**Wu Xiaobang 吴晓邦 (b. December 18, 1906, Jiangsu Province, China; d. July 8, 1995, Beijing, China)**

Wu Xiaobang portrait



image source: <http://image.baidu.com/i?ct=503316480&z=&tn=baiduimagedetail&word=%CE%E2%CF%FE%B0%EE&in=15053&cl=2&lm=-1&st=-1&pn=8&rn=1&di=294838036851&ln=813&fr=&fm=&fmq=1338106445652_R_D&ic=0&s=&se=1&sme=0&tab=&width=&height=&face=0&is=&istype=2#pn8&-1&di294838036851&objURLhttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.pp155.com%2FeWebEditor%2FUploadFile%2F201052119201428.jpg&fromURLhttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.pp155.com%2Farticleall.asp%3Fsid%3D814&W370&H264&T8190&S64&TPjpg>

*Fire of Hunger* (1942):



image source: <http://www.chinabaike.com/article/316/338/2007/2007022580172.html>

Wu Xiaobang in Qufu with Confucius Memorial Ceremony specialist



image source: <http://baike.dangzhi.com/wiki/文件:200712101020ywwuxi02.jpg>

**Summary**

Wu Xiaobang, known in China as ‘the father of Chinese new dance,’ was the most important pioneer of modern dance in twentieth century China. Exposed to German and American modern dance and ballet in Japan in the 1930s, Wu devoted his life to promoting dance for the use of patriotic and leftist political causes, as well as to the documentation and study of Chinese religious and folk dance. Wu founded the first Chinese-run modern dance school in Shanghai in the early 1930s, and in 1937 he joined the ‘National Salvation’ movement traveling around war-torn China as an activist choreographer and performer. *Exile Trilogy*, *Song of the Guerillas*,and *March of the Volunteers*, among more than fifty original works created in 1937-1938, are Wu’s trademark dance works. As one of two instructors of the Dance Cadre Training Course held in Beijing in 1951-52, Wu shaped a generation of dance leaders in China. He founded the Chinese Dance Art Research Society in 1954 and the Sky Horse (*Tianma*) Dance Art Studio in 1957. Wu was appointed Chairman of the China Dancers Association and founding member of the Dance Research Institute in 1978, and in 1982 he became first advisor to master of the arts in dance programs in China.

**Training**

In 1929, Wu moved to Tokyo to study music. Inspired by Western classical compositions, he changed his name from Zupei to ‘Xiaobang,’ the Chinese pronunciation of Chopin. After seeing a modern dance performance called *Host of Ghosts* by university students in Tokyo, Wu decided to devote his life to dance. He studied ballet at the Dance Institute of Masao Takada, then taught dance in Shanghai in 1931. In 1932, Wu went to Japan and studied modern dance, influenced by Isadora Duncan, at the Takada Dance Institute. In 1934, he returned to Shanghai to teach. In 1935, Wu attended a summer workshop in the German expressionist modern dance of Mary Wigman with Takaya Eguchi and Misaka Miya in Tokyo. In 1936, Wu began promoting his own form of modern dance in China, which he called ‘New Dance.’

**Contributions**

Wu staged his first modern dance performance in Shanghai in 1935, a set of solo pieces set to music by Chopin. After 1936 his new choreography turned to themes of poverty, revolution, and criticism of commercial decadence. Wu joined the ‘National Salvation’ movement in 1937, a group of intellectuals and artists who vowed to use art to inspire patriotic sentiment and increase morale during the war. At this time, Wu formally rejected romanticism and created realistic works intended to support the Chinese cause against Japan. In 1939, Wu began creating full-length political dance dramas, such as the anti-Fascist work *Poppy Flower*. In 1946, Wu conducted field research and teaching in Inner Mongolia, where he helped foster the modern Mongolian folk dance movement led by Jia Zuoguang and Siqintariha. Through his role as one of two teachers (along with Korean dancer Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi’) selected to lead the Dance Cadre Training Course at Central Drama School in Beijing in 1951-1952, Wu mentored the People’s Republic of China’s first generation of dance leaders. After rejecting the position of founding principal of the Beijing Dance School in 1954, due to objections to Soviet ballet training, Wu devoted his efforts to research and documentation of Chinese religious and folk dance. In 1956-1957 Wu led the field research team that created the only existing pre-Cultural Revolution documentary film footage of the Confucius Memorial Ceremony in Qufu, Shandong. Wu was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and was recuperated in 1976. In 1982, he founded and served as first director of the Dance Research Institute in the China Academy of Arts in Beijing.

**Legacy**

As a teacher, choreographer, performer, and researcher, Wu helped define the trajectory of twentieth-century Chinese dance. The success of Wu’s wartime activist performances in the late 1930s and 1940s alerted the Chinese Communist Party leadership to the power of dance as a medium of political education and propaganda, helping to establish dance as a state-supported art form after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Unlike Dai Ailian, Wu favored modern dance over ballet as the basis for Chinese dance training. As Chinese dance scholar Ou Jianping has noted, modern dance was largely suppressed during the 1950s to 1970s in China, and Wu turned his energies to folk and historical dance research during this period. Along with his wife and collaborator Sheng Jie (1917- ), Wu conducted extensive field research documenting and preserving Chinese historical and folk dances and helped create one of the first teaching curriculum for Chinese folk and ethnic dance. Wu wrote and taught extensively on dance theory. He published six books in Chinese on dance theory, as well as his autobiography, *My Career in Dance Art*. Wu worked as editor-in-chief of three monumental projects in contemporary Chinese dance history, including *Collection of Chinese National Folk Dances* (containing over thirty volumes); *The Chinese Encyclopedia: Music and Dance Volume*; and *Contemporary China: Dance Volume*.

**Emily E. Wilcox**

**List of Works**

Early works in Shanghai (1936):

*River Elegy* 浦江之夜

*Clown* 小丑

*In a Funeral Procession* 送葬

*Puppet* 傀儡

*Peace Fantasy* 和平的憧憬

’National Salvation’ works (1937-42):

*March of the Volunteers* 义勇军进行曲

*Song of the Guerillas* 游击队之歌

*Poppy Flower* 罂粟花

*Fire of Hunger* 饥火

Mongolian-themed (1946-1949):

*Mongolian Dance* 蒙古舞

*Inner Mongolia People’s Trilogy* 内蒙古人民三部曲

*Hope* 希望

Sky Horse Dance Art Studio (1957):

Three Stanzas of Plum-Blossoms [梅花三弄](http://www.hudong.com/wiki/%E3%80%8A%E6%A2%85%E8%8A%B1%E4%B8%89%E5%BC%84%E3%80%8B)

Wild Geese Landing on Calm Sands 平沙落雁

Fishermen 渔夫乐

Ambush on All Sides 十面埋伏

**References and Further Reading**

Ou, Jian-ping (1995) “From ‘Beasts’ to ‘Flowers’: Modern Dance in China.” In Ruth Solomon and John Solomon, ed. *East Meets West in Dance*, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers. pp. 29-35.

(This is an authoritative account of the development of modern dance in China by an esteemed Chinese dance studies scholar with expertise in Western modern dance. Ou contextualizes Wu’s contributions in the political and cultural environments of modern dance development in China and offers explanations of why modern dance developed later in China than in other parts of the world. This is an excellent resource for undergraduate courses in dance history. English.)

\_\_\_\_\_(1998a) China: Contemporary Theatrical Dance. *The International Encyclopedia*

*of Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

(This is an overview of the historical development of dance in contemporary China, written by an 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. Ou contextualizes Wu’s contributions in the broader policies and trends in Chinese dance development in the twentieth century. English.)

\_\_\_\_\_(1998b) Wu Xiaobang. *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*. New York:

Oxford University Press.

(This is an introduction to Wu by an authoritative scholar on Chinese and Western modern dance. English.)

Wilcox, Emily (2011) *The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People’s Republic of China 1949-2009.* PhD Dissertation. 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 Wu’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 Wu’s life and artistic work. The dissertation includes interviews Wu’s students. English.)

吴晓邦 (1982) 我的舞蹈艺术生涯. 中国戏剧出版社.

(Wu Xiaobang’s professional autobiography includes detailed accounts of his experiences studying dance in Japan, his major works in the 1940s and 1950s, and his political and aesthetic views on the development of Chinese dance. This is an excellent resource for scholars of Chinese dance history. Chinese.)