens left cynical remarks such as "Forget about creating any standardization, as long as people gain exercise and feel happy about themselves that is good enough" (56.com 2015). The dancers being interviewed for this research—be they enthusiasts devoted to dance competitions and performances, or just common people interested only in maintaining their everyday fitness—have reacted differently to the sanctioned routines. Some are willing to learn the official movement sequences and

4. In-text citations for Wang J. 2015 refer to Wang Jing the dance leader; citations for Wang J. 2014 are for the author of the thesis on public dancing.

Figure 4. An event in which 300 people participated at Xiqing Park, Qiaoxi District of Shijiazhuang, organized by the Mass Arts Center of Shijiazhuang in early November 2015. (Courtesy of Wang Jing)

adapt them to their own choreography; some do not care. The Chief of GASC, Liu Guoyong, clarified the next day that the *Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines*, created by the 29-year-old fitness coach Wang Guangcheng, are only meant as a reference, not something to be forced on the dancing public (Liu 2015).

What is actually being performed by the dancers? If it is impossible for the government to standardize the dancing, as is evident in the resistance to the "Twelve Routines," what are the forces at play shaping a practice engaging approximately 100 million Chinese people? As a form of popular culture, the dancing privileges movements simple enough for those without any prior dance training to learn. But at the same time the choreography traces a complex web of distinct histories of institutional and mass dance cultures in modern China, as well as their transformation by means of new technologies and shifting state discourses. The aesthetic and social choreographies of dancing in public squares illuminate a specific psychophysical experience, aesthetic preference, and gendered performance.

Between Live and Virtual, Aestheticized and Functional

As mentioned earlier, dancing in public squares most typically happens in empty outdoor spaces where a dance leader guides a group—spontaneously formed in lines—in dancing collectively to music. Most dance groups have a fixed time and place for their activities, usually in the morning or evening. To avoid disturbing neighbors, the government and the community organizations have developed tacit or written agreements for the time and place appropriate for dancing. Most groups ask their members to pay a small fee for the audio equipment, but some allow people to join for free.

Besides seeing the dances live in public spaces, one can also view dance videos (instructions, performances, competitions) online. Many dance leaders use these videos for their own teaching and choreography. Despite the impression that the older generation is not well versed in new technology, and that the Chinese internet is heavily regulated, the dancing is vibrantly circulated on specific Chinese social media sites such as Youku, Tudou, Weibo, WeChat, etc. Square dancers from one locale in China can view the dances of others from areas throughout the nation. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" that is central to the formation of modern national consciousness, which he attributed to the rise of print-capitalism, finds a new virtual incarnation in contemporary China (Anderson 1983).

At present, dancing in public squares follows several tracks: dance workouts benefiting health (*jianshen cao* 健身操), reinterpretations of Chinese folk and ethnic minority dances, fusion dances choreographed to Chinese and foreign pop songs, and distinct performances for formal events, sometimes with propagandistic purposes. These tracks may overlap; we've delineated them for analysis of the varied choreographies. It is important to note that participants continue to fuse and reinvent their dances.

As dance workouts, the emphasis naturally lies in physical exercise. Both Yang and Wang teach this kind of dance. The *Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines* are also choreographed to optimize the benefits of the exercise, much like aerobic dances choreographed to Mandarin pop songs. Simple and not too intense for the elderly, the movements aim to help stretch the muscles and loosen the joints. "When I choreograph a dance workout," explains Yang, "I consider the movements of the head, the neck, the waist, and the legs, so to provide proper exercises for each body part" (Yang X. 2015). Sometimes, additional equipment may be involved, such as a massage ball. The massage ball is a rubber ball about the size of a fist, sometimes wrapped in cloth, linked to a plastic ring by a cord about the length of one's arm. When dancing, one holds the plastic ring by one hand and the string by another and swings the ball in different directions to tap it onto different parts of the body thus massaging oneself. The choreography focuses on the meridian points of the human body drawing on traditional Chinese medicine. The result is a hybrid collective dance-massage performance.[5]

The massage ball is integrated into aestheticized dance performance. Conducting a keyword search of "massage ball square dance" on the Chinese video sharing website Youku turns up more than 700 results. The video "Hengfengta Mountain Park Massage Ball Square Dance *Love My China*" is an example (Tiantian kuailei 623678 2014). Twelve women in matching red sweatshirts and white track pants deftly manipulate the massage balls to the music. The massage balls are attached with colored ribbons creating a strong visual effect when swung or spun around. These movements are performed for visual impact, alongside the tapping movements meant for physical health benefits. The flowing ribbons create the same effect as the swiftly spun handkerchiefs in yangge dance. The lyrics of "Love My China" (Ai wo zhonghua 爱我中华), a popular public square dance song, praise the beauty of Chinese culture; the melody evokes Chinese folk tunes and the beat is pop. The resulting performance enacts nationalism and fitness with a pop twist. The dance is well-rehearsed, aiming for a professionalized presentation for both live and online audiences. The video was shot with multiple cameras and edited to combine shots from different angles. The choreography involves multiple changes in group formations and the movements are precise and uniform. Everyone dances with consciously performed smiles. Indeed, although most public square dancers dance for pleasure and fitness, many of these groups also aspire to professionalism. As the field is now full of opportunities to advance their skills and to earn some monetary rewards through competitions, paid performances, and instructional DVDs, dance leaders and dance enthusiasts are encouraged to put their efforts in this direction.

5. Chiayi Seetoo was first introduced to the use of massage balls in public square dancing by Chen Shilan from Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, during their conversation in August 2015.

Choreography for public dances that is based on Chinese folk and ethnic minority dances already carries with it an aesthetic familiarity that appeals to both dancers and spectators. This kind of choreography also reveals the extent to which modern Chinese institutional dance genres—their aesthetics and conventions—are deeply ingrained in the popular imaginary. However, with the availability of opportunities for public dancing, ordinary people are no longer simply the audience for the perfected dance performances of professional dancers. They appropriate professional institutional aesthetics and conventions as they learn the dances, rehearse for the performances, and put themselves in the limelight of the community stage. The institutionally sanctioned and supported Chinese folk and ethnic minority dances practiced by professionals are peasant dances of the ethnic Han Chinese people (such as the various yangge dances that originated in agricultural communities) and the many non-Han ethnic minority dances within China, including Mongolian, Xinjiang Uyghur, Tibetan, Dai, Miao, and Korean dance forms (Chang 2008; Wilcox 2011). Dance systems collected by experts sent by the state to catalogue folk practices for aestheticized stage presentation are then reappropriated by urban residents for their own dance practices.

Examples of this reappropriation of folk genres appear in videos available on Youku.com of the Jing's Troupe 2014 Mother's Day Celebration (2014 Jing Zhi dui muqing jie lianhaun) organized by Wang Jing of Shijiazhuang, a self-organized event in a second-tier Chinese city. Of the ten groups involved, four presented Chinese folk and ethnic minority dances, including yangge, long silk-fan dance, Mongolian dance, and Xinjiang Uyghur dances. The shoulder-arm waves of Mongolian dance and the swift shoulder shakes of Xinjiang Uyghur dance were simplified to accommodate the dancers' abilities, while great efforts were put into the costumes and group formations. The use of props such as the fans that feature long, brightly colored silky fabrics attached to the folding fans generated striking visual effects whenever the dancers lightly twisted or shook their wrists. Not all the dances were modified to accommodate amateurs. The yangge dance performed by Red Maple Art Troupe demonstrated exceptional skills and professionalism, especially the rhythmic twists and shakes of the heads, arms, and torsos, as well as the intricate syncopation that signifies aestheticized yangge dance. Red Maple's artistic aspirations are clearly much higher than typical community dance performances.

Figure 5. Performance by Jing's Troupe at the Jing's Troupe 2014 Mother's Day Celebration. (Photo by Wang Jing)

Of the 21 dance performances shown in the aforementioned Mother's Day celebration, 10 featured fusion choreography. The fusion dances choreographed to Chinese and foreign pop songs can be dance workouts as well as staged performances, depending on the context. Simple gestures and steps make up the dances, such as arm waves, hand claps, leg stretches, toe-heel steps, box steps, marching steps, cha-cha steps, three-steps (waltz step), four-steps (foxtrot), and simple turns. In sum, the choreographic logic incorporates popular dance, as well as sports and other cultural activities in contemporary China.

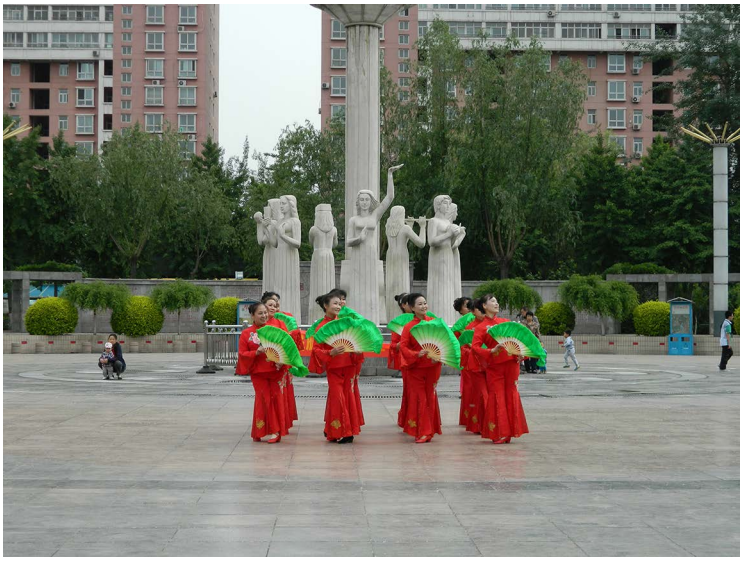


Figure 6. A yangge *dance performed by Red Maple Art Troupe at the Jing's Troupe 2014 Mother's Day Celebration. (Photo by Wang Jing)*

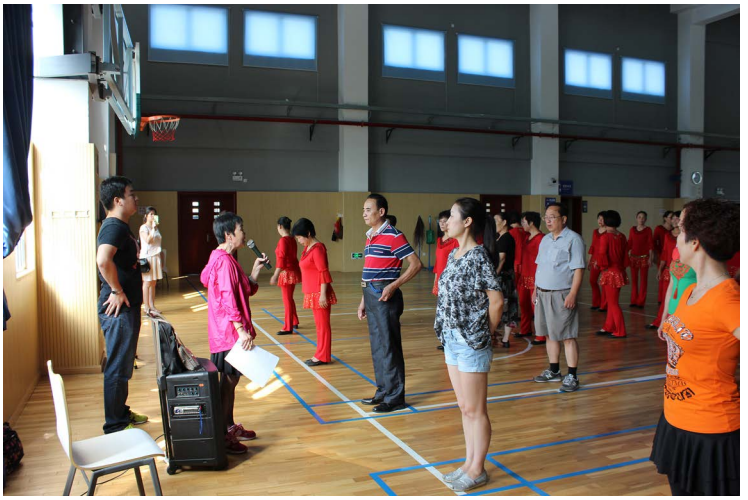
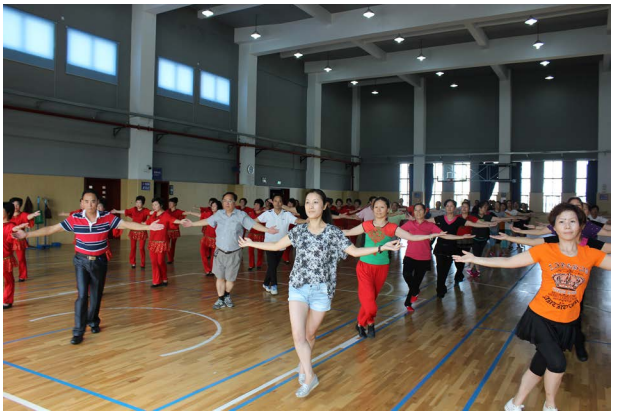


Figure 7. Yang Xiufeng coaching dancers for Dancing China *at Zhuanqiao Cultural Center, Shanghai, 19 August 2015. (Photo by Chiayi Seetoo)*

The pop songs used for public square dancing feature strong beats and simple rhythms. Some of the most widely used Mandarin songs include "Small Apple" (Xiao pingguo 小苹果) and "The Coolest Chinese Folk Style Song" (Zuixuan minzu feng 最炫民族风). These songs are referred to as *shenqu* (神曲) by Chinese netizens, referring to songs with memorable melodies in mass circulation, similar to the Korean pop song "Gangnam Style" that took the globe by storm in 2012. The costumes range from the "fitness" look of shorts and polo shirts to the "feminine," featuring, for example, bright-pink blouses and miniskirts.

The fusion dances choreographed to pop songs can be turned into distinct performances for specific purposes or to illustrate certain themes. In Yang's August 2015 rehearsal at Zhuanqiao Cultural Center of Shanghai for the Chongyang holiday event, among the group of 100 dancers, there were about 20 males mobilized by their neighborhood's residents committee. They were placed at the center of the group to support the Sports Bureau of Shanghai's promotion of male participation in the national health and fitness movement. The dance they were rehearsing was *Dancing China* (Wu dong zhongguo 舞动中国), with choreography by Qin Jianwei of Shanghai City Line Dance Sports Association to the song of the same name. The upbeat and rhythmic music explicitly fuses the celebration of dance and sports with national consciousness. During the rehearsal, Yang's five subleaders assisted her. They instructed the dancers in smaller groups before gathering them together for Yang's coaching. Throughout the rehearsal, Yang reminded the dancers to lift their torsos, dance on the balls of their feet, look to the front as they made turns, keep their arms straight when they lift them, be aware of the transfer of the body's weight during hip swings, stay with the tempo, and smile (Seetoo 2015c). When it comes to performances in formal events, even simple choreography requires discipline.

Not all dance groups are as disciplined as Yang's. Zhou Ying[6] leads a loosely formed dance group at Zhongshan Park, Shanghai. Every evening, Zhou comes to the same empty corner of the park with her own stereo, and people join her to dance. More and more people join as the evening goes on, from about 20 people in the beginning to about 40. Zhou does not charge any fee and the overall atmosphere of this group is relaxed, in contrast to groups pressed to perform well in public performance and competitions. Zhou uses lots of Japanese and Korean dance songs popular among young people, which is atypical of public square dance groups. Her choreography features light, brisk steps with elements of box-step, ballroom dance, and turns, with a lot of details such as the tap, brush, and slide-steps that use different parts of the toes, heels, and balls of the feet. These steps are combined and repeated in ways beyond strict left-right symmetry. They contain variation within repetition, a mathematical pattern built from formal simplicity. The complex rhythms of the songs she chooses, coupled with the intricate steps, make Zhou's choreography distinct. In between these Japanese and Korean dance songs, Zhou inserts Chinese pop songs with more typical public square dance movements. The Japanese and Korean dance songs provide a mild cardio workout, while more muscular stretch and strengthening are achieved in the numbers done to Chinese pop songs.



Figures 8 & 9. Rehearsal of Dancing China *at Zhuanqiao Cultural Center, Shanghai, 19 August 2015. (Photos by Chiayi Seetoo)*

Zhou came to dancing gradually. First she joined other groups for more than a year. But she was not satisfied with the choreography or the music. She went online and used relevant clips to create her own choreography. In 2014, she started to dance by herself in Zhongshan Park and slowly attracted followers. She told me about a brand of fitness shoes she bought which makes one's weight tilt towards the toes when walking. The instruction notes that came with the shoes included some basic concepts for physical training, which became the reference for her choreography. Zhou tells her dancers to pay attention to three things: put your weight towards your toes, feel your bodies lifted, and pull your bellies in as you dance. These instructions may be why this group of dancers appears especially light and brisk regardless of their body types (Seetoo 2015b).

6. This is a pseudonym; the subject asked not to be identified.

Figure 10. Public square dancing, Zhongshan Park, Shanghai, 19 August 2015. (Photo by Chiayi Seetoo)

Residues of the Collectivist Era

Recently, Chinese scholars and journalists have attempted to understand the psychology of dancing in public squares (Guan J. et al. 2014; Huang et al. 2015). They point out that the dancers are the generation who experienced the drastic social changes of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the death of Mao Zedong, and the 1978 economic reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) under Deng Xiaoping. "They had been intensely absorbed in political movements since they were young, experiencing the Red Guard era, the Down to the Countryside Movement, State Owned Enterprise Reform, and the Reform of Social Security System, and now many of this generation are facing retirement, empty nest syndrome, and the gap in intergenerational communication" (Guan J. 2014:35). Huang Yongjun interprets the psychological experience of this generation as having "duanlie gan," a fractured sense of self (断裂感):

> The shock and pain inflicted on contemporary Chinese people by the drastic social changes that have been taking place throughout modernity, which were intensified by the economic reform and opening-up, have not been effectively resolved. The emergence, development, flourishing, and impact of public square dancing demonstrate how contemporary Chinese people attempt to repair the tremendous sense of disruption in their own way. The way they try to repair this rupture embodies the residual thought patterns, modes of behavior, and attitudes toward life formulated from the collectivist era. (Huang 2015:16)

Although Huang refers specifically to the collectivist era under the Chinese Communist government, it is important to note that a collectivist culture tied to the Chinese agricultural society has existed for centuries.

Dancing in public squares embodies the corporeal culture of collectivism. That elderly Chinese people would choose to join a dance group, follow the dance leader, and perform the same movements as everyone else may be difficult to comprehend for those groomed by the Western culture of individualism. For the devout public square dancers, however, this kind of collective corporeal participation is normal. Another aspect of such a collectivist operation is the need for the leader. The leader is someone who stands out in terms of the standards of the community; to follow the leader with everyone else generates a comfortable sense of safety and belonging. Sometimes, the individual dance leaders go beyond dancing. Yang Xiufeng, for example, organizes group trips out of town and treats members of her dance group to a New Year's Eve dinner. Calm and assured, Yang remarked:

> They [the members of her dance group] are all very delighted, and they follow what I say. [...] I had suffered from paralysis, such a great illness, and yet I persisted until now, all for cheering these women up everyday. They even asked me, "Teacher Yang, could you take

> us on sightseeing trips? We don't feel safe going with other people but you." I am very proud and delighted that I have been so trusted and respected by everyone. Everyone thinks of me, and I think of everyone. I also told my students that "as long as I see you happily learning dance every day, I am satisfied." (Yang X. 2015)

The collective-leader relationship with its psychology of communal solidarity is also key to other mass dance, sports, and cultural activities in China.

Formal contests and performance events are exemplary of the Chinese collective identity. But mass spectacle is visible in the grassroots performances held daily in public squares and parks. In China's second- and third-tier cities, up to a thousand people join in the same dance practice every day, making the mass performance in large formal events not only a spectacularization of the everyday, but also a mirroring of the everyday.[7] Coaching her square dance team for the performance in the Chongyang holiday celebration, Yang reminded the dancers: "You are not just individuals, but members of the Zhuanqiao community. Being selected to participate in this event means you are quite good. You must perform well in *Dancing China*. We must not lose face" (Seetoo 2015c).

Such collective participatory corporeal experiences have consistently served nationalist and revolutionary ideologies throughout modern times. Performance, the participation in the collective act itself, is unfailingly appealing and impactful. Certain qualities persist, such as the positive, uplifting spirit and patriotic sentiments imbued in these acts. From a choreographic perspective, Peng Zhang, a professional dancer who taught public dancing in the Wujiaochang neighborhood of Shanghai, observed that the choreography and music for contests and large performance events almost always try to create a positive, high-spirited, and cheerful mood. There are no solos, duets, or trios; nothing pensive or expressing doubt (Peng Z. 2015).[8] Collective dancing as a performance is not just a vector for meaning; form and content are not separate entities. Collective dancing itself is the content, the purpose, the meaning, as well as the form. Collective dancing is a kind of ritual—those deeply immersed in it know the "script" by heart and perform accordingly without any doubt. The identity and relationships of the community cohere in the very act of *performing* the ritual (Feuchtwang 2010).[9]

Gendered Performance

As an activity mainly performed by women, dancing in public squares reflects certain experiences shared by Chinese women old enough to have lived through the Cultural Revolution. One critic has put it this way:

> In their youth, they dressed up not too differently than men, suppressing their love for feminine beauty; they loved the martial look over the feminine one [*buai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang* 不爱红妆爱武装], and their gendered features were cruelly wiped out. By the time the taboos were lifted, these women were already past their prime. [...] When dancing in the public square appeared in their lives, they seemed to gain new vitality all of a sudden. (Guan J. 2014)

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7. Accounts and video recordings from friends in their hometowns (Xiangxi, Hunan Province; and Daqing, Heilongjiang Province) verify that this kind of everyday spectacle/practice is widespread.

8. Peng Zhang is versed in the different choreographic requirements and ideologies in different contexts in China. Trained in an orthodox Chinese dance institution and later receiving an MFA in choreography from the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, Peng choreographed award-winning Chinese ethnic dance pieces suiting the needs of the institutions employing him, while also working to develop his own dance theatre pieces. He was hired to choreograph and instruct groups dancing in the public square of the Wujiaochang neighborhood of Shanghai.

9. Peng Zhang also made observations about the connection between ritual and dancing in public squares (Peng Z. 2015).

Figure 11. Naxi Ballad*, performed by Jing's Troupe at the Jing's Troupe 2014 Mother's Day Celebration. (Photo by Wang Jing)*

Spectacularized performance of femininity appears first through the costumes of the dancers. Outfits highlight female body curves; whirling skirts and colorful fabrics relay youthful energy. For instance, in *Naxi Ballad* (Naxi qingge 纳西情歌), part of Wang Jing's 2014 Mother's Day celebration, dancers wore bright pink hair bands and dance shawls over all-black tops, mini-skirts, and thick leggings. The choreography featured hip-swings and brisk steps. The dancing expressed youthful energy and the eroticism was safe because even as the female body was highlighted no skin was exposed (Jing's Troupe 2014). The range of gendered performance in the dancing is not limited to the ultrafeminine. *Flaming* (Huole huole huo 火了火了火), also part of Wang's event, celebrated the fiery ambition that drives one forward. The mostly female dancers wore green polo T-shirts and black shorts. They exuded an active, sporty energy, complemented by exercise-based movements largely devoid of stereotypical gender specificity. The militaristic marching steps lent a traditionally masculine tone to the largely gender-neutral performance.

It seems that Chinese women are more comfortable than men with performing a wide range of gendered expressions, a point confirmed by both Wang and Yang (Wang J. 2015; Yang X. 2015). Older men who want to embody sexuality go for ballroom dancing. Another public performance of gender by older Chinese men and women is found in modeling groups, which Wang Jing also leads. Modeling groups don fashionable clothes and then walk and pose according to standards of respectable elegance and composure, enacting Chinese mainstream heterosexual ideals. In the 2014 Mother's Day Celebration, for instance, the women of the modeling group wore *cheongsams* (one-piece, body-hugging dresses) and the men wore Western suits projecting both style and class (Jing's Troupe 2014).

Dancing in public squares also meets Chinese mainstream expectations for women's duties to their families. Although many dancers are retired empty-nesters, many women dancers are

Figure 12. Flaming*, performed by Wang Jing's Red Maple Art Troupe at the 2014 Mother's Day Celebration. (Photo by Wang Jing)*

still occupied with house chores and caring for their grandchildren. To those bound by house and family duties, coming out to dance for an hour and a half is the only time that belongs to them; the dancing is not only a respite from domestic duties but also scheduled so that it does not interfere with them. For example, women who dance in the morning may join a group scheduled for right after they take the kids to school and finish their morning grocery shopping, before they go home to make lunch and do other chores (Wang J. 2015). Keeping to this schedule, female dance leaders such as Yang and Wang have gained power for themselves outside the domestic sphere but in a way that is acceptable to mainstream society (which is still highly patriarchal).

Anthropologist Wang Qianni suggests that dancing in public squares can be seen as Chinese women's "collective solos" (*qunti de duwu* 群体的独舞). Wang discovered that many women switched from ballroom dancing to public square dancing to avoid conflicts with their jealous husbands. The women who still favor ballroom dance steps made them more acceptable by transforming couple dancing into collective solo dancing, incorporating some of the moves into their group dances. According to Wang:

> These women still get excited when being watched by male spectators, but they are already wives and mothers and thus need to conceal these desires, or channel them in ways that match the gender expectations of society. [...] By way of this kind of public dancing, middle-aged and elderly women aspire to feminine beauty, gain recognition and pleasure through real or imagined gazes, and avoid being labeled as morally unacceptable through "collective solos." (Wang Q. 2014:58–60)

The women involved in square dancing are trying to find a balance between personal pleasure and meeting the expectations for their gender in society. Wang concludes that "every woman participating in square dancing has her own unique taste and understanding of beauty; each wants not to just conform to societal norms and expectations, but to create her own life" (60).

Square Dancing Management

Between Community Organization and Government Intervention

In 2009, the Bureau of Culture and Sports of Qiaoxi District (in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province) formed a Culture and Sports Association in which all the leaders of dancing in the public squares of the district were gathered for the first time and formally signed an agreement to become members of the Association. On that occasion, each of us was given audio equipment and a small microphone. In the beginning of 2015, the Hebei Performing Arts Group, which runs all the singing and dance troupes, bangzi xi *(梆子戏) troupes,*[10] *and acrobatic troupes in Hebei Province, launched a community outreach project called "one helping the other, pairing up" (*yi bang yi, jie duizi 一帮一、结对子*). A teacher approached me through a friend, saying that they would like to send professional teachers to teach us dance. After talking to him, I thought this was quite nice, and I asked him if I could pass the contacts of all the public square dance leaders in the community to him, and he was very delighted. The project was officially launched on 23 May 2015, which also took place in our Xiqing Park. Since I was the one who helped them make this project happen, I spoke on behalf of more than a hundred dance groups of Qiaoxi District in the opening ceremony. I was interviewed by journalists and there was newspaper coverage afterwards. The Red Maple Art Troupe performed as well, with a large photograph of their performance printed in the newspaper. Now, I have also become a kind of celebrity.—Wang Jing (2015)*

The above passage from our interview with Wang Jing reveals aspects of the organization and management of individual dance groups. There is a spectrum of organizational styles, from the looser, more casual groups, to more organized groups that can be partnered with other groups for either community-based, self-initiated events or those held by government at all levels. In general, those groups actively pursuing performance opportunities tend to become better at group management and organization; they need leaders with charisma and skills to connect with other groups, cooperate with the authorities, and obtain resources. Even groups that are more casually run, if they want to use public spaces, must comply with government regulations, such as the set hours, and make sure the squares are maintained. The social problems already noted—the lack of and fight for space and the noise pollution—necessarily demand government intervention. Over recent years, local Chinese governments of various levels have developed measures to facilitate and manage dancing in public squares and mitigate conflicts between the dancers and their neighbors. How the dances are to be managed is included in the *Circular for Guiding the Healthy Development of Public Square Dancing* (Ministry of Culture 2015). While the generation and maintenance of spaces require policy-making and the efforts of local governments, problems such as noise control fall largely to the dance leaders to resolve. As such, the relationship between the local governments and the dance leaders becomes crucial. Because many measures are still under development and experimentation, there is still a window the roles of community organizations and the government to evolve in today's China.

The biggest problem is noise, which is related to the lack of appropriate spaces to accommodate the huge number of dancers. It is not uncommon to see dancers occupy metro entrances or empty alleyways within the residential areas. Some dancers even push people's cars out of the way in order to use a parking spot for dancing. Often dancers practice to music played through poor quality loudspeakers at high volume to accommodate the diminished hearing of some older dancers. Also, some dancers told us that volume helps them dance with "more feeling."

10. *Bangzi xi*, "clapper opera," is prominent in northern, western, and central China. "Bangzi" designates the wood clapper that is struck to mark the main beats. Bangzi xi is high-pitched, loud, animated, and highly emotional.

In a way, these problems reflect the ongoing rough transitional period of urban development: citizens have not yet fully recognized or adjusted themselves to behaviors deemed appropriate in urban public spaces. Another fundamental problem is China's high population density, leaving little space for exercising. According to the *12th Five-Year Public Sports Facilities Construction Plan* published by the National Development and Reform Commission and General Administration of Sport of China in 2012, the average space for physical exercise per capita is estimated to be between 1.2 square-meters and 1.5 square-meters. This is only one-16th of the space per capita in the United States and one-19th of the space in Japan in 2013 (Administration of Sport 2012; Daxiang Gonghui 2015).

A single incidence of noise pollution could technically initiate legal measures, resulting in fining or banning a group.[11] However, with noise pollution and the shortage of space an inevitable and persistent part of mass culture, local governments and community organizations have had to look for nonpunitive ways to alleviate, if not solve, the problems on their own. Yang Yanna, Section Chief of the Public Culture Management of the Bureau of Culture in Changning District, Shanghai, points out that government efforts to mitigate conflicts and provide management support have increased since 2011 and 2012 (Yang Y. 2015). Currently, managing the dancing in public squares is handled by the combined efforts of local operations, including the subdistrict office (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处), the residents committee (*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会), property management, special personnel engaged in public affairs, and dance leaders who are active in community organization.[12] Yang explained the current practice, as exemplified by Zhongshan Park: "the park management company goes through the Chinese Communist Party branch to form a team of third-party volunteers to self-initiate various coordination efforts for the different groups that use the park, including dance groups." This practice began between 2012 and 2013, in response to the problems and disputes that occurred among the groups that use the park. The park management company sent an outreach person to approach the leaders of various groups. A volunteer team was then formed in which a main coordinator oversees the team of group leaders. According to Yang:

> This means that practicing in a public space like this park requires one to follow our "conventions for civil conduct" [*wenming gongyue* 文明公约]. The group leaders are members of our volunteer team and are responsible for regulating the behaviors of their own group members. Moreover, there is a negotiating system among the different group leaders, such as the designation of space and time slots, the launch of events, as well as the conventions for civil conduct. (Yang Y. 2015)

Some districts have developed more elaborate organizational measures. For example, in 2015 the Minhang District of Shanghai formed Shanghai's first Public Cultural Plaza Management Association to support rehearsal needs, event suggestions, ideas for forming groups, and artistic instructions for the dance groups in the district. The role of the dance leader is emphasized again. One of the council members remarked that "dance leaders have considerable control over the groups [...]. The council gathered more than 200 such 'bellwethers'" (*lingtou yang* 领头羊), making it easier to create more orderly systems for dancing in public squares (Shao 2015).

11. The Law of Environmental Noise Pollution Prevention and Control of the People's Republic of China was passed in 1996 and implemented in March 1997. In Shanghai, the Measures for the Prevention and Control of Public Noise Pollution in Shanghai City was published in 2013 (Yu 2015).

12. The special personnel engaged in public affairs may include CCP party secretaries for the communities, who are used to help mitigate disputes, such as Dai Suqin of Zhongshan Park neighborhood; or representatives of the Municipal People's Congress, such as Chen Suping, who is also the head of Hu Opera Troupe of Changning District, Shanghai (Xie 2015).

> The Administration of Culture, Radio, Film, and TV of Minhang District held 12 consultation sessions; 500 people from the Representatives of People's Congress of the District, Members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, common citizens, and representatives of the dance groups drafted relevant management measures, conventions for civil conduct, and an evaluation program for the dance groups. (Shao 2015)

What stands out from the measures developed in Minhang District is the Star-System Evaluation for the Groups (*Xingji tuandui kaoheping xuan* 星级团队考核评选). The system evaluates groups by totaling "basic points, extra points, and deductions." This separates dancing groups into three-star, four-star, and five-star groups. For example, if a group is reported by the residents for disturbance, 10 points will be deducted; if a group participates in more than one free community event, five points will be added; if a group wins an award in a national contest, different numbers of points will be added according to the type of award; if there is any disharmony between different groups—for example, fighting over space—or among members of a group, five points will be deducted. Dance groups are awarded funds and services on the basis of their points. The services offered to groups include "artistic training, fitness instruction, attendance of cultural events, etc." (Shao 2015). This sort of evaluation program is starting to be systematized in certain areas of China.

The case of Wang Jing provides an example from the dancer's perspective of how self-initiation and organization can gradually lead to collaboration with the government (including serving propagandistic purposes) as well as forming connections with other groups in the community. As mentioned before, Wang organized the Mother's Day Celebration for five consecutive years in the Qiaoxi District of Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province. In the first year, only her own groups were involved, and she did not officially apply for permission from anyone other than informing the park management office of her intent. Throughout the following years, as she earned the trust of the community, including the park management, more and more groups got involved. "By now, five years have passed, and they all knew I would organize an event on Mother's Day, so they wouldn't stop me. On the contrary, the director of the park management office told me that 'Teacher Wang, you should sell tickets now, because the performances you arranged are wonderful'" (Wang J. 2015). The format of the Mother's Day Celebration is like that of the Spring Festival Gala of China Central TV (CCTV), in which one show after another is performed. Wang is the organizer, the hostess, the stage manager, and the stage crew. She wears many different hats during the event. Wang's success attracted the Bureau of Culture and Sport of the District. Now she is often asked to help organize the major events held by the bureau each year, as the liaison between the district government and the more than 70 dance leaders in the district. Wang and some of the other dance leaders have worked to obtain certificates as Public Sports Instructors (*Shehui tiyu zhidaoyuan* 社会体育指导员) issued by the different levels of government (up to the national level). Since 2010, she has organized large events every year to support the launch of national health and fitness programs in Shijiazhuang. For example, since April 2014, she has organized a "core values" event involving 500 people every month for six months, conceived as "500 people dancing one dance, a dance of health for the common people" (*wubai ren tong tiao yizhi wu*, *baixing jiankang wu* 五百人同跳一支舞，百姓健康舞), promoting the Socialist Core Values for the propaganda departments of the city and the province.[13] In 2015 Wang also led a group of 160 Public Sports Instructors to present a large-scale performance involving bouquets and red ribbons at the opening ceremony of the 15th Sports Games of Shijiazhuang City (Wang J. 2015).

13. In 2014, the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress emphasized the promotion of Socialist Core Values, including "prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and kindness" (*People's Daily* 2014).

Wang represents one of those talented Chinese women who not only has leadership skills but also is capable of meeting the needs of the government in providing performances for events and propaganda campaigns. Yang Xiufeng is also such a figure. One can imagine that among the tens of thousands of dance groups, a considerable number of leaders possess these qualities. Channeling the talent and energy of these leaders into all kinds of dance contests and events is another way that the government manages the dancing in public squares. Whether or not the *Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines* are enforced is really not that essential. For many of these devoted leaders, as long as they are given the opportunity, they are incredibly creative. For example, Wang mentioned that she has organized events for the environmental protection unit of the district government every two years over the past five years. Her group has modeled costumes made of newspapers and plastic bags: "Some of our sisters are very talented; they used the red plastic bags to make skirts that looked quite fashionable. We would wear them to promote the messages of environmental protection and not to litter, etc." (Wang J. 2015). It should be noted that the criteria for scoring in competitions, the instructions given by the professional teachers, and the expectations for the content and tone of the performance for these formal events (such as choreographing mass spectacles and creating a positive, uplifting atmosphere) still powerfully shape how dancers channel their creative energies.

Yang Yanna notes that besides creating performance platforms and sending instructors to "serve" the dancers in the community, most of the work done by the cultural department of Changning District, Shanghai, concerns guiding citizens in civil conduct:

> In creating all kinds of performance platforms, we are really promoting conventions for civil conduct to our citizens through dancing in the public squares, such as the ethos of health and happiness for the families through dancing, and the need to abide by the rules for using the public spaces—not treading on the grass and controlling the volume of their voices and sounds, etc. We promote these messages in the events, during rehearsals, and before the contests, utilizing various communication channels, including WeChat. In the past, we would hear noises of garbage or plastic bags coming from some groups, but this has greatly improved in recent years. We can sense that the participants have become more aware of civil behavior, and they relay this to the younger generation, as many of them are grandparents. For example, this year we asked them not to bring plastic bags but canvas bags to the event, and not to speak too loudly, and we saw a lot of improvement. We also gather the group leaders for promoting civil conduct throughout these events. (Yang Y. 2015)

For those countries or regions that have longer histories of modernization and urbanization, self-regulation of behavior in public spaces is probably already internalized and normalized by the citizens. In China the public dance organizations become a means of imparting these codes.

The cases above draw from a range of primary and secondary sources grounded in different locales in China and from the perspectives of both dancers and officials. The practices developed by local residents and leaders comprise much of what was subsequently published by the central Chinese government in their *Circular*. The principles of "incorporating public square dance activities into grassroots social governance systems," especially the approach of picking the core members (*zhua gugan* 抓骨干) or gathering the bellwethers, are an operational convention that have persisted in Chinese society for specific historical reasons (Ministry of Culture 2015). The hours of operation and the allocation of public spaces and facilities, the conditional distribution of free mobile audio systems, the registration of cultural activities happening in public squares, and the possible adoption of the Star-System Evaluation Program are all addressed in the *Circular*, as are the servicing of public square dance instruction (by sending instructors and distributing instructional DVDs), the organization of contests and performance events, as well as the need to develop local ethnic characteristics and promote the Socialist Core Values. Perhaps the most concrete new development set forth in the *Circular* is the stipulation that urban planning should involve developing appropriate venues for dancing based on the size

of the population. This is accomplished by using existing resources such as the lots and squares of shopping malls, business and community venues, and empty street corners. This is probably why most of the complaints about the *Circular* concern the potential takeover of venues (such as basketball and badminton courts) by dancers. Even after the publication of the *Circular* by the central government, local governments still need to develop detailed measures for implementation. The story of dancing in public squares is far from over.

Reflection: Historical Influences

As mentioned earlier, many threads of historical influences contribute to the emergence of dancing in public squares. Although the threads below are delineated chronologically, one should not take them as a simple teleological explanation, but consider them as layered residues and partial continuities that trace longer historical cultural roots as well as shifts of political, social, and economic forces and conditions in modern times.

In Chinese agricultural society before 1949, people carried out large-scale farming activities as a collective, such as dredging the river and making irrigation systems. Collective singing and dance performances were also featured in farmers' festival celebrations. Yangge, literally "rice-sprout songs," a mixture of singing and dancing when planting seedlings in the rice field, is still the most common form of collective performance in northern China. People spontaneously organize yangge dance teams for a ritualistic processional performance in hope of ensuring peace, prosperity, and abundant harvest for the community. An important feature of yangge is its liveliness.

> In northern Shaanxi province, every village and neighborhood has a yangge team widely attended by men, women, the young, and the old. In the Spring Festival, the yangge teams visit villages and households, performing everywhere. They compete against each other, which was fervent and exhilarating [...]. (China IBSN Press 1995:123)

The New Yangge Movement in Yan'an District launched by the Communist Party in 1942 seized upon this tradition. Artists from Lu Xun Art College in Yan'an District adapted and transformed the local yangge in Shaanxi Province for their propaganda supporting Mao Zedong's political thought. Mao delivered a speech at the Yan'an Forum of Literature and Arts in May 1942, stating that literature and arts should serve the masses, especially the peasants and soldiers (Guo 2006). They turned "the grassroots performance of yangge that has long and pervasively existed in the peasant folk culture into an important instrument for the Yan'an intellectuals to promote their arts and cultural activities, imbuing it with a ritualistic form and significance for the border regime" (Guo 2006:246). The reason New Yangge was accepted by the people in a relatively short period is that it retained the form of traditional yangge while instilling it with new meaning. From then on, yangge teams were organized to perform in the streets and squares during the major festivals like New Year's Day, Spring Festival, Labor Day, October Revolution Day, and other major occasions (Li 1996). This ritualized collective dance became one of the important means the government used to unify the masses after 1949.

During the Cultural Revolution, the Loyalty Dance (*Zhongziwu* 忠字舞) epitomized these ritualized and politicized collective artistic activities. Widely popular for a time, its movements were simple and repetitive, much like broadcast exercises. It is generally believed that the Loyalty Dance came from the epic dance drama *The East Is Red* (Dongfanghong 东方红; 1965). The scene of the Loyalty Dance is of people dancing in a circle, the little red book in their hands and Chairman Mao's badge on their chests—expressing their loyalty to Chairman Mao. They usually sang the most popular songs, while repeatedly circling their steps, gestures, and facial expressions matching the lyrics (Tan J. 2013). It was common to see some grassroots artistic squads or Mao Zedong propaganda teams performing the Loyalty Dance during the parades of the Cultural Revolution. In some large-scale parades, there were even Loyalty Dance groups of up to tens of thousands of participants (Zhou 2015). Although the Loyalty Dance

looked stiff and mechanical, lacking beauty, it was easy for people of all ages to learn because it didn't require any dance skills or special training (Baidu Baike 2015). Other revolutionary dances also remained in the psychophysical memory of this generation of Chinese people. Peng Zhang noted that many of the public square dancers he encountered remembered performing revolutionary model ballets such as *The White-Haired Girl* (Baimao nu 白毛女; 1966) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (Hongseniangzijun 红色娘子军; 1964). Some even performed leading roles (Peng Z. 2015).[14] Currently, "red songs" (*Hongge* 红歌) celebrating the Chinese socialist revolution and popular during the Cultural Revolution, are sometimes used by those who dance in public squares. The most notable example is the Nanguan Art Troupe (*Nanguan yishutuan* 南管艺术团) whose performances, with their sensational makeup and costumes, draw on red songs, Chinese folk dances, and the uniformed military dances (*jundui wudao* 军队舞蹈) that relay the spirit of discipline, determination, heroism, power, and patriotism of the Chinese revolutionary army (Peng and Yang 2014). Their deliberately politicized shows, which make spectacles out of revolutionary symbols of the past—and which the government would rather avoid—attract a lot of media attention, although they are not typical of the majority of public square dance groups today.

In pre-1949 China, most grassroots cultural and arts activities were initiated and organized by the people. After 1949, these activities were initiated by the government as part of the Communist Party's reorganization of the whole country. Before 1949, the national regime consisted of two parts: one was the formal bureaucracy, which only reached down to the county level; and the other was carried out by the landed gentry through informal social networks. Many scholars described it as the "Government-Elite-Grassroots Society," or the three-layer ruling model. After taking over in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party completely reorganized the society in order to unify the dispersed and diverse social forces. In the cities, all the people were organized into two kinds of systems: the unit system (*danwei zhidu* 单位制度) for those working (or at school); and the street resident committee system (*jieju zhidu* 街居制度) for those out of work (including the retired, women who worked in the home, and the disabled). It turned the three-layer model of "Government-Elite-Grassroots Society" into the two-layer model of "Government-Grassroots Society," which strengthened the government's control and management of the country (He H. 2003; Yang L. 2006). From the 1950s to the 1970s, Chinese society became highly politicized, affecting the grassroots arts and cultural activities as well. A lot of these activities were used as propaganda for the Party's important policies and major tasks at the time. The work units (and schools) and the street resident committees built up various kinds of hobby groups to carry out cultural and artistic activities, among which dancing was the most common and usually involved the largest number of participants.[15] In addition, the government organized mass performances. For example, the Shanghai Municipal Government held a Chinese Folk Art Festival of Workers in 1955, with the participation of nearly 400 units with more than 3,000 workers in total. More than 800 programs were performed in the festival

14. During the Cultural Revolution, many regional troupes and self-organized performance groups by non-professionals staged their own performances using the officially sanctioned "Revolutionary Model Ballets." This phenomenon is recounted by both Peng Zhang (2015) and Beijing-based choreographer Wen Hui (Wen 2013:133).

15. For example, in the first half of 1955, in Shanghai there were already 800 workers' clubs and 1,386 workers' art hobby groups in the factories, including theatre, music, dance, literature, and fine arts groups. For every 1,000 people there was one cultural/artistic group. A total of 18,500 people participated in the activities of the groups. The participation ratio was 1 in every 806 workers. There were a total of 624 cultural and artistic groups in all 203 middle and high schools. A total of 20,763 people participated and the participation ratio was 1 in every 10 students. There were 72 singing groups with 9243 members and 152 dance groups had 4,211 members (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture 1956).

during that time (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture 1956).[16] After 1979, as China initiated the "reform and opening-up" policies, the government no longer organized such politicized mass performances. The current government management of dancing in public squares essentially provides guidance and regulation based on what has already been initiated and organized by the urban grassroots participants, as opposed to a top-down politicized imposition.

As China reformed and the nation transformed from a planned economy to a market economy, the government began to withdraw its supervision from many areas of economic and social life. Two new factors that had an impact on the citizens' lives indirectly contributed to the rise of dancing in public squares. One was the tens of millions of laid-off workers, a result of the reorganization of the state-owned enterprises. They were poor but with plenty of free time. The other factor was the cultural system reform carried out by the government in the 1980s. Before that time there were some free Civic Cultural Activity Centers and Stations (*wenhua guan* 文化馆 and *wenhua zhan* 文化站) for residents. But the government cut the budget for the centers, encouraging them to self-finance. As the Civic Cultural Activity Centers/Stations became commercial businesses, they cut off free services for local residents and opened commercial ballrooms and cinemas—and the jobless soon found that they were driven out (Ma 1992; Shi T. 2014).[17] This made it difficult for people to find entertainment, fitness venues, and places for social interaction. The situation was especially hard on elderly people who had little access to the internet. Dancing in public squares quickly took over as the cheapest and most convenient way for city and town people to satisfy their social and fitness needs (Shi T. 2014; He H. 2014).

In the 2000s, the government realized the importance of grassroots cultural and artistic activities for the masses and re-emphasized it again. The campaigns of Creating a National Health City (*Chuangjian guojia weisheng chengshi* 创建国家卫生城市) and Create a National Civilized City (*Chuangjian quanguo wenming chengshi* 创建全国文明城市) in 2005 and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games proved to be the best opportunity for the government to promote dancing in public squares (He H. 2014). In the *National Civilized City Assessment System (Trial)* published in 2004, requirements for community cultural and sports activities are specified: at least 15 amateur cultural and sports groups in each community, and at least 8 cultural events at large public squares per district per year. Under the pressure of meeting these requirements, local governments used dancing in public squares as the best way to promote mass cultural and sports activities. In 2008, some citizens of Jiamusi city, Heilongjiang Province, choreographed a dance in a public square which was adopted by the Heilongjiang Provincial Sports Bureau in 2010 for the whole province. In 2012, the General Administration of Sport held a week-long course to teach participants this dance, now named the *Jiamusi Happy Dance Workout* (*Jiamusi kuaile wubu jiansbencao* 佳木斯快乐舞步健身操). The first group of 60 participants came from 30 provinces. This initiated a bottom-up and top-down pattern: a local dance was confirmed by the national authorities, and then the national authorities promoted it nationwide. The provincial and municipal governments continued to train dance instructors, which sped up the popularity of dancing in public squares (Shi T. 2014).

16. The art festival included two phases. In the first stage, the districts held their own shows from 5 December 1955 to 14 January 1956. In the second phase, the city held the final festival, which took place in three areas of the city—east, west, and center—simultaneously from 12 January to 30 January 1956, with an audience of nearly 16,800 people (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture 1956).

17. By 1992 there were 51,556 mass cultural institutes comprising Mass Art Centers (serving provinces and municipalities, directly under the central government), Civic Cultural Activity Centers (serving counties and cities), and Civic Cultural Activity Stations (serving villages, towns, and cities). In 1992, 70.9 percent of the Mass Art Centers (253), 71.2 percent of the Civic Cultural Activity Centers (1,934) and 48.2 percent of the Civic Cultural Activity Stations (2,949) in city communities provided for-pay services. No relevant statistics for the for-pay services of the Civic Cultural Activity Stations in villages and towns can be found. Their total net income reached RMB 54,054,000 (USD 8,316,000), equivalent to 33.3 percent of the total net income from all of cultural institutes and 3.3 percent of the total government funding for all cultural institutes that year.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the other popular dance activity that also takes place in open-air public spaces: ballroom dancing (*jiaoyiwu*). Ballroom dancing in China emerged in the 1980s, after the reform and opening-up. Unlike the political mass dance discussed earlier, ballroom dancing is from the West and came into fashion in cosmopolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Done as couple-dancing, ballroom dancing involves popular styles such as the cha-cha, waltz, rumba, and jitterbug. When danced by ordinary people, moves are more loose and relaxed. Sometimes the dancing couple just hold each other and sway to music without performing any steps. Two men and two women can also dance together. Peng Zhang points out that this sort of popular ballroom dancing is mainly about the flow of desire and pleasure for the dancers themselves, unlike systematized sports dance or what dancing in public squares has in part become (Peng Z. 2015). In the early 1980s, ballroom dancing was banned by the Chinese government for being "immoral and obscene" (*shangfeng baisu* 伤风败俗). Now the government only makes sure that it does not cause social disturbance. The government does not support or promote ballroom dancing as it does dancing in public squares (Shi T. 2014).

The Performance Goes On

Dancing in public squares is a distinct popular culture item born out of the specific context of China and its contemporary development. It is not a simple collective dancing imposed by the government; it exists in the community and relies heavily on community-initiated organizing, but it is also intertwined with government directives and support that traces distinct histories of public organizing and staging of mass cultural and sports activities and performances in Chinese socialist modernity. The recent growth of dancing in public squares can be attributed to the national health and fitness movement promoted by the Chinese government, on top of the existing interest and energy of a generation of Chinese people, mostly women who avidly dance for sociological and psychological reasons discussed in this article. The active dance leaders organize the performances. When local governments organize contests or performance events, they cooperate with and even help broaden the connections of the leaders. A robust network of communication, management, and mobilization links resident committees, subdistrict offices, district governments, and municipal governments in supporting the dancing.

In terms of content, the dancing is saturated with teaching efforts and products from the government, the community organizers/dance leaders, as well as local entrepreneurs. Various levels of contests and performance opportunities abound. The dancers choose, appropriate, and create different choreographies for themselves. The official routines serve as recommendations and supplements, not rules crudely enforced. Nevertheless, due to the distinct historical development and context, the dance leaders and the official teachers often end up referencing the same body of dance knowledge, practice, and choreographic conventions. When it comes to contests, those who want to gain recognition—whether to affirm their sense of honor or receive monetary reward or future supportive possibilities—naturally choreograph and perform along the aesthetic criteria generated by these contests.

It may help provoke further reflections by posing some questions here that put into perspective some corporeal performance cultures. For one, what is the difference between dancing in public squares and aerobic classes offered in gyms at a higher cost? Formally, the two are very similar—the students follow the teacher performing the movements collectively, accompanied by rhythmic, uplifting music with heavy beats. For another, if dancing in public squares is exported to Sydney, for example, will it be as popular as in China? Who would dance in the public squares of Sydney, what kind of public dance culture will emerge, inducing what kind of management, regulation, and support? For still another, the song list of "Square Dancing" offered by Apple includes songs ranging from Teresa Teng to Michael Jackson, as well as Missy Elliott, Snoop Dogg, and Britney Spears. How will this song list affect the "choreography" of the Chinese people's emotional and physical expressions?

Many people think that the phenomenon of dancing in public squares is limited to a certain generation of Chinese people. Younger people perform far more diverse activities for recreation and exercise; they are far more interested in activities that allow for individual self-expression. It is foreseeable that dancing in public squares will prosper for a while, now that it has gained official support. But what about the long term development this kind of dancing? This is an open question that only the next generations of Chinese people can decide.

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