

## The Influences of Qi and Chan Buddhism in both Chinese Classical Dance and Modern Dance

Chinese dance has always played a central role in my life. It was handed down to me by my mother, Lorita Leung, who was a professional Chinese dancer in China, and became an integral part of my cultural identity as a Chinese-



Canadian. Between 1991 and 1996, I had the opportunity to study Chinese Folk and Minority dance at the Beijing Dance Academy and the Central Institute for the Minorities. This past summer, I completed a one-year program in Chinese Classical dance at the Guangdong Dance School. These experiences, when added to my studies in Modern dance at SFU, have led me to draw interesting connections between Modern dance in North America, and Chinese Classical dance. Modern dance, which sprung its roots in America at the turn of the twentieth-century, is still in its infancy when compared with Chinese Classical dance—which can be traced back to the Han Dynasty that spanned from 206 BC to 24 AD—yet, I find it intriguing that these two culturally distant forms of dance share something in common. Upon returning to Canada from Guangzhou, I felt compelled to explore these similarities, and found that many of the principles that have led to the development of Chinese Classical dance have also influenced Modern dance. Since art is a reflection of its society, it is no surprise that Chinese Classical dance embodies important elements of Chinese culture, yet it is fascinating that Chinese culture has also influenced North American dance. My main focus in this article is to discuss the Chinese principles of Qi and

Chan Buddhism, and to trace their influences both in Chinese Classical dance and in Modern dance.

The concept of Qi originates from the Chinese cosmological view of the universe as being made of both the spiritual and the material. Wei Ming Tu has defined Qi as the “psychophysiological power associated with blood and breath”, or as a “vital force”, or a “vital power”. While the Chinese believe that Qi can be found in all objects, both animate and inanimate, it is also fundamental in its application to Chinese Classical dance training. Chinese dancers are given a concise lesson in Chinese cosmology when they are told by their teachers to “Stand like a pine, sit like a bell, and move like the wind”. The fulfillment of this Chinese dance saying is not possible if the dancer’s Qi is not *guantong*, or flowing throughout her body. For the constant flow of Qi to be attained, the dancer must first let her Qi sink to the *dantian*, the center point of the body located below the navel. This lowering of Qi to the *dantian* gives the dancer inner and outward strength and stability. Images often used by Chinese dance teachers to facilitate this lowering of Qi are that of the head rising toward the heavens, and the feet digging their roots deeper and deeper into the earth. These types of images are also used extensively by Modern dance teachers, although the term Qi is not always associated with them.

Chinese Classical dance is inextricably linked to Tai Qi Quan, the non-violent martial art in which an individual focuses on the cultivation and strengthening of his or her Qi. While it shares many principles with Tai Qi Quan, there are a few terms that are specific to Chinese Classical dance in describing its use of Qi: *ti/chen* (lift/sink); *chong/kao* (charge/lean); *han/zhan* (retreat/expand); *heng ning* (spiral); and *yuan* (circular pathways). The Taoist opposition of these terms—lift/sink, charge/lean—reflect the idea that all movement originates from its opposite movement, just as yin must exist in order for yang to exist. This harmonic balance between opposites is a quintessentially Chinese notion. In the context of Chinese Classical dance, however, the movements of lifting, sinking, charging, leaning, spiraling, and making circular pathways hinge directly on the dancer’s use of Qi: it is only after the dancer’s Qi is flowing freely throughout her body that she can execute these movements with integrity. Therefore, it is not uncommon for Chinese Classical dancers to study the art of Tai Qi Quan.



From dance history at SFU, I have learned that Tai Qi Quan has influenced the lives and works of several Judson Church dancer/choreographers, including Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown and Deborah Hay. Deborah Jowitt describes Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* as having “more to do with Tai Chi than it does with American Modern Dance”, and Hay’s *Circle Dances* and *The Grand Dance* were partly inspired by this ancient Chinese artform. Hay practiced Tai Qi Quan and felt that through Tai Qi, she “began to let go of all she had learned, and to trust a new thing called flow, or herself, or the universe”<sup>[1]</sup> This notion of a dancer trusting this “new thing

called flow” is comparable to the integrity of movement the Chinese Classical dancer reveals through her use of Qi.

Aside from the concept of Qi, another major influence on Chinese Classical dance came from Chan Xue, or the study of Chan Buddhism. Chan Buddhism is a Chinese form of Buddhism that is better known in the West by its Japanese term Zen. Chan Buddhism greatly influenced Chinese Classical dance in its theory that one can attain spiritual lucidity through meditation, and that movement comes from within the soul. Due to this inherent interdependency between the body and soul, true Chinese Classical dance is never “movement for movement’s sake”, for a dichotomy between spirit and matter goes against the beliefs of Chinese cosmology. In 1991, Yang Yang and Shen Piao co-wrote a fascinating article for the China Dance Magazine that make an interesting connection between Chinese Classical dance and the dances of Isadora Duncan. One of my Chinese dance teachers read the article to me, which was entitled “The Initial Exploration of Zen Dance” (this is my direct translation). It suggests that while Isadora Duncan sought her inspiration in ancient Greek culture, her philosophy on dance—that movement must originate from the soul—was the same as that of Chinese Classical dance, and was in keeping with Chan/Zen principles. Duncan wrote herself: “For me the dance is not only the art that gives expression to the human



soul through movement, but also the foundation of a complete conception of life, more free, more harmonious, more natural” [2]. I think that Duncan would not only have agreed with the Zen/Chinese Classical dance view of the soul as the source of movement, but that she might have also agreed with the “harmonious” balance between opposites in Taoism, and the “natural” flow of Qi.

My desire to explore the similarities between Chinese Classical dance and Modern dance grew out of a seed that was planted the first time I noticed similar imagery being used by teachers on different sides of the world. As I delved deeper and deeper into the knowledge I had acquired about Chinese culture, cosmology, and Classical dance, and learned more about

Modern dance, I began to make my own connections between the two. The concept of Qi has been an integral part of the Chinese consciousness for many centuries, and is now beginning to appear in Western society and Western dance. Chan Buddhism, or Zen, and its view of the soul as the originator of movement has found a place in both Chinese Classical dance and the dances of many Western dance artists, including Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. I feel that this exploration is only at its beginning: there remains an endless inquiry into the wisdom of the Chinese culture, and an anticipation as North American culture continues to create its own path in the world. The impacts and influences these cultures have on one another’s dances are ever-changing. Like the constant ebb and flow of Qi, they will never be static.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Three Different Styles of Chinese Dance**

Since there are countless books in China which devote themselves to classifying and describing the different styles of Chinese dance, I will make no pretense of being able to give a complete and definitive lesson in Chinese dance classification. I will, however, try to give a simple and general explanation which will promote a greater appreciation for the richness of Chinese dance.

China is home to fifty-six different ethnic groups. The largest ethnic group is the Han, which makes up approximately ninety-four percent of the population. Chinese dance can be divided into three distinct types: Classical (gu dian), Folk (min jian) and Minority (shao shu min zu).

Both Classical and Folk originate from the Han nationality. Chinese Classical dance is the amalgamation of many different influences from the Han culture, including court dances, Chinese opera, and martial arts. Within the Classical dance category itself, there are many different styles and subdivisions, such as Dunhuang, sword, and Shui Xiu (watersleeves)—to name a few.

Folk dance comes from activities in the daily lives of the Han people—from tilling the land to celebrating the harvest. Since the Han nationality is so widespread throughout China, Han people from different provinces in China will have completely different dances. The generic term “Folk” is, therefore, used to describe all types of Han folk dance.

“Minority dance” is the term used to categorize the dances belonging to the six percent of the Chinese population that is not Han. Some of the larger ethnic groups that fall into this category include Mongolian, Tibetan, Korean,

Hui, Zhuang, and Uygur. Minority dances vary greatly from one another since the ethnic groups from which they originate are all unique. Often, we can find many different styles of dance within a single ethnic group itself.

As Chinese dance is continuing to evolve in China, the study of Chinese dance is becoming more and more specialized. In the past, dancers in professional schools in China used to gain a general knowledge of the three types of Chinese dance. Now, they specialize in either Chinese Classical dance or Folk and Minority dance. This allows for a deeper, more complete knowledge of their chosen specialty.

### **A Note on the Romanization**

Throughout this article, I am using the Pinyin system of romanization for all Chinese words. The Pinyin system is the official system of romanization used in China today. Another system of romanization— Wade-Giles—is perhaps more commonly seen outside of China. This explains my spelling Qi instead of Chi, and Tai Qi Quan instead of Tai Chi Chuan. Qi is also known in the West as Ki, which is its Japanese name.

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1. Banes, Sally. Terpsichore in Sneakers—Post-Modern Dance
2. Duncan, Isadora. [Isadora Speaks](#).