**Dai Ailian 戴爱莲 (b. May 10, 1916, Couva, Trinidad; d. Feb 9, 2006, Beijing, China)**

**Summary**

Dai Ailian, a woman of Chinese descent, was born and raised in Trinidad and first visited mainland China in 1941. Together with Wu Xiaobang, Dai helped pioneer twentieth-century Chinese dance, especially Chinese ballet, and modern Chinese folk and ethnic dance. Dai received early ballet training in Trinidad. In the 1930s she studied ballet and modern dance in England, where she began choreographing and performing her own work before the age of twenty. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, Dai served as founding director of the Central Folk Song and Dance Ensemble, the first principal of the Beijing Dance School, president of the China Dancers Association, and artistic director of the Central China Ballet. Dai’s major works include *Longing for Home*, *Sale*, *The Mute Carries the Cripple*, *Air Raid*, *Doves of Peace*, *Lotus Dance*, and *Flying Apsaras*. Apart from her contributions as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, Dai was instrumental in introducing Labanotation to China. She led the founding of the Labanotation Society of China in 1983 and produced numerous notations of Chinese folk dances, and taught China’s first generation of Labanotation experts. A bust of Dai Ailian is displayed at the Beijing Dance Academy, commemorating Dai’s life-long contribution to Chinese dance.

**Training**

Dai was the granddaughter of a wealthy plantation owner who emmigrated to Trinidad from Guangdong in the late nineteenth century. From age eight to fifteen, Dai studied ballet in Trinidad with Nell Walton. After moving to London in 1931, she continued studying ballet with Anton Dolin, Marie Rambert, Margaret Craske, and Lydia Sokolova. Despite her accomplishments, Dai faced discrimination, likely on the basis of her ethnicity. While in England, Dai became interested in German modern dance and studied with Lesley Burrows-Goossens, then at Dartington Hall with Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder, where she received a scholarship. Dai performed briefly with the Ernst and Lotte Berk Modern Dance Group. In 1940, with support from the London Chinese Institute repatriation fund, Dai travelled to Hong Kong to study Chinese dance. In 1941, she arrived in Mainland China just as the country was in full-fledged war with Japan. In China, Dai studied Chinese folk and ethnic dance by conducting field research trips among rural and ethnic minority communities. She used these dances as the basis for her choreography throughout the 1940s.

**Contributions**

Dai’s first choreographic works were created to raise money for war relief efforts organised by overseas Chinese in London in the 1930s. In these and later works, Dai used dance to express the suffering of Chinese civilians, war victims, and the poor. In the 1940s, Dai began creating original dance works inspired by Chinese folk and ethnic dances discovered during field research. She performed tours of these dances in the cities of Chengdu, Chongqing, Guilin, Guizhou, and Shanghai. Her historic 1946 ‘Borderlands Music and Dance’ performance in Chongqing became the basis for later developments of folk and ethnic minority dance in China. During and after the 1950s, Dai was instrumental in developing Chinese ballet. Between 1963 and 1966 Dai was artistic director of the Central Ballet of China. Although she suffered political persecution in 1966-75 due to the Cultural Revolution, she was officially rehabilitated in 1975 and served as the Ballet’s artistic advisor until her death in 2006.

**Legacy**

Dai Ailian is one of the most celebrated figures in twentieth-century Chinese dance, both in China and abroad. Her choreographic style is characterised by innovation, using mixed elements of ballet, modern dance, and Chinese folk and ethnic dance. Stories of wartime suffering and elements of Chinese folk dance adapted from field research appear in many of Dai’s works, which reflect either the everyday lives of Chinese people or aspects of Chinese history and cultural heritage expressed in inventive new forms. While Wu Xiaobang fought the use of ballet in Chinese dance, Dai supported ballet and helped make it a lasting part of Chinese dance education and performance. In its content and form, Dai’s choreography and teaching helped set the foundation for the socialist realist dance tradition that shaped much of dance in twentieth century China. Throughout her life, Dai used her international connections and background to serve as an international ambassador for Chinese dance, and she facilitated numerous collaborations between Chinese dancers and choreographers as well as dancers and choreographers in Europe and the United States.

**Emily E. Wilcox**

**List of Works**

1935-1939 (London):

*March* 前进

*The Concubine Dances for the Emperor (Yang Guifei)* 杨贵妃

*Alarm* 警醒

1940 (Hong Kong):

*East River* 东江

1941-1946 (Chongqing):

*Longing for Home* 思乡曲

*The Mute Carries the Cripple* 老背少

*Sale* 卖

*Moon of the Miaos* 苗家月

*Air Raid* 空袭

*Guerilla Camp* 游击队的故事

*Drums of the Yao* *People* 瑶人之鼓

*Auntie Zhu Presents Eggs to the Army* 朱大嫂送鸡蛋

*Tibetan Spring* 春游

*Lolo Love Song* 倮倮情歌

1948-1955 (Beijing):

*The Victory of the Chinese People* 人民胜利万岁

*Dove of Peace* [和平鸽](http://baike.baidu.com/view/7376.htm)

*Flying Apsaras* 飞天

*Lotus Dance* 荷花舞

**References and Further Reading**

Cheng De-Hai (2000) *The Creation and Evolvement of Chinese Ballet: Ethnic and Esthetic Concerns in Establishing a Chinese Style of Ballet in Taiwan and Mainland China (1954-1994).* PhD Dissertation at New York University School of Education.

(Cheng De-Hai provides a detailed account of Dai’s role in the development of Chinese ballet, including a comparison of Dai’s approach to that of her contemporaries and analysis of major works of Chinese ballet. The dissertation focuses on dance analysis and the history of Chinese ballet in the context of global ballet history. English.)

Glasstone, Richard (2007) *The Story of Dai Ailian: Icon of Chinese Folk Dance, Pioneer of Chinese Ballet*. Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd.

(Glasstone provides a biography of Dai Ailian based on interviews and personal accounts from people who knew her. Includes treatment of personal and professional life, including family background, and large number of photographs and illustrations. Glasstone places Dai’s life in broader context of Chinese history and society. This work is ideal for high school and university undergraduate courses in dance history, diaspora studies, and performance culture in modern China. English.)

Ou, Jian-ping (1998) China: Contemporary Theatrical Dance. *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

(*The International Encyclopedia of Dance* provides an overview of the historical development of dance in contemporary China, written by esteemed dance studies scholar in China with expertise in Western modern dance. It works well as an introduction to political and aesthetic issues in contemporary Chinese dance. Moreover, it contextualizes Dai’s contributions in terms of the broader policies and trends in Chinese dance development in the twentieth century. English.)

Wilcox, Emily (2011) *The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People’s Republic of China 1949-2009.* PhD Dissertation at University of California, Berkeley.

(Wilcox provides a cultural and historical analysis of Chinese dance in relation to socialist ideology and cultural nationalism. The dissertation contextualizes Dai’s contributions in the development of Chinese dance education at the Beijing Dance Academy and explains major theoretical issues in Chinese folk, classical, and revolutionary dance that helped shape Dai’s life and artistic work. English.)

李妍红 著(2008) 戴爱莲传—永不停息的舞者. 江苏人民出版社.

(This is a biographical account of Dai’s personal and professional life, with emphasis on Dai’s international training, impact on dance in China, and her dedication to the development of Chinese folk dance and ballet. Chinese.)