

SUMMER 2018

centre stage

modern dance in China

BeijingDance LDTX 'All River Red'
photo by Wang Xiaojing



TAO Dance Theatre '4'
photo by Fan Xi

Four dancers stand clad in identical baggy tunics, faces painted black and heads snug in black skull caps, impossible to tell front from back. When the music slams on—a cacophony of bells and voices—these bodies twist and spin in perfect unison, like a flock of birds or four electrons circling an invisible nucleus. An arm juts out from each grey tunic, yanking the quartet into a forward roll, four feet pointing straight into the sky.

These bodies defy gravity, gender, and it seems, physics, moving with the precision of an army but in the patterns of leaves tumbling down a hutong.

‘what are they doing?’

Whispers an impatient ten-year-old boy to his mother two minutes into TAO Dance Theatre’s sold-out performance at the China National Centre for the Performing Arts in 2013. After four years of following this company on their Weibo account as they toured dozens of countries on five continents, the family has flown in from Shenzhen to see them on their home turf for the first time.



TAO Dance Theatre ‘4’ (excerpt) / video courtesy of TAO Dance Theatre

what's in a name?

What makes modern dance in China Chinese? What makes it modern?

Contemporary choreographers in China today use dance and dancers' bodies—whether traditional forms like folk dance and ballet, or an entirely new physical language they devised in a stairwell on the outskirts of Beijing—not to promote a national agenda, but to communicate individual experiences and worldviews.



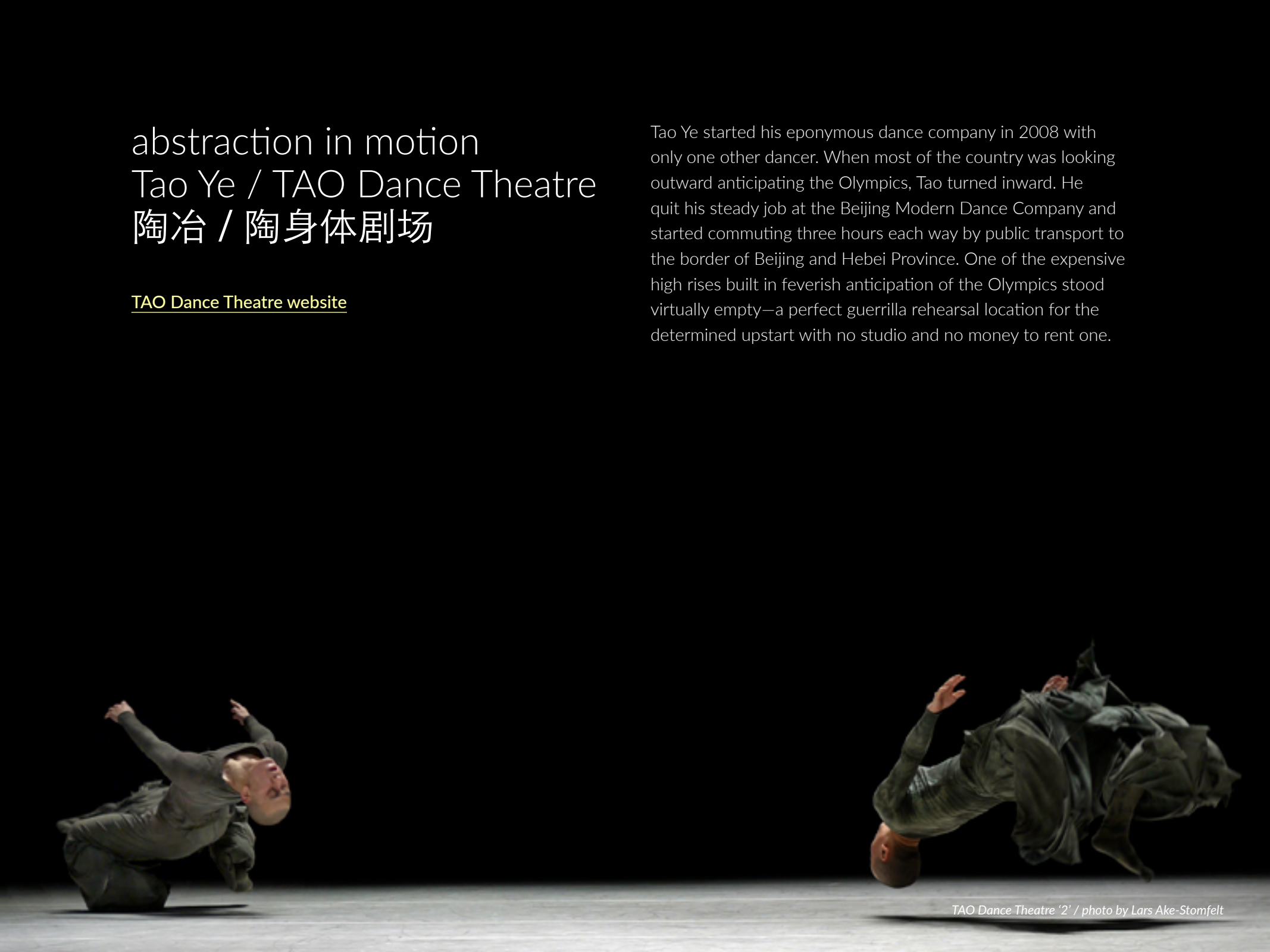
Willy Tsao teaching class at BeijingDance LDTX / photo courtesy of Yin Peng

When asked in a 2003 interview how he defines 'Chinese modern dance,' BeijingLDTX Artistic Director Willy Tsao retorted, 'In China, not only the government officials come to tell you that you must do something with "ethnic Chinese characteristics," but also the Western critics say "Since you are from China you shouldn't copy us, you should have your own voice." But I think, this is modern society, and in modern society it's not about whether it's Western or Eastern, it's a matter of individual choice.'

abstraction in motion
Tao Ye / TAO Dance Theatre
陶冶 / 陶身体剧场

TAO Dance Theatre website

Tao Ye started his eponymous dance company in 2008 with only one other dancer. When most of the country was looking outward anticipating the Olympics, Tao turned inward. He quit his steady job at the Beijing Modern Dance Company and started commuting three hours each way by public transport to the border of Beijing and Hebei Province. One of the expensive high rises built in feverish anticipation of the Olympics stood virtually empty—a perfect guerrilla rehearsal location for the determined upstart with no studio and no money to rent one.



TAO Dance Theatre '2' / photo by Lars Ake-Stomfelt

At only 22 years old, Tao was on a mission. Trained in the Shanghai Army Song and Dance Troupe, one of hundreds of government-funded troupes set up in the 1950s and 60s to celebrate the nation, he knew something more lay beyond the confines of the army studios. ‘Even as a kid, I thought it was ridiculous that we were always supposed to smile when we performed. Why?’



TAO Dance Theatre ‘6’
photo by Marco Feklistoff

Tao's desire to explore and push past the boundaries of the human body has launched a unique choreographic voice. With monastic rigour and military discipline, he calls on his dancers, now numbering nearly a dozen, to turn their awareness inward and open up the movement potential of every joint, sinew and organ, in a process of nearly surgical physical research. (His company's name in Chinese 陶身体剧场 means TAO 'Body' Theatre.)

Tao's works are numbered rather than named. 'I want audiences to have a pure experience watching my work, not be limited by or filtered through a title.' Audiences may forget they are watching humans on stage—limbs become lines, torsos twist in impossible directions, narratives dissipate into pure energy in motion.



TAO Dance Theatre '6' (excerpt) / video courtesy of TAO Dance Theatre

Gu Jiani / UNTITLED GROUP
古佳妮 / 十口无团

UNTITLED GROUP facebook page

A dancer falls backward; inches before slamming to the floor another dancer's hand catches the back of her neck, flinging her sideways into an off-kilter spin, arms spanning out to encircle briefly a third dancer's shoulders, jerking back to launch that one into another whirl—and Gu Jiani's intricate clockwork is set in motion...



UNTITLED GROUP 'Exit'
photo by Lin Dingtai



UNTITLED GROUP 'Exit'
photo by Lin Dingtai

Inspired by Newton's principle that all actions have an equal and opposite reaction, Sichuan province's Gu Jiani explores the interplay of cause and effect in explosive, athletic, and often violent duets and trios. Trained in ballet and Chinese classical dance, Gu deems both inadequate for what she wants to express. Like Tao Ye, Gu left a steady job in a full-time dance company to spend time in borrowed spaces exploring and developing her own technique and training methods.

Gu's work has been shaped by creative responses to limited financial resources. When she could not afford to pay a projection artist to create the video for her duet 'Right & Left,' she convinced a dancer friend trained in lighting design to create the effects live with her hands moving in front of a projector beam. The work now tours with this third dancer in the rafters casting haunting lights and shadows over the two bodies on stage.



UNTITLED GROUP 'Right & Left' (behind-the-scenes) / video courtesy of Gu Jiani

'I might take a stool, or a pillow, something totally mundane that our bodies touch in daily life, and explore all the possible ways a body might interact with this inanimate object. It turns the object into something else, and also, I hope, makes the audience look at their daily lives a little differently.'

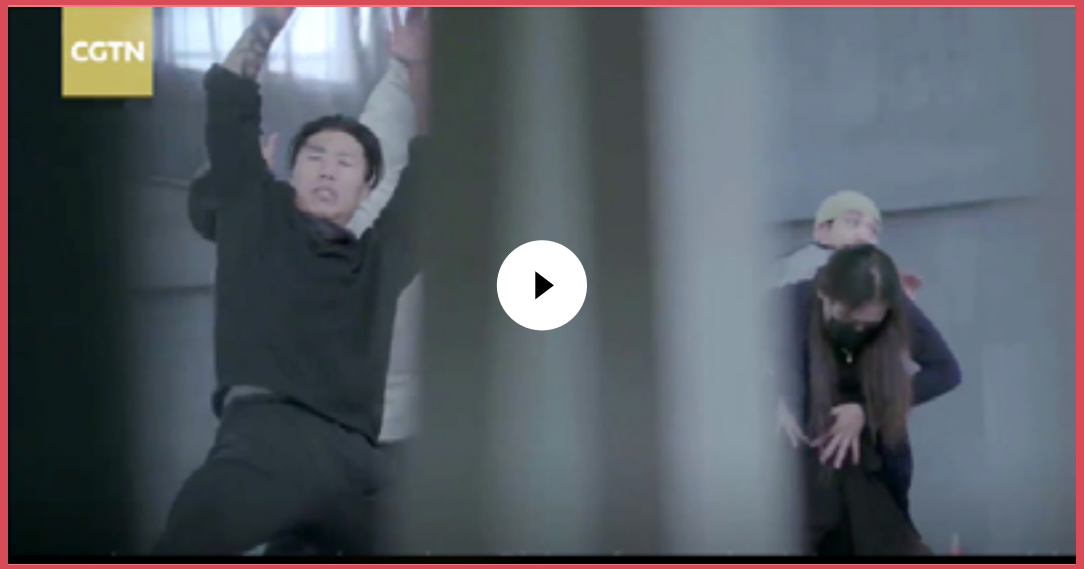
a cocktail of movement



Chinese traditional dance forms abound. Of the 56 officially recognised ethnic groups in China, most claim their own folk dance traditions, for everything from rites and rituals to retelling folktales. Other movement traditions stem from the hundreds of Chinese opera forms—Kunqu, Chuanju, Jingju, Yueju, etc—each involving codified movement vocabularies, gestures, storylines, and aesthetics. Martial arts techniques also became incorporated into opera and dance performance traditions over the dynasties. Classical ballet entered stage left in the 1950s thanks to friendly Sino–Soviet relations. Following that, 'Classical Chinese Dance' 中国古典舞 was codified at the Beijing Dance Academy, Asia's largest dance conservatoire. Chinese classical dance technique melded Soviet ballet training with traditional Chinese opera and folk dance forms to create the ultimate in virtuosity, refinement, and discipline.



Chinese Classical Dance male solo 'Feng Yi' performed by Wu Yifeng, Beijing Dance Academy



Beijing Modern Dance Company Artistic Director Gao Yanjinzi / video courtesy of CGTN

Some artists credit international teachers for introducing them to modern dance. Others see ‘modern dance’ as creative acts by individuals that have nothing to do with geographic or ethnic identity, and say they have been creating ‘modern dances’ since they were children bouncing around freely in their bedrooms.

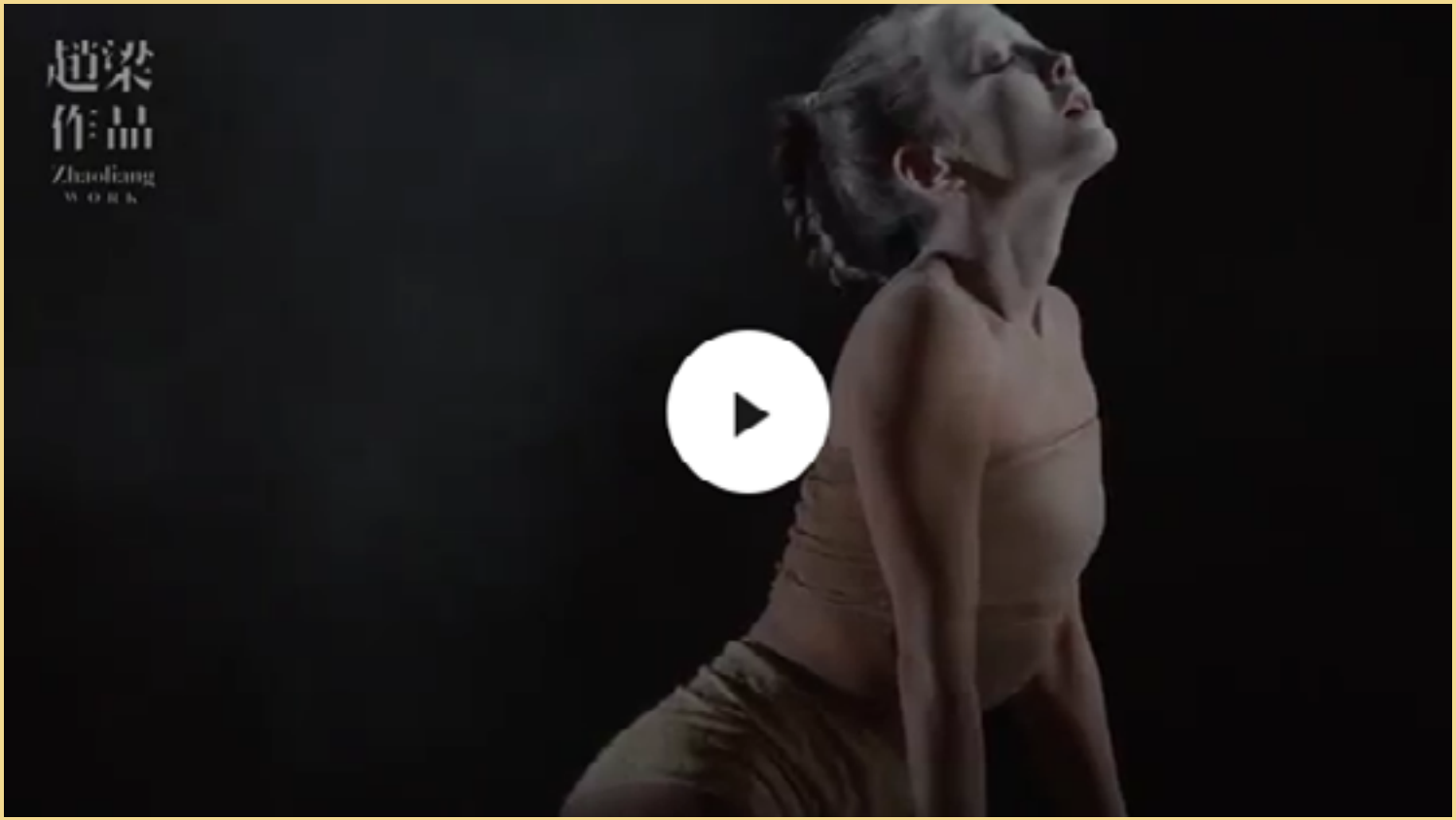
bawdy buddhism

On a sweaty August night outside Beijing's Zheng Yi Ci Temple in 2017, the impatient audience starts when a female form, nearly naked and painted in deathly white chalk, slinks down the steps into the steamy alley. Her sylphlike crawls and flitting jumps perplex local passersby.

A pedicab can't get through the crowded alley. As she slithers up to his front tire, the panicked driver scrambles off and backs away barking 'No, no, no, no' as if to ward off a ghost.



Zhao Liang ART 'The Tea Spell'
photo courtesy of Zhao Liang ART



Zhao Liang ART 'The Tea Spell' (trailer)

Releasing his bike from her grasp (and the driver from her spell), she lures the audience through the temple's red lacquer doors, where Zhao Liang's performance of 'The Tea Spell' awaits.

Zhao Liang / Zhao Liang ART 赵梁 / 赵梁ART

Zhao Liang ART website

On the temple stage, 'The Tea Spell' reinterprets the Tang Dynasty story of an enchanting beauty—played by a male dancer—and her romantic encounters with a farmer, an officer, and a monk. Zhao's cast of Chinese opera performers, martial artists, and Chinese classical dancers infuse diverse skills and styles into his contemporary tale of seduction and betrayal. Our chalk-white sylph continues to slink not only across the stage but also through the audience and, occasionally, into stunned audience members' laps.



Zhao Liang ART 'The Tea Spell'
photo courtesy of Zhao Liang ART



Zhao Liang ART 'The Tea Spell'
photo courtesy of Zhao Liang ART

‘The Tea Spell’ is part two of Zhao Liang’s Soul and Desire Trilogy, which also includes ‘Dreams of Zen’ and ‘Escape from the Temple.’ Zhao Liang explains his works as expressions of his perspectives on life and love. One dancer describes Zhao as ‘Not your typical Buddhist. You can see the intense sexual tension between the characters in the piece.’ ‘Dreams of Zen’ in particular opens with male bodies clad in nothing but loincloths writhing in heaps of humping skin.

Long hair and beads nearly to his ankles, choreographer Zhao Liang looks the part of a spiritual wanderer. He travels from his Beijing home base as often as possible to spend time in the mountains and grasslands of China’s western provinces as well as India. ‘To create beauty, you must experience beauty,’ he declares in his philosopher’s cadence. ‘I believe every moment you are alive is a dance. You are using your body to express. It doesn’t have to be on a stage.’



‘Dreams of Zen’ (trailer) video courtesy of Zhao Liang ART

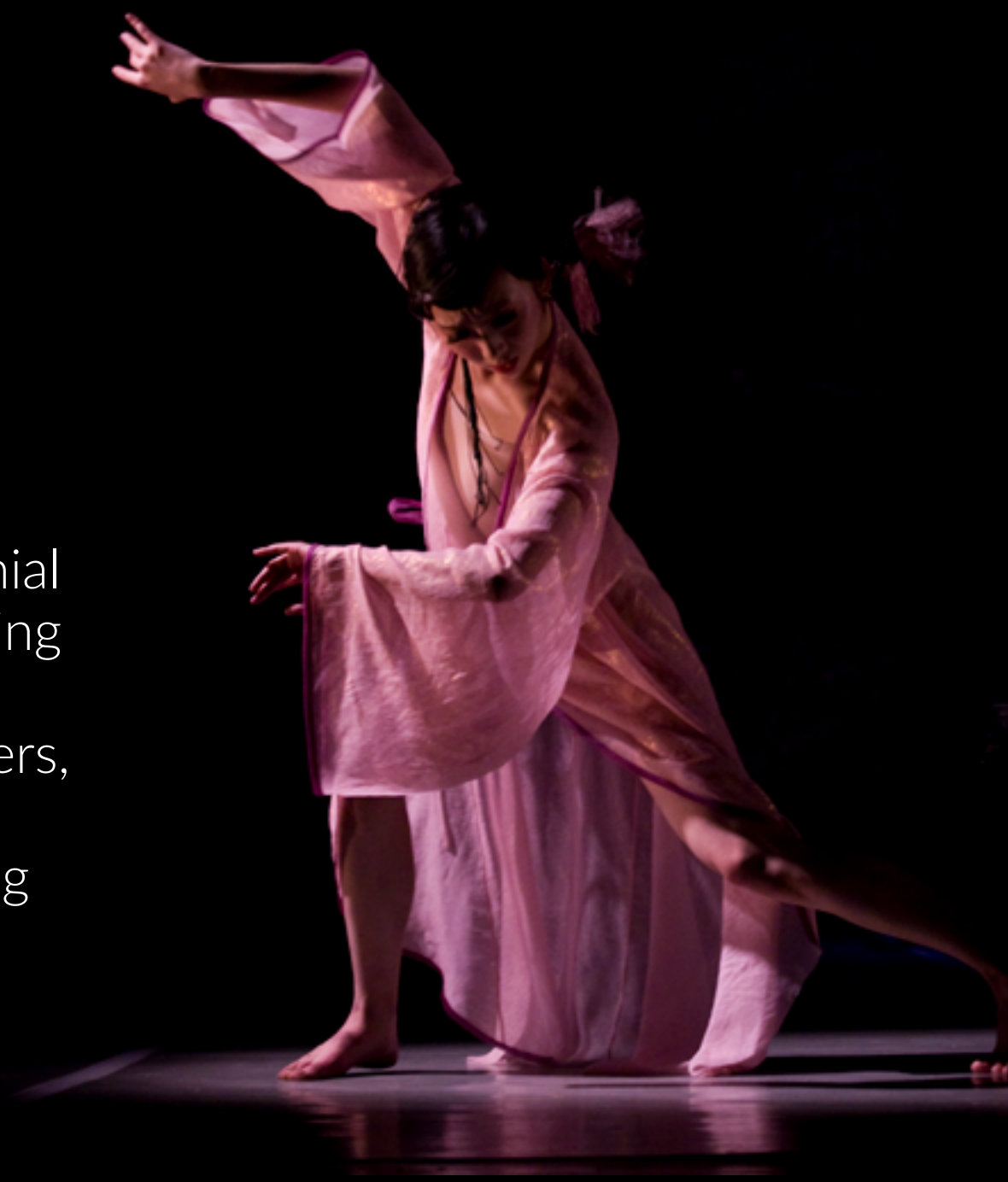


‘Escaping from the Temple’ (trailer) video courtesy of Zhao Liang ART

Wang Yuanyuan/ Beijing Dance Theatre 王媛媛 / 北京当代芭蕾舞团

Beijing Dance Theatre website

The audience filtering into Peking University Centennial Hall on the chilly fall evening of 2012 was atwitter with giggles and hushed whispers, as if each of the 1500+ ticket holders was sneaking into something forbidden.



Beijing Dance Theatre 'Golden Lotus'
photo courtesy of Beijing Dance Theatre



The curtain was about to rise on Wang Yuanyuan's Beijing premiere of her contemporary ballet adaptation of the late Ming Dynasty novel《金瓶梅》or 'The Golden Lotus.'

Known for its graphic descriptions of sex and the voracious sexual appetites of its male and female characters, the book is banned in China. Wang had to change the name of the ballet before it received official government permission to perform in Beijing, despite previous sold-out performances under the original Chinese name in Chengdu and Chongqing.

In an interview with the All China Women's Federation, Wang said, 'Sex is a primary aspect of humanity, so it should not be avoided. It's very artistically conveyed in the ballet, not so much through nudity, but costumes which intimate sex in a more subtle, Chinese way that stimulates the audience's imagination.'

Beijing Dance Theatre 'Golden Lotus'
photo courtesy of Beijing Dance Theatre

Oscar-winning set designer Tim Yip drips the stage in gilt and velvet fabrics that make you want to climb on and roll around. Wang, originally a choreographer with the National Ballet of China and for such films as Zhang Yimou's 'The Banquet,' opens the piece with promising foreplay: she distills the complex novel to basic plot lines of adultery and murder told through a cast of more than 20 half-naked dancers. Sinewy bodies pulse to throbbing Buddhist chants, limbs entangle and bare backs arch in high, sustained, crescendos of ecstasy and agony.

No one is actually naked; all landscapes of skin are covered in slightly dowdy flesh-coloured body suits. The narrative is impossible to follow if you do not already know the story and even then, characters get muddled. Some audience members complained the choreography is all promise, no follow-through. But suggestive tableaus—her buttocks in his crotch, legs around necks, a giant red and gold silk swing centre stage—make for enticing visual delights, even without a satisfying climax.



Beijing Dance Theatre 'Golden Lotus'
photo courtesy of Beijing Dance Theatre

While no longer performed in China, 'The Golden Lotus' ballet **continues to tour** abroad under its original name. The company is touring other, less licentious though equally sensuous, repertory in Beijing, Shenzhen, Xiamen, Guangzhou, Changsha as well as the U.S. in 2018.



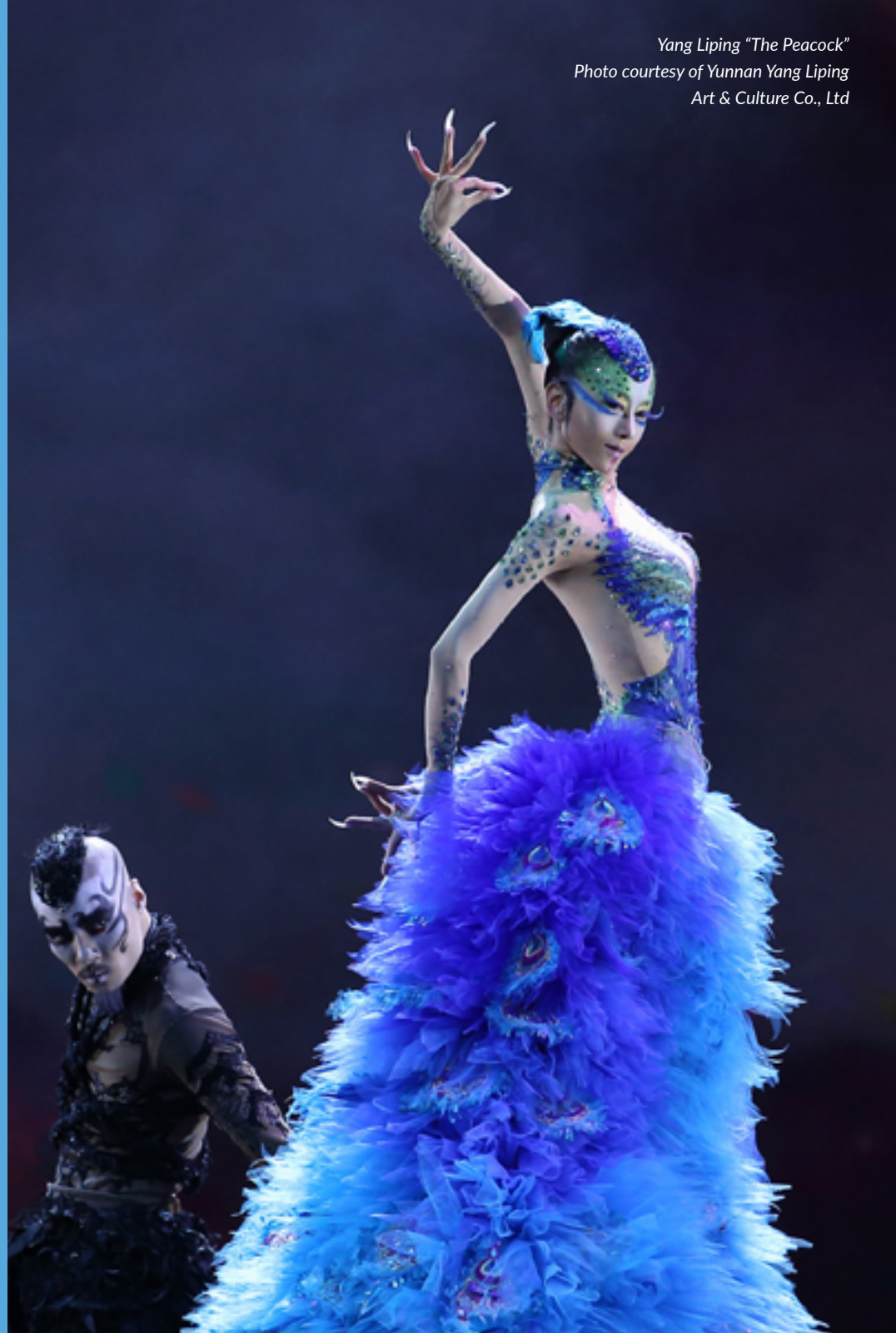
Beijing Dance Theatre 'Golden Lotus'
photo courtesy of Beijing Dance Theatre

PEACOCK PRINCESS and her VILLAGE PEOPLE
Yang Liping 杨丽萍

Yang Liping Art & Culture Co. Ltd website

Yang Liping's virtuoso personal interpretation of the traditional Bai folk dance—claw-like nails extending her fingers to inhuman lengths, hand twitching like a bird head atop her majestic arm—instantaneously established her version of Bai dance as the zenith towards which all future dance students would aspire.

Though a dance legend, she downplays any formal training, telling one journalist, 'Nature is simply the best teacher. I'm a researcher. I watch the motions of the peacock, birds, animals, clouds, anything that moves. That's how I've taught myself to dance'. Yang Liping is a household name throughout China. She shot to stardom in the 1980s when her now iconic Peacock solo premiered on the annual CCTV New Year's Gala to millions of viewers.



Yang Liping "The Peacock"
Photo courtesy of Yunnan Yang Liping Art & Culture Co., Ltd

The Peacock dance is a traditional element from Bai folk dance, one of China's ethnic minority folk dances. It involves dervish-like spinning, manipulation of a gauzy skirt into the peacock's tail feathers, and long arching arm gestures with rapid-fire, precision finger articulations to imitate the strutting movements of a peacock's long neck and head.

Yang's stardom opened opportunities to invest in a company that now produces full-fledged extravaganzas comprising hundreds of dancers and musicians, Las Vegas style lighting effects, and giant sets. To create the 2004 work 'Shangrila—Dynamic Yunnan' now performed more than 4,000 times worldwide, Yang travelled to remote villages across Yunnan Province, one of China's most ethnically diverse. Official lore claims she selected local villagers from remote areas whom she identified as having 'a natural gift of song and dance, inseparable from their customs in the village, not any formal training,' to join the vast production as permanent cast members.



Yang Liping 'The Peacock"
photo courtesy of Yunnan Yang Liping Art & Culture Co., Ltd

Yang Liping Art & Culture Co. Ltd, China's only dance institution to be **publicly listed on China's stock exchange,** now operates daily tourism performances in multiple permanent venues around Yunnan and other provinces, as well as touring productions that regularly perform across China and abroad. In interviews, Yang says **'Shangrila—Dynamic Yunnan'** and the other large-scale, folk dance-inspired extravaganzas are her efforts to find commercially viable ways to preserve and modernize what she views as dying traditions.



Yang Liping 'The Peacock Solo'

audiences in China: young, omnivorous, engaged

In the West, arts managers bemoan the ‘sea of blue’ [hair] of their aging audiences. Mainland China audiences represent the other end of this spectrum: young and omnivorous, open to seeing a classical concert one night and a hole-in-the-wall experimental theatre production the next. Although government-run venues have notoriously had to give away free tickets to fill seats, that trend has shifted dramatically in recent years. Audience ages fall into the 20-40 year old range of college-educated young professionals. ‘Date night’ may entail attending a dance performance as often as seeing a movie or partying at the karaoke club.



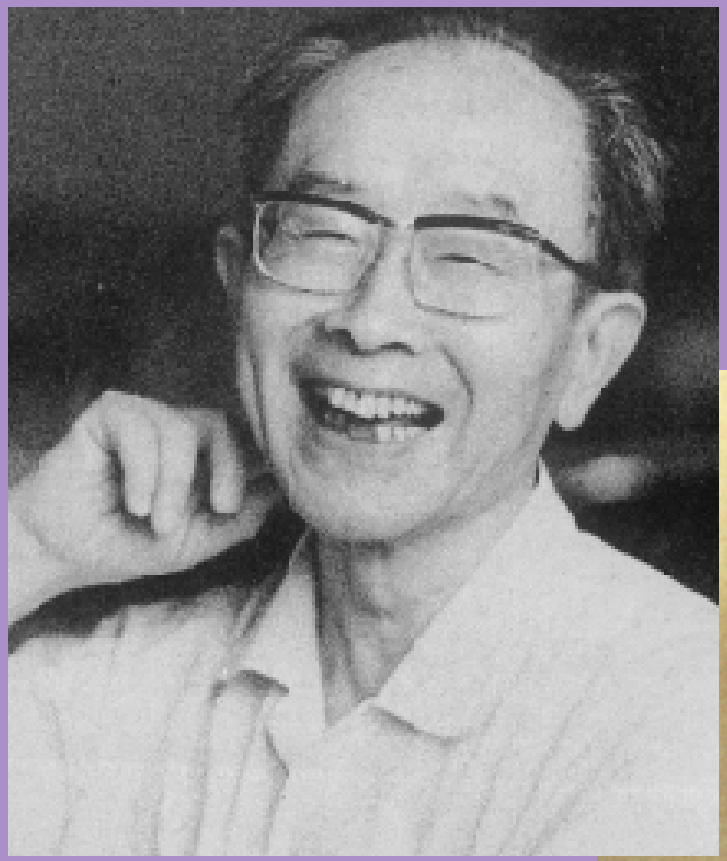
Cynthia Sayer & Her Joyride Band (US) at Xiamen University
photo courtesy of Ping Pong Productions



Shanghai No. 3 Girls High School students talk with cast members after performance of Ayad Akhtar's play 'Disgraced' photo courtesy of Ping Pong Productions

Many students and young professionals see performances one or more times per week. Most dance and theatre performances in China by both international and Chinese groups include post-performance discussions with the artists. More than half of audiences stay for these discussions, even in large 2000-seat venues. The discussions regularly last forty minutes or more, until venues need to usher everyone out. 'In Xi'an, our post-performance discussion lasted longer than the play!' marvelled New York actor Fajer Al-Kaisi on tour in 2016 with the Tony-nominated play 'Disgraced.'

legends of dance



Wu Xiaobang



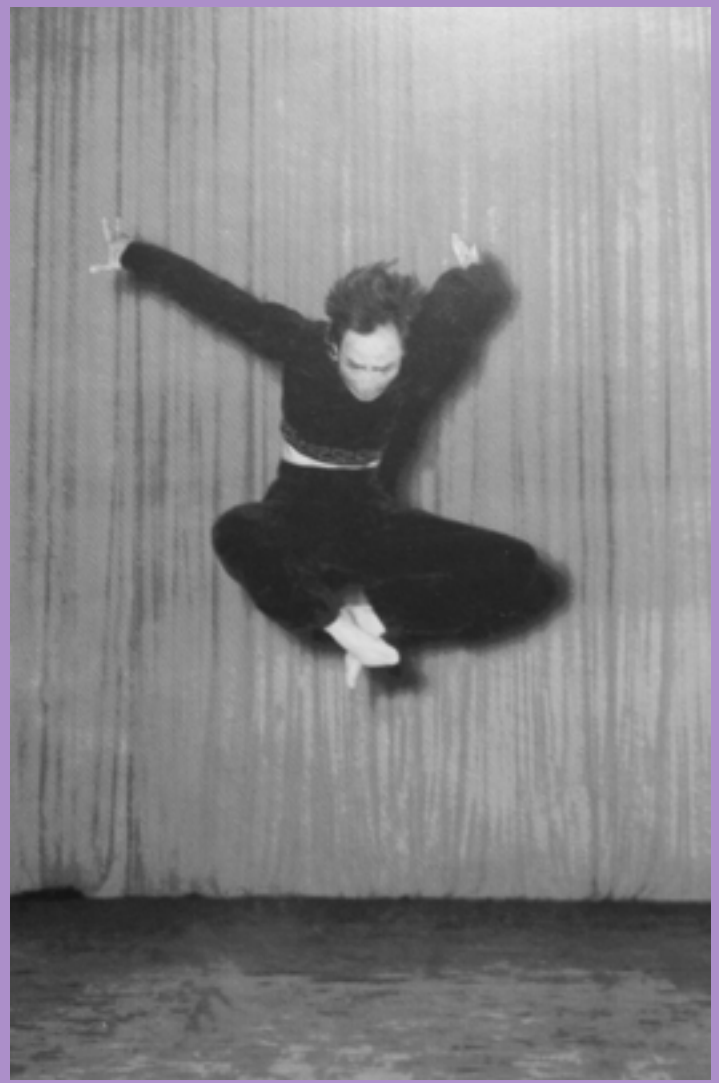
Yang Meiqi

first steps

Wu Xiaobang (1906-95) is often credited as the father of Chinese modern dance. He studied ballet and modern dance in Japan from teachers who had trained in Germany. He returned to China during the War of Resistance and choreographed patriotic solos and ensemble dances.

At the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, Wu founded the Tianma Dance Art Studio in Shanghai to promote his own teaching system, combining what he had studied in Japan with his own research of Chinese folk and religious customs.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), modern dance, like almost all other art forms that did not conform to official prescriptions, was prohibited. In the 1980s, Wu Xiaobang became the founding director of the Dance Research Institute as well as the first instructor in China to teach an MA degree in dance. Read more about Wu's work in a 2016 article by Emily E. Wilcox.



Wu Xiaobang performing 'Yiyongjun jinxingqu'
(義勇軍進行曲 March of the volunteers)
photo courtesy of The MCLC Resource Centre



Yang Meiqi, Charles Reinhart, and students from the Guangzhou modern dance program (1988)
photo courtesy of American Dance Festival

‘why not?’

Yang Meiqi, not a dancer but an educator, is considered the mother of modern dance in China. She received a scholarship in 1986 to attend the American Dance Festival (ADF) in the U.S.

After watching her first modern dance classes at ADF, she marched into then director Charles Reinhart’s office, demanding to know ‘Why do those dancers roll around on the floor like that in class?’

Instead of offering a history of modern dance technique including physics principles of fall and recovery, Charles looked at her and asked, ‘Why not?’

Both Yang and Reinhart credit that ‘Why not?’ moment as the instant Yang decided to bring modern dance training—both technical and choreographic—to China.

Upon returning to China, Yang worked with ADF and the Asian Cultural Council to set up a four-year modern dance training program at the Guangdong Dance School, where she was principal. Dancers from song and dance troupes across China were recruited to enrol, most of whom had never heard of modern dance.



Yang Meiqi / photo courtesy of XIAO KE × ZI HAN

In 1992, graduates of the program formed the Guandgong Experimental Modern Dance Company, later renamed Guangdong Modern Dance Company, China's first official modern dance company. Three years later, Beijing Modern Dance Company (BMDC) was founded under the auspices of the Beijing Song and Dance Ensemble and then in 1998 registered independently of the government. In 2008, BMDC registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs as China's first official non-profit dance company.



Zhao Liang ART 'The Tea Spell'
Photo courtesy of Zhao Liang ART

where to watch

IN CHINA

Beijing Modern Dance Festival

Every July at various venues across Beijing. For past programs click here.

Guangdong Dance Festival

Every November at various venues across Guangzhou.

Shanghai International Dance Center

One of the only venues in China in recent years built exclusively for presenting year-round performances and education programs in dance, including ballet, contemporary, folk, jazz and tap dance, and more.

'12 Days of Chinese Dance'

Every July-August at Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts, co-hosted by the China National Dancers Association. For the 2017 line-up, click here.

IF YOU ARE NOT IN CHINA

Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land & Beyond book and online video library by Shih-Ming Li Chang and Lynne E. Frederiksen.

Indulgent Encores

'So You Think You Can Dance (China)' was a televised dance competition based on the format of the American 'So You Think You Can Dance' television franchise. The first season aired on Shanghai Dragon TV in 2013 with the name 舞林争霸, with celebrity judges including peacock princess Yang Liping and modern dance icon Jin Xing, who underwent China's first publicly acknowledged gender re-assignment surgery in the 1990s. Season 2 aired on Zhejiang Satellite TV in 2014 with the name 中国好舞蹈.

Enjoy archived episodes of the 2014 Final Season here and episodes from the 2013 Season One starting here.

Centre Stage continues our annual arts series

2017



2016

choice cuts

Chinese popular music

2015

hip flicks for sinophiles

21st century Chinese cinema

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economy: PBoC–MoF discord, rural revitalisation, ultra-low emissions, internet powerhouse

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poverty alleviation moving on from low targets

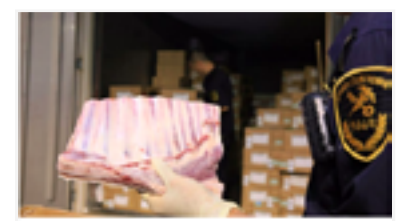
Xi Jinping sees ending poverty in China as a major test of socialist policy – and one he takes a great interest in supervising. Set at the low level of CN¥2,300 per person per year, China's poverty line



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financial opening: echoes of WTO accession

A 'financial opening' agenda is under way, designed to improve market access and business conditions for international investors in the financial sector. Admitting the need for



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animal protein: rising demand to 2027

Despite short-term uncertainty, China's own ag outlook projects sustained rise in animal protein imports for the next decade.