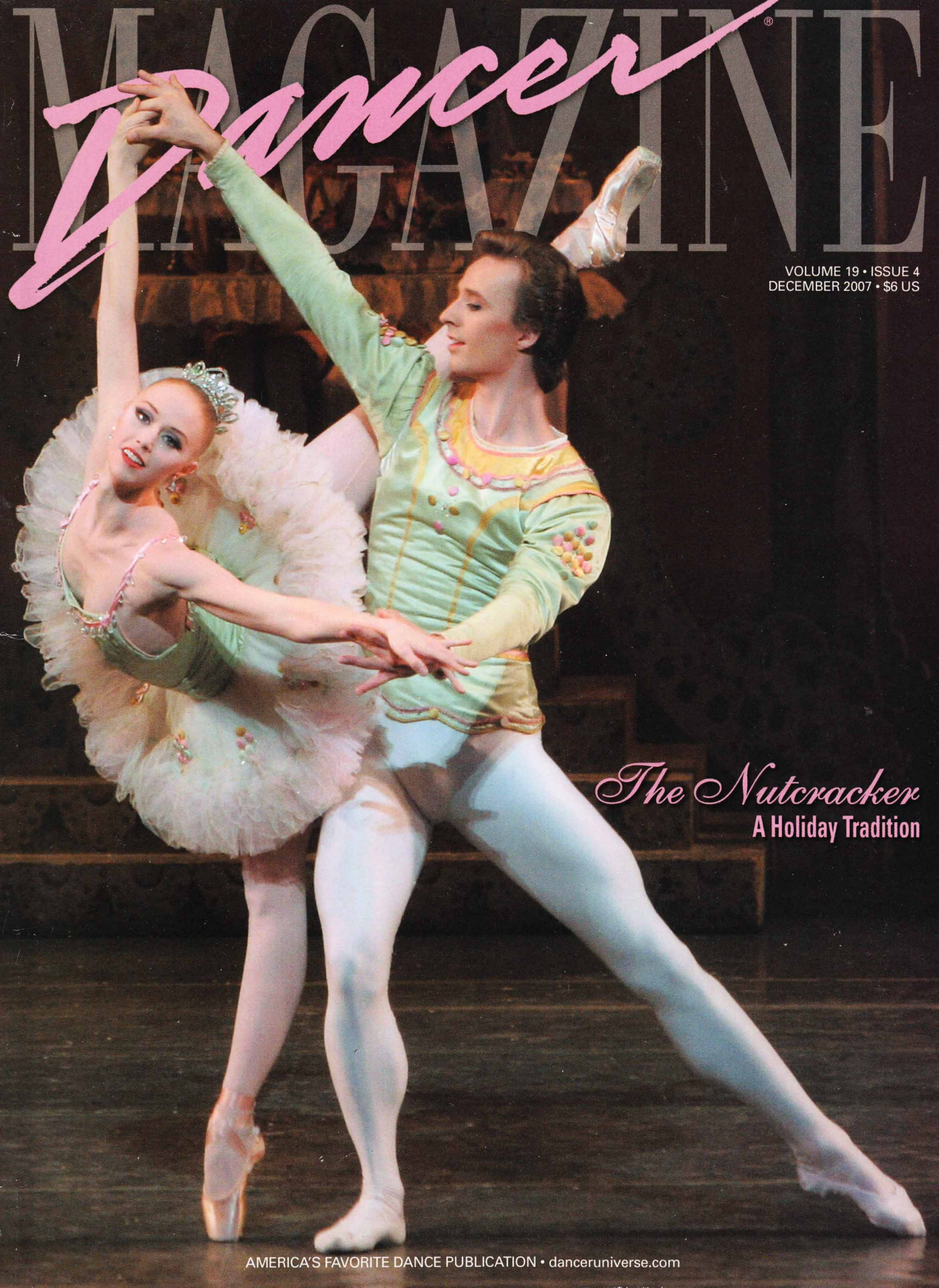


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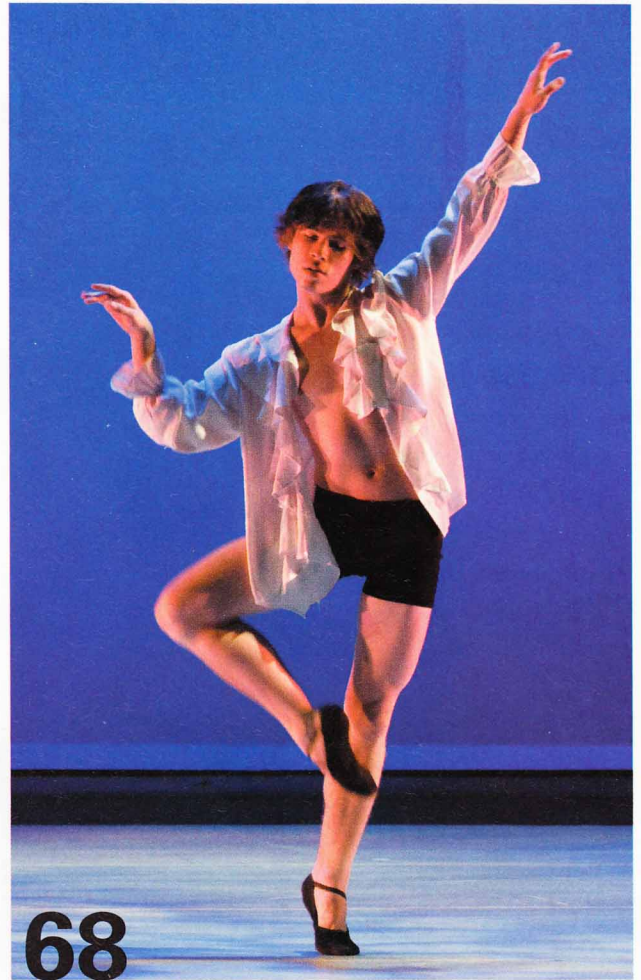
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NATIONAL FINALS

Las Vegas, NV July 8 - 11
Cincinnati, OH July 13 - 16
Orlando, FL July 23 - 26
Myrtle Beach, SC July 28 - 31

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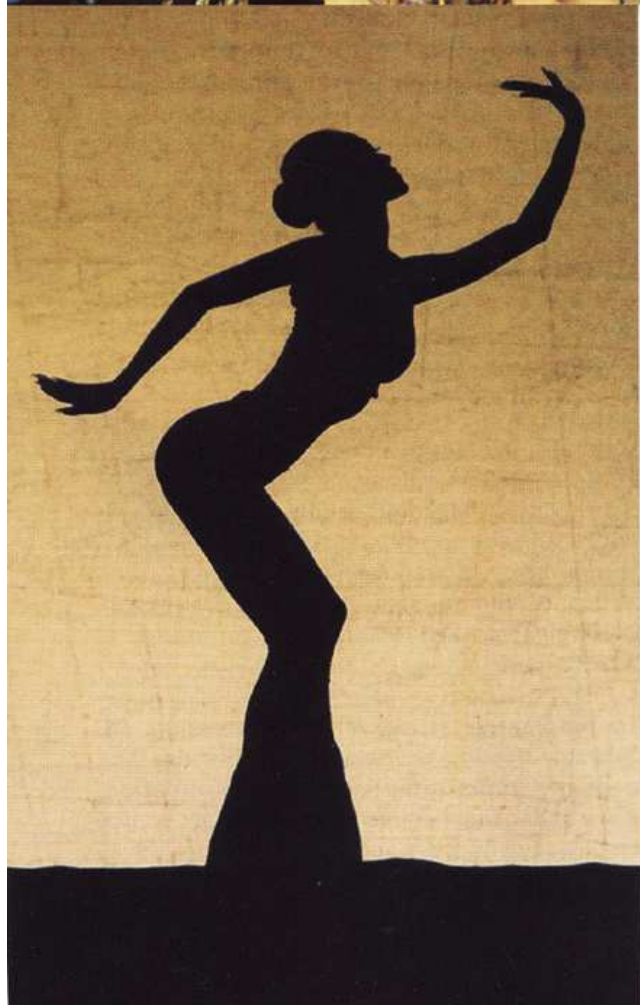
"Thousand Hands Buddha" by Jigang Zhang / Photo courtesy of mydream.org
Liping Yang portrays the typical "three curves" of a female body / Photo: Tian Yi

Inspiration beyond Dragons and Kung Fu - Chinese Dance for Western Choreography

By Ling Tang

Choreographers are constantly searching for new inspiration. Today, "being culturally interesting" has the potential to make contemporary western choreography unique. Some choreographers have successfully integrated African, Indian, Spanish or Mid-Eastern dance movements into their work. Although Chinese dance is not widely recognized by the western dance community, its many uses and forms may be inspirational for contemporary choreographers. Chinese dance refers to two major categories - classical dance and folk dance.

The roots of Chinese classical dance can be found in traditional opera, acrobatics, Kung Fu and Tai-Chi. Borrowed from Tai-Chi, the concepts of *qi/chi* and *yun* appear in classical dance in conjunction





Doudou Huang performing a Tai-Chi dance at the closing ceremony of 2004 Athens Olympic Games / Photo courtesy of doudoudance.com

with rhythmic body movement, called *shen yun* (body rhyme). The torso initiates seven basic efforts: rising, sinking, punching, leaning, arching, contracting and shifting. Tai Chi theory emphasizes the concept of counterbalance “to forward first backward, to extend first shrink, to fast first slow, to rise first decent, to up first down, to straight first bend, to drift first sink, to left first right.” Following this concept of counterbalance, movements in Chinese dance are usually fluent and circular; lines and planes of circles and figure eights are common. The fifth act of Aly Rose’s modern dance production “Phoenix” conveys her dexterous knowledge of Chinese body rhyme techniques (See Tang’s *A Phoenix Story: An American Rose in China*, *Dancer*; November 2006). Circular movements are fully seen in all 16 dancers’ shoulders, elbows, wrists and torsos to represent the natural quality of flowing rippling water.

In addition to body rhyme techniques, western style dances like ballet, tap and ballroom typically overlook hand ges-

tures. Western upper body movement refers to the torso and arm extensions without fully articulating the hands and fingers. By contrast, there are more than 100 named hand gestures in Chinese classical dance, such as the “mountain arm,” “flag in propitious winds,” “little five-petal flower,” “cloud hand” and “windmill.” Most hand gestures are directly adopted from traditional Chinese opera. The early American modern dancer Ruth St. Denis described a performance by Peking opera master Lanfang Mei in her autobiography *Unfinished Life*: “I have never seen such marvelous hands as Mei’s nor such grace and beauty as his dancing.” Inspired by Mei, St. Denis created “General Wu’s Farewell to His Wife,” which was the first Chinese opera-style dance transplanted to America.

Besides classical dance, China has folk dance, also known as ethnic dance. The Chinese population has 56 nationalities whose dance movements are derived from their lives and the environments in which they live. For example, the



Modern Tibetan dance "Passions of Kangding" / Photo courtesy of Golden Universe Dance Studio

Dai people's dance imitates subtropical creatures -- trees, rain, elephants and peacocks. The Mongolians live a semi-nomadic life on the northern grassland; their dance movements include "grazing sheep," "milking cow," "wrestling" and shoulder shimmering that symbolizes horse riding.

In addition to these imitations of life, Chinese folk dance is also unique for its use of various props and costumes. Umbrellas, fans, ribbons, handkerchiefs, hats, lanterns, music instruments, bows, cups, plates and chopsticks identify the ethnicity and region of the performers and the region they are from. Some unique costumes include the big robes and skirts of Yi dance and long sleeves of Tibetan dance. The skills of dancing with various dance props and costumes can be tricky. Experienced Chinese dance performers are able to manipulate these with ease and grace as if the props are the extensions of their physical bodies.

In order to better communicate with the audience, it is essential for a Chinese dancer to engage theatrical facial expressions. Training in Chinese classical and folk dance includes systematic eye exercises such as rolling eyeballs, sweeping eyes and fixing eyes. "Observing a Chinese dance class at Weihai University last summer in China, I was intrigued by the dancers' use of tremendous facial expressions," said Shane O'Hare, coordinator of the dance program at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. His oriental-influenced choreography requires a substantial amount of facial expressions and hand gestures that can blow the audience away from the rest of the "serious faces" in a modern dance concert. A western choreographer during dance rehearsals may emphasize the importance of focus and stage presence by asking the dancers to engage their bodies, face and eyes as a whole. However, he/she is not likely to address specific articulations of an eye or a smile. An experienced Chinese dancer pays specific

attention to expression and emotion. Emotion initiates dance and dance expresses emotions. In this way the aesthetics resonate physically and emotionally with the audience.

In Chinese classical and folk dance, dancers play either female or male roles and take on feminine or masculine movements respectively. For instance, the concept of the "three curves" refers to the curves of neck, waist and knees, drawing an outline of an ideal female body. Feminine movements represent the quality of *yin* -- graceful, elegant and peaceful, while masculine movements represent the quality of *yang* -- bold, strong and vigorous. However, in western dance choreography, dance movements are less restricted by gender. Male and female dancers take technique classes together working on cross-gender or gender-neutral movements. Learning gender-

oriented movements encourages a choreographer to experience movements assigned to contrasting body features in order to avoid a uniform style.

Choreographic inspiration may lead to simply blending movements, gestures and nuances from Chinese dance heritage without being aware of doing so. However, "Chinese dance is never just about movement; one is encouraged to research its culture, history and the origin of the art form," said Lan-Lan Wang, the former dance department chair at Connecticut College. And Chinese culture's richness extends beyond dragons and Kung Fu.

So, if you want exposure to Chinese dance, what are some options? U.S. colleges offering Chinese dance courses, workshops or study abroad programs include Brigham Young University, Bucknell University, Connecticut College, New York University, University of California at Los Angeles, University of California at Riverside and University of Wisconsin at Madison. Here are some additional Chinese dance resources I recommend:

chinesedance.org
chineseperformingarts.org
chinasprout.com/shop/video/dance

Ling Tang studied Chinese dance for 15 years in Wuhan, China, and received her dance degree from University of Maryland. Sponsored by the Washington Performing Arts Society, she will be teaching a "Chinese Dancing Ribbons" workshop for Grades K-12 in Washington, D.C. metropolitan area schools. She can be reached at ling.dance@gmail.com.

* Special thanks to those who have assisted with this article: Judith Lynne Hanna, Andrea Ligon, Xiongyan Luo, Aly Rose and Chang Xie. ■