

Why do Chinese People Love Social Dance?—Gender History Found in National Sports

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Do you know that social dance has long been deeply loved by Chinese people as a popular entertainment and also as a means for achieving and maintaining health? There are as many as 30 million dance fans in China. You can see men and women enjoy dancing hand in hand in parks and open spaces in communities all over the country. When I had university students in Beijing watch *Shall We Dance?*, a Japanese movie that had been hugely popular in Japan, all of them seemed to have difficulty understanding why Japanese men tried to hide the fact that they did social dance. The real pleasure of social dance lies in pair dance, which is performed by a man and a woman. The students' reaction indicates that, unlike Japanese people, who tend to feel somewhat embarrassed about engaging in this kind of dance, Chinese people have a very open attitude to pair dance. Since ancient times, China has been a nation of Confucianism, which exhorts people to emphasize the separation between men and women. When and how did the customs change and how did pair dance gain popularity as a national entertainment? Examination of the history of social dance in China reveals an interesting gender history.

Social dance was introduced from Western countries in modern times. In Japan, the Rokumeikan Hall was constructed to hold gorgeous Western-style parties and balls. In China, however, leading figures genuinely believed in the superiority of their own manners and at first totally ignored this culture from foreign countries. It is said that the Empress Dowager Cixi also expressed intense opposition to social dance throughout her life. At the beginning of the 20th century, dance education introduced from Japan was employed for a physical exercise class at a modern school. It was not until after the establishment of the Republic of China that social dance began to be accepted by Chinese people. In the 1910s, mass movements, such as the New Cultural Movement and the women's suffrage movement, developed extensively, criticizing the traditional Confucian norm and the patriarchy. Around this time, perspectives contrary to these traditional ideas, such as gender equality, freedom of love, freedom of marriage, and modern nuclear families, permeated. It is thought that this acted as the preparation for



Picture of a woman dancer
in the age of
Republic of China

acceptance of social dance. In urban schools and public spaces, the separation between men and women was being abolished, promoting discussion on a new form of interaction between men and women. In China, social dance was named “Jiaojiwu”, which in English roughly means “interaction dance.” In the 1930s, this dance developed and reached full maturity as a form of entertainment in the settlement of Shanghai. Professional women dancers appeared and stood in the limelight. Many such women came from poor families to the settlement to escape war damage and made their living by earning daily wages. Between these women and urban middle-class men dancing with them, there still remained an asymmetric structure regarding hierarchy and gender.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the social system was changed, forcing dance halls and professional women dancers to discontinue their business. Nevertheless, social dance continued. In 1950, a new marriage law was established based on the freedom of marriage and monogamy, encouraging men and women in China to face each other with more emphasis on equality. Social dance was renamed “Jiaoyiwu” which in English roughly means “dance to deepen friendship and relationship.” It is said that around this time the number of male dance fans was still larger than that of female fans. After a while the Cultural Revolution began in the country, followed by the age of “desexualization,” in which the expression of gender was denied. Social dance was prohibited.

Right after the Chinese Economic Reform was launched in 1978, social dance made its first re-appearance after having been banned for many years at the Spring Festival Gala Evening held in the Great Hall of the People. The news instantly triggered a new social dance boom. Intuiting the coming of a new age, people went out into cities, as if their restrained longing for freedom was exploding. Tens of thousands of people got really involved in dancing. With one’s passion arousing another person’s passion, a big dance boom was created. While men put on sneakers and bell-bottom jeans, symbols of individuality and youth, women took off gray slacks and went to a dance venue in a colorful and light one-piece dress. This was the beginning of the search for a new custom and gender identity.

In the last century, the idea of heterosexuality was generated and respected. The story of social dance in China, which continued even during that century based on people’s fantasies, has now been sublimated into a dance sports. This sport has reached the highest level in Asia, and has also become a part of stage arts of “Guobiaowu” roughly meaning “international standard dance” in English.

Now, what is currently going on with social dance? In the 1980s, when laundry machines and refrigerators began to be used widely, many married women released from physically demanding household chores began to go to dance lessons, leading to the number of female dance fans far exceeding that of male fans. Also, the number of women playing the male part



People dancing in Sanlitun, Beijing

in social dance is increasing. Middle-aged women are now enjoying a non-traditional form of social dance. It can be said that in this century, women in China are trying to go beyond the boundary of the gender norm and the stereotype that social dance must be done by a man and a woman. They might be trying to create a new form of dance in which dancers can appreciate close communication regardless of ages.