



## Symbolic Communication in Theatre: A Malaysian Chinese Case

by Dr. Chua Soo Pong

**T**heatrical event in Asian societies has never been a purely artistic event. It usually has several functions simultaneously. Subli in the Philippines, Wayang Purwa in Java, Chinese opera in Singapore, Mayong in Kelantan, or Lakorn Chatri in Thailand, all demonstrate the fact that theatrical events in the region serve a variety of political, social or religious purposes much more explicitly than the art forms in the West.

Anthropologists of the art and expressive culture have in recent years advanced their studies and proposed several approaches in the analysis of processes and institutions of artistic production. Anthropologists are not only interested in the features of the art object itself, but also in the external aspects like technology, social institutions, patronage systems, mediators, and economic factors.

Examination of the details of the structural processes in the artistic production of the arts could locate specific issues in the wider social context.

This paper is based on personal involvement as adjudicator in the four dance festivals (1983, 1984, 1987, 1989) organized by a number of Chinese cultural organizations in Malaysia and in the author's long time observations and research on dance in Malaysia. In this article the author will focus on three areas. It provides an overview of the festivals organized in the last few years, a close examination of the underlying social implications of the event and a discussion of the functions of such a gathering. Ultimately these well planned events are an important symbol representing the cultural identity and communal

feelings of the Chinese community in Malaysia. But they also reflect the awareness of the Chinese artistes in stating their inspiration to promote Malay, Indian, and Chinese dance on equal footing. It is clear that the Chinese artistes would prefer the art forms of the various ethnic groups to be developed side by side with one another.

### Gathering in Penang

The last two days of 1983 have been most exciting for the dance audience in Penang. This was when the Fifth Malaysian Dance Festival was featured at the Dewan Sri Pinang in Penang. This non-government dance festival is annually organized by the Chinese cultural organizations in Malaysia. Launched in 1978, in Kuala Lumpur, the festival has grown

over the years. It had, to a great extent, promoted dance activities in all states of West Malaysia. Although billed as a festival, the event was, in reality, a dance competition. Three Singaporean choreographers were invited to adjudicate the competition. They were: Tan Tien Soh, Chew Seok Choon and the author.

The Fifth Festival has accepted over 60 items, presented by 30 dance groups. The organizers decided to divide the presentations into three separate performances. The first performance was staged on the 30th of December, 1983. There were three Malay dances, two Indian dances, three minority dances, three modern dances and 11 Chinese dances. Most of the dances were joyous, light-hearted dances, depicting New Year celebrations, harvest, or the harmonious village life. There was also a "Lotus dance", presented by the clan association from Malacca.

The two pas de deux presented on the first night were "Liang Shan Bo and Zhu Xing Tai", performed by the Penang Maha Bodhi Old Boys' Association; and the "Fish Dance", presented by the Selangor Hainanese Clan Association Youth Club's Dance Group. The former incorporated modern dance idioms with Chinese dance steps. The latter was an ethnic dance, choreographed to depict the joy of the fishermen who captured a beautiful fish. It was comical but technically demanding.

Of the Malay Dance items, the "Chicken Rearing" dance was the most impressive. Performed by children, this dance vividly showed the village life in Kampong in a charming manner. They teased each other while rearing the chickens. Apparently they enjoyed themselves. Another item was performed by children and won the hearts of the audience. This was the "Fishermen" dance, performed by

the Persatuan Belia Perkampungan Jur. Using 36 children, the dance convincingly portrayed the hardships of the fishermen. The scenes where the fishermen encountered a thunderstorm at sea, was especially convincing.

### Haphazard Dance Drama

While the short dances won applause from the audience, the dance drama items were relatively amateurish. The stories were not

sex-roles in this piece, the dance sequences were really arranged in a haphazard manner.

The highlight of the first night actually came from the two pieces that depicted the New Year celebrations. One was performed by Pertubuhan Hui Yin Seh while the "Spring Festival" was performed by the Selangor Hokkien Clan Association's Youth Club. The dancers were competent and the choreography was intricate and appropriate with the theme chosen.



**"Women Generals of the Yang Family", a dance presented with virtuosity by the Selangor Hainanese Choir and Dance Group.**

constructed dramatically and the choreographic arrangements were not satisfying. One of the examples was the piece entitled "Replacing Father". This was the story of Hua Mu Lan, a famous woman general in ancient China. The dancers were, most of the time, walking or miming rather than dancing. The fighting scene was too brief and simple. The other piece that had a similar problem was the item called "Meeting in the Galaxy". It used a male dancer who was impersonating a "fairy". Although it was amusing to discover the changes of

The second show, held on the 31st of December, was a matinee. Nineteen items were put up in that afternoon. The most impressive item came from Persatuan Bekas Penuntut Pay Fong from Malacca. Entitled "Shadow on the Waves" the dancers were dressed up as seaweeds and fishes. It provoked a romantic atmosphere with lyrical music.

The highlight came in the evening of the same day. Twenty-three items were performed that evening. Two guest items came from the Kumpulan Tamil Youth Bell Club and

the Kumpulan Budaya Negri Pulau Pinang. They added much colour to the evening.

### Secret Society on Stage

The ballet entitled "Alarming Bell", performed by Persatuan Drama Kheng Lin, stole the show. The group had well trained dancers and the piece was dramatically constructed. The story told of how a young girl was trapped by hooligans and how she was forced to work as a prostitute. Unable to bear the pressures of this secret society, she decided to kill herself to end her tragic experience. The other piece that impressed the audience a lot came from the Selangor Guang Xi Association Youth Division. Entitled "The Lamp Boat", the dance used a piece of religious music that had satisfyingly created the right atmosphere. The audience was particularly impressed by their clever use of long and simple props in this dance. The costume design too was very creative.

Several items also had well trained dancers, who performed with virtuosity. For example, the Persatuan Bekas Penuntut Pay Fong from Malacca danced with their long ribbons with great skill, while the Korean dance, staged by Dewan Perniagaan China from Trengganu, was equally impressive.

### Dun Huang Paintings Come Alive

The Pertubohan Gerakan Belia Bersatu Malaysia contributed an item in the Dun Huang Style. Taken from the scenes of the famous cave stone in Dun Huang, the choreographer arranged the dancers like sculptures. The Cultural Corps of Selangor Keng Chew Yough performed a dance drama, created by themselves, called the "Stone Boat". Although the dancers needed to upgrade their

standard, the performance was commendable for their dramatization of a local folktale in dance.

No doubt, the Fifth Dance Festival of Malaysia had fulfilled its aim to gather dancers and choreographers from different states to exchange ideas during this grand celebration of creativity. The young dancers were delighted to watch each others performance. The choreographers had the chance to view each other's creation, with critical eyes. The organizers had decided to stage the next festival in Malacca at the end of 1984. Once again the talented dancers will gather in this nationwide event.

### Dance Festival in the Historic Town

On 22-23 December, 1984 the Sixth Malaysian Festival of Dance was held in Malacca. At the opening ceremony on the 22nd, J.P. Mr. Shen Mu Yu, who was also the Chairman of the Festival's organizing committee, delivered an opening speech. More than ten Honorary Chairmen, who sponsored this festival, were invited to cut the ribbon, after which J.P. Datuk Lin Jin Shu officially declared the Festival open.

This Festival was jointly organized by the Chinese cultural organizations of Malaysia. It has been six years since the Festival of Dance was first held in Kuala Lumpur in 1978. The organizers hoped that this annual festival would be held at a different venue in Malaysia each year.

The Sixth Malaysian Festival of Dance involved 28 organizations whose participants were as many as 800. Four choreographers from Singapore were invited to judge the 1984 competition. They were Seow Yoke Beng, Yan Choon Lian, Low Mei Yoke and the author. Dance items presented on both evenings totalled

51, including Chinese dances, Indian dance, ballet and modern dances. There was also a Malay dance, performed by guest artistes from the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, on each night.

However, one must view these guest items in proper perspective and learn to understand the importance of the inclusion of non-Chinese dance in a significant Chinese community event, aiming at enhancing Chinese cultural identity. The Chinese in Malaysia, like their counterparts in Singapore, always believe that the national culture consisted of the cultures of all the major ethnic groups, i.e. Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Thus, they manifest this belief in their cultural practice. The learning and staging of Malay and Indian dances are always actively encouraged. Therefore, the inclusion of a Malay or Indian dance is a symbolic expression of the Chinese community's desire for ethnic harmony and cultural multiplicity.

### Many Folk Dances from China

Of the dances that depict festivity, the most impressive performance was the Chinese dance item, "Flower Drum Lantern", presented by the Selangor Hainanese Association Drama and Choir Group.

"Flower Drum Lantern" is a popular form of folk entertainment in the farming villages of Northern China. Folk artistes have increased its entertainment value over the years. Skills in acrobatics and manipulating fans and handkerchiefs as drum-beat accelerates is something the dancers must master. The simple, yet difficult dance steps, are not easy to grasp. But artistes from the Hainanese Association gave a rather authentic presentation of the spirit of the Chinese farming village festivals.

Another interesting item was

"Joy Spreads on the Riverbank". Adapted from the Tibetan dance "Laundry Song", this popular dance from China portrays the harmonious relationship between the soldiers and the people. The dancers, forming the Batu Pahat Branch of the United Youth Movement, were able to capture the atmosphere with fine music recording. This dance and song item held the audience's attention.

The audience also greatly appreciated the "Shadow of Flowers", a classical dance presented by the Youth Group dancers of Selangor Hokkien Clan Association. The dance is well choreographed with suitable costume design. However, the "modern" decor, which included twinkling electric light bulbs on the hard board scenery, certainly spoiled an originally beautiful tableau. Trengganu Chinese Chamber of Commerce presented the folk dance "The Happy Herdsmen", performed by an all-men dance group for a change.

### Snake, Geese, Buddha and Iceberg

In the second evening, Pei Nan Alumni's dancers performed a newly-choreographed production, the "Dance of the Golden Snake". It was a small item adapted from the Indian snake-charmers. As a daring experimentation, it should be encouraged.

Johore Association of Taiwanese Graduates presented "001 Iceberg". They impressed the audience with their use of iceberg and the sun to reflect on the relationship between men. Although this philosophised dance was slightly difficult for the evening's audience to comprehend, the dancers had shown that they have had good basic training in dancing. It was a creative piece of choreography. But it was a bit too long.

A more successful piece of choreography was "The Light of

Buddha", presented by the Malacca Sakya Institution. It involved over 30 dancers and the performances were able to reach a superb amalgamation of scene and sentiment. The dance depicted the good deeds of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha.

There were very few children dances in this festival. However, the young dancers appeared to be very well-disciplined, especially those in the dance "Herding Geese", presented by the Youth Group of Selangor Hainanese Clan Association.



Contrasting styles of the old (right) and the new logo (left) of the Malaysian Chinese Dance Festival.

### A Memorable "Calamity"

Among the ballet items, the audience appreciated "Calamity" most of all. It was a creation of the Selangor Hainanese Association Drama and Choir Group. The choreographer indirectly portrayed the plight of the victims of invaders. What the dancers actually depicted was the deep sufferings of humankind, after a plunder that was caused by man himself. A group of innocent children wandered aimlessly. And the young people who were once filled with vigour had become full of indignation and discontent. The discontent and hatred for the invaders

were clearly written on the faces of the young people and their actions. Even the stage presentation depicted this sentiment.

Through the dance, the audience could perceive the strong human will to struggle for survival and freedom. The climax of the dance was when the leading female dancer tore a grey silk cloth in anger. It symbolized the rupture of the invaders' power. And the significant moment was enhanced by exciting music accompaniment.

Among modern dances presented, "Nightmare" by Selangor Guang Xi Youth Group dancers was interesting. Although the described "Nightmare" was not obvious, it has been made up for by creative stage designing and choreography that was soothing to the sight. The dancers displayed wonderful skills, especially in the pas de deux.

Guest artistes presented some items that enriched the festival's programme. The Penang Dance Association performed "Spring Festival" while the Malacca Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports presented two Malay dances.



### Perilous Waves

It is important to note that the two evenings of dances were given a general title: "Perilous Waves". It was also the title of the dance that served as the curtain raiser. According to the foreword of the souvenir programme, it was hoped that by choosing "Perilous Waves" as the title of the evenings, the event could alert the Chinese community on the critical situation they are in ... they must head for the right direction.... but whether or not they could reach their destiny depends on their tenacity, ability to unite together and determination....".

"Perilous Waves" appeared more similar to the dances created during the Cultural Revolution in China, when dancers often angrily waved their fists. The militant approach did not appeal to all dance lovers.

However, the metaphor was easily understood. "Waves" are always used in the Chinese literature. They symbolize the difficulties one has to overcome in one's life journey. Used as curtain raiser on both nights, the piece apparently achieved its designed effect and set the tone of the evening. "Perilous Waves" was danced by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Cultural and Educational Group. The group also performed "Year of Bumper Harvest" and "Lament of a Pipa Maiden". These two dances were choreographed by Ke Rong Tian. Then 34, Ke Rong Tian already had twenty years of experience behind him in performing arts.

The lyrical piece "Lament of a Pipa Maiden", inspired by the famous Tang Dynasty poem, moved the audience. The most poetic of the dances performed during the entire event was "Lament of a Pipa Maiden". It portrayed the sad encounter of a Pipa maiden who sold her music and body. The extravagance of the

costumes, the stylised movements of the cast, the choreographer's meticulous attention to details and the dancers' sensitive dancing had made this dance very moving indeed.

### The Open Discussion

The organizers organized a panel discussion on the third day of the festival. Through this discussion they hoped the adjudicators and the participants could exchange their views freely. Seow had previously adjudicated the competitions twice. He commented that the standard of dancing and choreographing had improved. Adjudicator Yan's comments focused on two issues: the need for the dancers to adopt the correct attitude in learning dance and to embrace all the related fields of arts i.e. music, visual arts and literature. Adjudicator Low's main criticism was the dancers insensitivity towards music. "Musicality is an important quality each aspiring dancer must acquire", she said. She also urged choreographers to cooperate closely with the local composers, to create more expressive music. And that could help to depict the mood and spirit of the dance. The author, as an adjudicator, agreed with Low in that the drawback of some well rehearsed items was caused by the poor choice of music. "The organizer could consider a new Award for the Best Music", the author proposed. Other suggestions proposed by the author then included: the exploration of a wider range of themes, the drawing of more literary sources for choreographic ideas, the organization of more outdoor performances, to reach out to the masses and to develop a vibrant dance critic community.

The following open discussion was actively participated by members of the Organizing Committee, leaders of the groups, choreographers and

dancers. They responded to the criticisms positively and agreed that some of the dance titles were so absurdly unrelated to the contents. Such misleading practice should not be continued. Wang Jin Chai, an adviser of the festival suggested that the organizer should adopt and feature the festival logo more prominently. It should be used in all their publicity materials. "This is significant as the standardized logo symbolizes our unity", he reminded the participants.

### In Search of a Direction

Although not raised in the official commentary session, one hot issue had been the cause of heated debates in many informal discussions among the choreographers, members of the organizing committee and the adjudicators. The issue was: which direction should Malaysian Chinese dance head for? Should the Chinese in Malaysia learn and promote the folk dances of China, including the numerous dances of the minorities such as the Mongolian Milking dance, the Hainanese Straw Hat Dance and the Uighur Grasp Picking Dance, which were particularly popular in the 50s? Should the Chinese in Malaysia continue to depend on Chinese myths, legends and literature for sources on new choreography? Should Chinese choreographers in Malaysia adapt ethnic music and dances into modern choreography, to be appreciated by young audiences acculturated to western ballet and contemporary dances? Some felt strongly that if Chinese dance was to remain a form of cultural identity and ethnicity, it should be based on dance movements that are identifiably Chinese. It means that choreographers should train their dancers by using the Chinese dance training method devised in the 50s by the dance

Schedule of the Malaysian Chinese Dance Festival

Dates	Venues	Organizers
12-13 May 1979	National Stadium, Kuala Lumpur	Chinese Cultural and Educational Association in Kuala Lumpur
8-9 Nov 1980	National Stadium, Kuala Lumpur	Chinese Cultural and Educational Association in Kuala Lumpur
5-6 Dec 1981	National Stadium, Kuala Lumpur	Selangor Chinese Cultural and Educational Association
11-12 Dec 1982	Auditorium of Pei Nan Independent Secondary School, Ipoh	Perak Chinese Cultural and Educational Association
30-31 Dec 1983	City Hall, Pinang	Pinang Chinese Cultural and Educational Association
22-23 Dec 1984	Auditorium of Pei Feng Secondary School, Melaka	Melaka Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Chinese Schools Alumni Association
28-29 Dec 1985	Auditorium of Zhong Jing Primary School,	Kuantan Chinese Cultural and Educational Association
11-12 April 1987	Chinese Sport Council Hall	Sembilan Chinese Cultural and Educational Association
9-10 April 1988	Auditorium of Kuan Rou Secondary School, Johor Baru	Dewan Perniagaan "Tiong Hua" Johor Baru
30-31 Dec 1989	National Stadium, Kuala Lumpur	Selangor Dance Association

schools of China. The training syllabus drew sources from Min Jian Wu (dance of the masses), movements and dances from Chinese opera as well as Chinese martial art.

Some choreographers disagreed with this kind of interpretation. They insisted that as long as dances were presented to convey the feelings and ideas of the Malaysian Chinese, they were Chinese dances no matter how much the form had been alienated from the authentic Chinese folk dances or classical Chinese dances. The form, they said should always be flexible and correspond to the changes of society. Some of them even went one more step further by suggesting that the Chinese in Malaysia should not stage dance dramas from China.

They should only present stories of the Malaysian society!

### The Continued Debate

The issue on the direction of Chinese dance continued to be the main concern of the Festival in the following years. Rivaling advocates continued to find supporters. In 1985, the seventh Malaysian Chinese Dance Festival was held in Kuantan. The participation of the three groups, one each from Sib, Sarawak, and East Malaysia, received a warm welcome from the organizer, who had always been hoping that the Festival could obtain the full support of all the states in Malaysia.

However, it was the participation of a young choreographer, Tan

Chin Chwee from Johor Baru, that stirred great excitement. Trained in Chinese dance and ballet in Singapore, Tan has also been exposed to the wide range of drama and dance in the Singaporean theatre. He was at one time, a member of the Singapore National Dance Company and travelled overseas, several times, to perform. His two items "Pressure" and "Lin Chong Divorces his Wife" clearly showcased his versatility. "Pressure", using unconventional dance vocabularies, depicted the anxiety of youth faced with visible as well as invisible pressures from society. "Lin Chong Divorces his Wife", on the contrary, was adapted from a Chinese classic "Outlaws of the Marsh". It borrowed mainly Chinese opera gestures and movements. The four adjudicators of the Seventh Malaysian Chinese Dance Festival from Singapore, Tan Tien Soh, Tan Choong Poh, Ong Choon Mui and Ong Siu Ha, unanimously voted "Pressure" as the best item.

It was in the same year that choreographers began to address a wider range of social issues. They were "Tears of the Orphans", "Emptiness", "Tenable Grasses", "Fire Bird Reborn", "Debt", "Bus Station", to name a few.

### Modern and Moralistic

The aesthetic appeal and dialectic approach of Tan's "Pressure" had won the support of some choreographers who were previously skeptical about incorporating modern dance idioms into their work. A good dance, in the eyes of the majority of the Chinese community, has to be a dance that has aesthetic value as well as moral value. Tan worries least about a dance being, modern or traditional, ethnic or western. "My background is Chinese dance. Although I attended ballet

classes, I think I am a man of contemporary society. I want to use the dance movements that the great masses of people can understand and appreciate. I choreograph events that relate to the personal lives of the people. Even when I use stories from legends or classical literature, they are all stunningly relevant to contemporary society. You know, you can use metaphors to make serious comments!", he said in an

Bi Fang, had as in previous years presented the memorable "Nightmare". Her effective use of balletic steps won much respect among her contemporaries.

While the non-traditionalists, like Tan and Luo, were gaining momentum, those who preferred to choreograph in the Chinese ethnic dance style were also progressing with new vitality. Thanks to the large number of faithful supporters

pated in the competition. The adjudicators from Singapore for that year were Gan Beng Lee, Chew Seok Choon, Tay Hong Lim and the author. They were delighted to discover that after a lapse of one year, the standard of dancing and choreography had improved noticeably.

Ethnic dance and other items based on the Chinese classical dances were technically more competent. "Woman General of the Yang Family", adapted from the tale of a group of Song Dynasty heroines, was a dance drama about patriotism. The audiences were too familiar with the story and therefore to succeed, it required dancing of unusual intensity and moment to moment suppleness to hold the audience throughout. Veteran dancers from the Selangor Hainanese Association Drama and Choir Group were able to do just that. And they won the Best Production Award. Two other classical dance items, "Sprouts" by the Malaka Buddhist Association and "Chu Yuan, the Great Poet" by the Selangor Jing Wu Martial Arts Association Dance Group also received prizes.

### The Two Women

Equally strong in choreographical skills were the non-traditionalists, Tan and Luo. Coincidentally, they both picked well known women in Chinese history and literature as the central characters of their dance dramas. Tan's "Qiu Jin" was about a much respected heroine of the late Qing Dynasty, who sacrificed her life for revolution. Premiered in Singapore a year ago with leading dancer Tang Min Lan in the title role, the dance drama was so splendidly made. It was so fine in drama, in characterization, in dancing and in designs. However, the less experienced



Souvenir programmes of the past years' festivals.

interview conducted by the author a year after the premiere of "Pressure".

The new Best Music Award was won by the Guang Xi Clan Association Youth Dance Group. Its contribution, "Fire Bird Reborn", also won the Best Decor Design Award and was rated among the top ten. The choreographer, Luo

from the Chinese Community, who valued such informal dance education for their youth.

### The Delayed Festival

As the economy suffered from recession, the eighth Malaysian Chinese Dance Festival had to be postponed until 1987. Held in Seremban, 27 groups from nine states partici-

cast from Johor Baru was unable to present it as impressively as the Singaporean cast did in the debut. Luo's "Fan Yi", was adapted from China's foremost playwright Cao Yu's best known play "Thunderstorm". Fan Yi was a victim of the old feudal family of old China. The dance drama borrowed western modern dance techniques quite effectively in its portrayal of the inner struggle of the miserable woman. Dancing to her own choreography and supported by the masked figures of the Selangor Guang Xi Youth Group, Luo did put over much of the torment and the catharsis implicit in the dramatic story.

The adjudicators were also dazzled by the beauty of the decor of the Ba Sheng Youth Association Dance Group's item "Echo". And they selected the group for the Best Design Award. Another item that deserved praise was "Prince Charming", presented by Selangor Hainanese Youth Cultural Group. It was a dance about deception. The dance drama showed how innocent girls were deceived by an exceedingly good looking man. It ended in a comic note in which the sheer cleverness of the choreography by Huang Bao was brilliantly disguised.

Surprisingly, during the seminar, the day after the performance, the participants did not discuss much about choreography or any other dance related issues. They focused more on logistic problems and the shortcomings of the facilities of the performing venue. The host, however, was very apologetic about the inexperienced stage crew's errors.

#### The 1988 Showcase of New Talents

A year later, when the festival was held in Tan's hometown, Johor Baru, Tan was indeed the star choreo-



"Nightmare" impressed the audience with its inventive decor design.

grapher in the limelight. The ninth festival was held in April 1988 as scheduled. Twenty-five items were entered in the competition. Tan presented two non-competitive guest items: "The Compelled drink" (excerpt of "The White Snake") and the "Death of Dai Yu" (excerpt of "The Dream of Red Chambers"). Taken from Chinese legends and classic stories, Tan liberally interwove classical Chinese dance and western dance idioms with ease. They had the merits of good choreography: dramatic incidents and dances. Of the two pieces "Death of Dai Yu" was more successful, especially in the powerful final scene when Dai Yu was lost in the ashes of love poems she angrily burnt. "The Compelled Drink" had some fluent and attractive dancing. But it was ruined by the appearance of a toy-like giant snake at the end. It turned the drama's sad ending into an absurd farce. Tan's strength was his musicality and his ability to interpret musical phrases effectively to express dramatic details.

The interesting phenomenon of the 1988 festival was the dramatic increase of "modern items." "Path", choreographed by a newcomer, Chen Lien He, was performed by the Batu Pahat Branch of the United Youth Movement. It reminded the audience of a production of Lin Hwai Min's Cloud Gate Taipei Contemporary Dance Theatre. Chen Lien He also choreographed and danced the lead role of another dance drama, "Dream of the Butterflies", presented by the Selangor Guang Xi Youth Group dancers. His unusual treatment of familiar tales impressed the adjudicators from Singapore, who mostly were also inclined to "modern dance" themselves. They were Tan Siew Lan, Yan Choon Lian, Goh Lay Kuan and Ong Choon Mui (the only choreographer who was strongly committed to ethnic dance).

Whatever different ideology and choreographic ideas might have been present among the participants, everybody agreed that it was a year of good dancing, one which they should be proud of.



### The Grand Tenth Anniversary

The Tenth National Chinese Dance Festival was held in Kuala Lumpur from the 30th to the 31st of December 1989, at the National Stadium of Malaysia. The opening ceremony was officiated by the Deputy Minister for Culture and Tourism, Huang Qiu Gui. The Chairman of the Organising Committee, Ang Kim Hock, during the ceremony expressed his gratitude to the donors from the Chinese community for their generous support. He also urged the dance groups to continuously upgrade their standard of performance and to promote Chinese dance more vigorously at the grassroot level. "Being essentially a communal experience, this kind of competition, should help to encourage cooperation among community members", Mr. Ang asserted. From a national perspective, the competition was seen as a step towards greater awareness of the potentialities of dance. It was a means to enhance cultural identity and ethnicity.

The Organizing Committee also unveiled an attractive new logo in red. The red line done by a brush looked like the flying streamer of the popular Chinese dance, "The Red Streamer Dance". "The figure, at first glance, also looked like the Chinese character, 華, which means Chinese", the designer Lu Zi Hua, Head of Graphic Design Department of Malaysian Academy of Fine Arts explained. This new logo was much appreciated by the participants. The old logo which showed two little girls holding a flower together looked more like a pleasant Chinese artwork.

### The Historical Record

The organizer also delighted the audience with a Photographic Exhibition of the "Nine Years of



"Blackening the Face", presented by charming young dancers from Sabah.

Dance Festivals", at the foyer of the National Stadium. The participants of the past years were filled with nostalgia upon seeing these vivid historical records. A young lady, choked with strong feeling, said: "What a challenging journey we had sailed through. We were financing, organizing and promoting the Festival all by ourselves." An elderly man turned around and responded, "If this was a test for tenacity and will power, we had passed with flying colours. Aren't you proud of what we achieved?"

To commemorate its tenth anniversary, the festival invited six adjudicators from abroad: Professor Li Tian Mi (Taiwan), Zheng Shu Zheng (Hong Kong), Low Mei Yoke (Singapore), Yan Choong Lian (Singapore), Xiao Yue Peng (Singapore) and the author (Bangkok).

In the two night festival, 32 dances were performed. Included were three guest items which were not part of the competition: Malay dances, performed by the Naujwan Treupe Sentul and Persatuan Anak-seni Kampus, and an Indian dance, presented by the Kala Kandira Group.

Of the 29 dances presented by the Chinese dance groups, only two

were folk dances from China: the "Straw Hat Dance", from the Hainan province, and the "Blackening the Face", a comical dance from the Yunnan province". This was a much lower percentage compared to the early days of the festival. It implied that the Chinese in Malaysia were, by 1989, less dependent on China in their cultural pursuits.

Like previously, many choreographers were inspired by tales, legends and folk hero Chinese classics. "Dream of the Red Chambers", love stories of the Tang Court, a chivalrous heroine of the Ming Dynasty and a Malaysian Chinese historical figure, Yap Ah Loy, were all subjects chosen for the new choreography.

The attempt by the Selangor Hainanese Youth Cultural Group to portray a Malaysian folk hero, whom the audience are familiar with, delighted them, especially when it was danced with skill and sensibility. Although the mime sequence of the Sultan and his men as well as the poorly edited music were disturbing, the lead dancers presented their pas de deux well. Their courageous experiment was awarded. It was picked by the adjudicators as one of the Top Ten items.

### Lesbians in Love

"Sorrow of the Imperial Court", choreographed by Johor Baru's Tan Chin Chwee was an unconventional sketch done in the old theme. The choreography vaguely suggested the story. It was about the large number of concubines kept by the Tang Emperor. The audience saw how many beauties spent their long days and nights hopelessly at the chambers of the Grand Palace. Some were feelingless, others became insane. Still few prayed that the day would come when they would be set free and returned to their sweet homes. Yet two or three were indulged in a lesbian relationship. Many were shocked by the explicit portrayal

of such a relationship. But it was accepted by some liberals. Most of the adjudicators could understand the choreographer's dramatic intentions, but he was dangerously at the verge of selling cheap floor show!

Of the classical Chinese dance items, "Dancing Sleeves in the Spring" was most coherent choreographically, except, during the end, when a male dancer oddly entered to lift the lead girl. It was nevertheless better than "Army Uniform" or "The Chivalrous Heroine", which suffered from disjointed music or storyline. Fortunately, both items were performed by the enthusiastic casts from the Ipoh Wu Martial Art Association and the Sekolah Menengah

Chung Cheng from Kota Bharu. Their charm had somehow won the hearts of the sympathetic audience.

### More New Territories

In the 1989 Festival, it was clear that more choreographers than ever before, were eagerly exploring their own ways of expressing feelings and ideas. Some had evolved their own synthesis of Chinese dance and movements. They freely borrowed from non-Chinese sources, although not all of them succeeded in making a good dance. Nevertheless, their sincere attempts to find new ways of articulating deserved praise. Newcomer Huang Jie You's "A Bed of Worries" for example, had some imaginative moments portraying the tragedy of an arranged marriage, although it lacked the clarity needed for a narrative dance. "Moonlight Over the Waterlily Pond" by Chen Xiu Qin was danced by the well trained youngsters from the He Po Cultural Group from Kuala Lumpur. It had not quite reached the elegance of poetic quality it was intended for.

More impressive were the two pieces choreographed by Lian Li Gen: "The Boundless Mountains and Seas" and "A Filial Son". The former was presented by the Selangor Guang Xi Youth Group. The large and well disciplined cast in blue leotards represented mountains and seas that separated the Chinese migrants from their place of origin. The dance was pleasant of watch and somehow effectively created an illusion of vastness of space. The migrants were represented by a lead male dancer who went through the distance between the mountains and the seas, over a long but beautiful passage of time. He aged but still he was seen practicing Tai Chi

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## 傳 燈

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Am F Am C G Am F Am

6 3 2 1 6 1 | 3 5 5 3 6 - | 5 3 3 2 2 3 5 3 | 2 1 5 6 - |

每一條河是一則神話 從遙遠的青山 流向大海

Am Em Am Em G F Am

6 3 2 3 5 3 | 6 1 3 6 5 - | 5 3 3 2 2 3 5 3 | 6 6 5 6 - |

每一盞燈是一脈香火 把漫長的黑夜 漸漸点亮

Am Dm E7 Am C Am F G Am

6 1 16 12 2 2 1 | 2 3 3 3 2 3 - | 3 5 5 3 5 6 6 5 | 6 1 1 7 5 6 - ||

為了大地和草原 太陽和月亮 為了生命和血緣 生命和血緣

Am F Am C G Am F Am

6 3 2 1 6 1 | 3 5 5 3 6 - | 5 3 3 2 3 5 3 | 2 1 5 6 - |

每一條河是一則神話 每一盞燈是一脈香火

Am Em Am Em G F Am

6 3 2 3 5 3 3 | 6 1 3 6 5 - | 5 3 3 2 3 5 3 5 | 6 6 5 6 - ||

每一條河都要流下去 每一盞燈都要燃燒自己

Lyrics and melody of "Passing the Lantern On", the song sang at the closing ceremony of the Tenth National Dance Festival of Malaysia.

in the place where he had settled down. In that distant land where he settled, the person was practicing Tai Chi. The message was obvious. The migrant carried on with his cultural practices and tradition, despite the physical distance and historical differences.

### Artistes as Educators

Liang's other piece, "A Filial Son", was also done in a modern style. Yet its connotations were as conventional as any traditional Chinese theatre: artwork was always used as a means of moral edification.

Viewed from this perspective, the organizers were pleased to know that although the forms of dances in the festival had noticeably changed over the years, the role of the artistes has not. They remained as educators, communicating values, norms and cultural knowledge to the community through their new tools.

This could in fact be further amplified by two more examples: "Journey" by Lou Yong Sheng and "Leisurely Roam" by Zhong Yong Qiang. In "Journey", the choreographer hoped to provoke the audience to think more seriously about the meaning of life, through the energetic journey he showed on stage. It was a journey that demanded skill and stamina from the cast. The dancers jumped, leaped, and ran at rapid speed, anxiously searching for meaning through their difficult journey. Unfortunately the lack of changing dynamics in the dance made it choreographically dull.

The programme note stated that "Leisurely Roam" made people feel like flying clouds, flowing water or swimming fish, free to travel the world over. The non-narrative dance adapted steps from the Tai

ethnic dance. The tight-knit ensemble was well-matched in their ability to give the flowing account of a refreshing choreography. They showed the audience how important it was to remain free, without any artificial restrictions of any kind.

### Candlelight's Wonder

However, the most touching item was none of those entered in the competition. It was, in fact, the event after the speeches and the official closing ceremony. When the master of ceremony announced "Let us sing a song together", prepared song sheets and candles were passed around and everybody in the auditorium was invited to join the choir on stage. Holding a candle, everyone sang together a locally composed song in the darkened stadium. The author had forgotten the lyrics. He vaguely remembered that it was about candlelight. He remembered the solemn atmosphere it created. They sang in such awesome harmony,

as if they had practised a thousand times before!

The seminar was held on the third morning, as usual. Time was hopelessly short, only two hours for the six adjudicators to reflect their views. Most of them explained their views on the good choreography and they helped clarify the criterion for judging. Impressed by the significant improvement they had made, the author congratulated the participants wholeheartedly: "The Malaysian Chinese dance scene is impressively invigorating because you have so much to say through your dance. And you said it so truthfully. Practise makes perfection. The more you communicate, the more effective your ways of communicating will become. Your dancing skills and the technical level of the choreography had advanced so much in so short a time. Practitioners in Singapore could learn much from your experience and your motivation." The author also felt it was time for the Malaysian dance community to



Ang Kim Hock (left), one of the founders at the closing ceremony of the 1989 Festival.

develop the non-dance communication system. Through this, dance news within the Chinese communities as well as communities of other ethnic groups could be effectively disseminated. The setting up of a data bank would further facilitate communications. The sooner they use computer to process data, the better for the dance community. This would undoubtedly further promote informal dance education in a greater scale.

The farewell dinner, as always appeared to come too soon. Many felt the necessity to mask their sense of inexplicable sadness. They said good-bye to their friends with exaggerated cheerfulness. But they knew for sure they would meet again, up north in Alor Setar, Kedah, the following year. A Festival of this scale can only be organized if there are a group of people who have something important to communicate. A group of reliable patrons to finance the venture and a group of artistes capable of expressing through their dance are also needed. In this case, the Malaysian Chinese Dance Festival appeared to have all the conditions needed for running the successful annual event.

The strength of the dance does not entirely come from technical brilliance. More importantly it was the motivation to communicate that gave the community the boundless energy to develop this unique system of informal dance education. This motivation also mobilizes the vast human resources to engage in an endeavour that enhances culture and identity. Whatever political or social changes may happen in the future, it is likely that such a mode of symbolic communication would continue to play a significant role in the Malaysian Chinese community. ■

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