Performing "Bifurcated Homelands":

Touring the Chinese Diasporas in Bangkok and Singapore, 1945-1960s

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ABSTRACT: From the end of the Second World War to the Cold War era, Chinese theatre troupes and performers endorsed by "bifurcated homelands" – the Republic of China (ROC) in Taipei and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing – travelled to Southeast Asia to battle for the hearts and minds of the Chinese diaspora through one potent means: dance, which has so far not garnered the attention it deserves. This article locates the performative linkages in two scenarios: (1) the Chinese Communist Party-affiliated theatre troupe Zhong Yi and its diasporic tours in Singapore and Bangkok in the immediate postwar era; (2) the experiences of the Taiwanese folk dancer Lee Shu Fen and her dancing legacy in Southeast Asia during the Cold War era. Situated in the burgeoning field of the "Chinese cultural Cold War," this article argues for a "performative" angle that examines both the tours and the performing arts in the context of the shifting power realignment as a manifestation of Cold War geopolitics in Asia. While stressing the competing nature of the idea of "bifurcation," this article goes further to prove the mutual influences and mirroring effects in the imaginings of Chineseness by both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

KEYWORDS: bifurcated homelands, performing arts, Singapore, Bangkok, Zhong Yi, Lee Shu Fen, diasporic tours, homeland-diaspora interactions.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was engaged in hot debate in the context of decolonisation, anticommunism, and local ethnonationalism. The central focus of these debates revolved around the meanings and position of "Chineseness" in Southeast Asia. Scholars working in Sinophone studies tend to reject the notion of Chineseness, which they believe imposes a Sinocentric view upon hybridised/localised overseas communities (Chow 1998; Ang 2001; Shih 2010). However, as Shelly Chan (2015: 121) acutely points out, the more serious problem is that as scholars "attack the diasporas for essentializing the Chinese elsewhere, they essentialize China instead, ignoring how issues of identity and culture at the centre are far from case closed, but subject to constant reworking." Echoing Chan, this article aims to unpack the complex ways of constructing and contesting Chineseness in the "bifurcated homelands" represented by the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). At the time when the wrestling of these two forces was changing China, they also had far-reaching impacts on the Chinese diaspora. Both sides launched "psychological warfare" to battle for the hearts and minds of the diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia. As part and parcel of this cultural battle that raged amongst the Chinese diaspora, this article investigates two comparative and interrelated scenarios in which the two competing regimes turned to travelling performative troupes and individuals for cultural propaganda. The first case relates to the CCP-affiliated theatre troupe Zhong Yi 中藝, which went on a three-year-long diasporic tour across Thailand, Singapore, and Malaya. It sowed the seeds of left-wing socialist culture, laying the foundation for diasporic Chinese youth to perform their visions of anticolonialism and independence in Singapore in the 1950s. The second case tells the story of Lee Shu Fen 李淑芬 (a Japan-trained Taiwanese dancer), who conducted KMT-endorsed diplomatic tours of Thailand and Singapore throughout the 1950s and 1960s. She promoted Chinese folk dance to inculcate the appreciation of pan-Chinese culture and constantly rearticulated Chineseness within the context of postcolonial nation-building. Situated in a continuum, though taking place consecutively, these two processes were analysed comparatively and positioned in contrast to each other to see how the rivalry was played out by the two regimes. Despite both being a propaganda tool, the performative discourses they circulated resembled each other, proving the mutual influences and boundary-crossings of the ideologies of the Left and Right as practiced by performers and diasporic Chinese in the Cold War world.

This article also draws inspiration from the concept of "bifurcated homelands" put forward by Enze Han. By this concept, argues Han, "the idea of homeland was fragmented into two competing parts, with each one claiming itself as the legitimate representative body for the diasporic populations" (2019: 580). This article seeks to build on Han, but also complicates the idea of "bifurcation." Specifically, as Meredith Oyen (2010: 61) argues, the Cold War struggles for the support of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia were far from bipolar, for the Chinese were pulled at least three ways. The rivalry of KMT vs. CCP became more complicated in the Cold War when the superpowers – the United States (US) and the former colonial patron of Singapore and Malaya, namely the British Empire – joined to form an anticommunist alignment, usually with the support of local Southeast Asian governments, such as the Thai government and the People's Action Party (PAP) that ruled postcolonial Singapore. Going beyond the bifurcated homelands, I argue that the roles and engagements of these regional and global forces shaped local political conditions, which had tremendous impact on the infrastructure of travelling, including the choice of routes, agents, and duration of the tours. This would, in turn, influence the ways in which theatre troupes and performers installed different strategies to perform Chineseness in certain ways.

An important ramification of the concept of bifurcated homelands is how the two sides, the KMT in Taipei vs. the CCP in Beijing, developed their policies through mutual influences, mimicking and even outbidding each other. This observation is briefly mentioned by Han in his study on the implementation of diaspora policies, but it is not fully developed. It is in Michael Szonyi's (2008) study on the Cold War Quemoy (Jinmen) that we see how the KMT tried to discipline the citizens on the island by drawing on the ideology forged in mainland China. The mutual influences and mimicking were also evident in the two diasporic tours and performances. Although the two processes had different characteristics, there were great similarities in terms of the performative practices they adopted to articulate what Chinese culture was and what, by and large, defined Chineseness. So, in addition to emphasising the competing nature of the bifurcated regimes, this article also highlights a mirroring effect that was particularly evident in cultural practices.

This article also speaks to the growing interest in the social and cultural imaginings of the Cold War, which witnessed a paradigmatic shift from Western superpowers to Asia (Day 2010; Szonyi and Liu 2010). By this new focus, scholars usually take socialist China as a common point of departure (Chen 2020). Additionally, there are efforts to expand the world of the "Chinese" to the larger Sinophone world, which incorporates the Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese diaspora in the US and Southeast Asia. In particular, Jeremy E. Taylor (2021: 9-13) advocates using the paradigm of "Chinese cultural Cold War" to examine various cultural texts produced and circulated in the Cold War Sinophone world. Xu examines the circulation and reception of socialist culture, such as the folksongs and opera films in Singapore and Malaya (2016, 2017, 2019). Focusing on the production and circulation of the famous Fujianese opera in mainland China, and in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, Taylor (2018: 180) asserts that provincial cultural identities, e.g., Fujianese, are continually "created, re-created and circulated as opposed to the ideologized centralized, national-level expressions." In a similar endeavour, studies by Josh Stenberg (2019) and Wang Ying-fen (2016) show the prominence of Hokkien culture, which gained popularity in multiple Fujianese diasporas, despite the Left and the Right divide during the Cold War. One common feature of these works lies in their commitment to go beyond the "battle for hearts and minds" narrative. They further push to consider the complexities of cultural practices by local and transnational agents, usually accompanied by a focus on the everyday and quotidian encounters with Cold War politics.

This article is rightly situated in this paradigm but it also differs from extant scholarship in the sense that it privileges a performative angle, that is, dance-making and the acquisition of dance epistemology. This inquiry has not been thoroughly undertaken, despite Emily Wilcox's (2019a, 2020a, 2020b) works that I have consulted. In my earlier works elsewhere, I argue that a "performative turn" with a focus on travelling theatre troupes could generate a new way of looking at the interaction between the homeland and the diaspora (Zhang 2021a, 2021b). It is because, first, there was a long genealogy of using theatre troupes and performances to explain China's sociopolitical transformations to the diasporic Chinese and call for their patriotic actions. Theatre troupes followed the routes of Chinese emigrants to Southeast Asia to disseminate cultural discourse and ideologies through various performative linkages that had kept the diaspora and the motherland in a dynamic and meaningful relationship. When we come to the Chinese cultural Cold War, theatrical culture has been regarded as a form of soft power to influence the perceptions of the diasporic Chinese (Xu 2016, 2017). But even more, theatre troupes have begun to draw scholarly attention due to the mobile, transnational, and even global character of the theatrical networks that emerged together with the theatrical touring in the context of early globalisation (Balme and Szymanski-Düll 2017: 3).

Zhong Yi's reaching out for the Chinese in Southeast Asia, 1946-1949

During China's War of Resistance against Japan, travelling theatre troupes were mobilised to conduct wartime propaganda throughout the country by utilising variegated cultural forms, such as theatre, songs, and dances. Importantly, during wartime under the United Front, many left-wing cultural workers in the troupes clandestinely followed the command of Zhou Enlai 周恩來, one of the CCP's senior officials in charge of wartime propaganda. In terms of performances, they were strongly influenced by the CCP's revolutionary art and culture developed from Mao Zedong's 毛澤東 ground-laying talk in 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art." The most representative programme of their performances was the so-called *yangge* theatre (*yangge ju* 秧歌劇), which centred on poor peasants and their desire for social change (Wilcox 2019a: 26).

Immediately after the war, two such wartime left-wing troupes were reorganised into a new performing entity, Zhong Yi, the full name of which was China Music, Dance, and Drama Troupe (*Zhongguo gewu juyishe* 中國歌舞劇藝社). However, after the Civil War between the KMT and the CCP broke out, Zhong Yi was suppressed by the KMT due to its communist background. The troupe had to seek a temporary retreat to Hong Kong in 1946. Xia Yan 夏衍, an important communist cadre who was in charge of propaganda work in Hong Kong, instructed the troupe to embark on a tour of Southeast Asia to

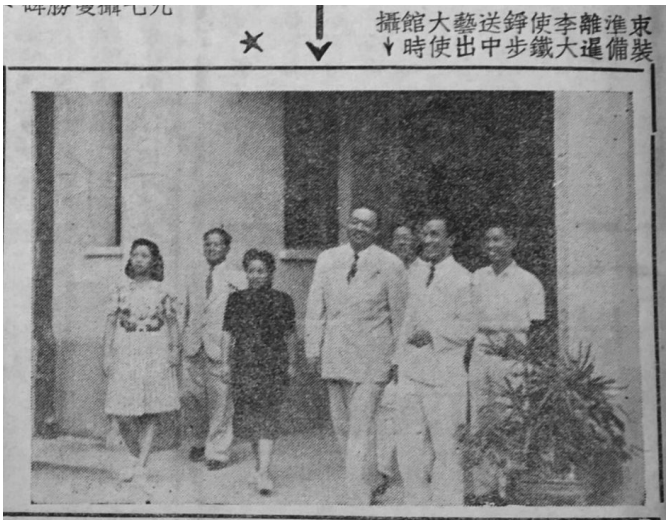
deliver important messages to the Chinese diaspora: the CCP aimed to build a peaceful and democratic nation. Evidently, the tour was expected to battle for the hearts and minds of Overseas Chinese (Xia 1986: 1).

By the time Zhong Yi arrived in Bangkok, the ambassador of the ROC to Thailand was Li Tieh-tseng (Li Tiecheng 李鐵城), a senior KMT official who also attended the shows along with Thai royalists (Zheng 1979: 258). This was a significant signal that upgraded the performances to a formal diplomatic occasion, emphasising the cordial relationship between the Thai and the Chinese governments. However, such formal diplomatic interactions need to be contextualised with regards to the infamous Yaowarat Incident, which had broken out just a year previously. In 1945, the same Yaowarat road had seen an escalation in the violent bloodshed that was taking place between the Thai and the Chinese. In the immediate postwar era, Chinese nationalism grew fiercer as China emerged as one of the "Big Five" powers. On 20 September 1945, Chinese in Bangkok gathered to display the national flag of the ROC to celebrate victory and honour the forthcoming National Day of their mother country (Xiu 2003: 208). This practice, however, was illegal in Thailand, as no foreign flag was to be displayed without being accompanied by the Thai national flag. A racial riot involving both Thai armed police and Chinese civilians took place (Skinner 1957: 278-80). The conflict was resolved swiftly by the new Thai Prime Minister M. R. Seni Pramoj, who emphasised to the international community that the Sino-Thai friendship was a priority and that there were positive developments in Sino-Thai relations. Such rhetoric was widely circulated and propagated by the Thai government mainly because "Thailand was at the mercy of Chiang Kai-shek's government, in terms of both the kingdom's post-war status and its application to the newly established United Nations, where the Republic of China was proudly represented on the Security Council" (Wongsurawat 2019: 142).

It was after such contact that Li Tieh-tseng was sent to Thailand to negotiate the Siamese-Chinese Treaty of Amity and was later appointed the first Chinese ambassador to Thailand. With the treaty, Li was able to negotiate positive and fair terms for the Chinese in Thailand regarding immigration, education, and economic freedom (Xia 2015: 72). On 17 June 1946, the ROC and the Kingdom of Thailand entered official diplomatic relations, affirming "perpetual peace and forever amity" (Skinner 1957: 282). So, from 1946-1948, Chinese schools mushroomed, and Chinese education developed vibrantly. There was an urgent need to revive suppressed ethnic identity and reconnect with the powerful motherland. The performing tours of Zhong Yi were arranged at this point in time when the Thai Chinese developed a craving for Chinese cultural expression. The unusually friendly environment in Thailand, however short-lived, was fundamental to the success story of Zhong Yi.

Before Zhong Yi departed for Singapore, Li Tieh-tseng sent the troupe off personally. The photo (Figure 1) that captured Li kindly escorting troupe members out of the embassy was publicised many times in its souvenir magazines (CMDDT 1947a: 7). The official endorsement, as represented by Li's attendance at the show, was particularly meaningful. It meant the performances of Zhong Yi would come to represent Chinese national culture regardless of the domestic ideological confrontations. The KMT-CCP hostility was seemingly played down in the face of Sino-Thai diplomatic relations, and there was no report about the communist background of Zhong Yi. Moreover, labelling themselves as representing Chinese "patriotic culture" – not necessarily communism – Zhong Yi played with the rhetoric of pan-Chineseness to deliberately deflect attention from its ideological overtone (CMDDT 1948: 3).

Figure 1. Ambassador Li sending off troupe members in Bangkok



Source: CMDDT (1947a: 7).

However, the ideological-free expression of pan-Chineseness was more for formal official occasions than actual daily interactions with the diasporic Chinese in Bangkok. Significantly, one important mission for the Zhong Yi troupe was to influence and encourage the development of left-wing culture in Thai Chinese communities, mostly through education and culture (Zheng 1986: 41). For instance, Zhong Yi conducted a summer-camp choir and a dance-training class to provide professional performing arts courses for Chinese youth in Bangkok. Teachers, students, clerks, and hawkers travelling from urban Bangkok and suburban regions swarmed to the Yaowarat region to sign up for the courses. The 20-day courses were very intense in that participants were not only taught the theories of music and dance, but were also introduced to new songs and dances composed during the war with themes centring on farmers and proletarians (CMDDT 1948: 25). One month later, students of the two training courses put on a graduation performance to showcase their artistic growth and achievement. The performance peaked with the formation of two diasporic amateur cultural groups made up of local Thai Chinese youth: the Huaxia Chinese Chorus (*Huaxia hechangtuan* 華夏合唱團) and the Siamese-Chinese Dance and Arts Research Society (*Xianhua wudao yishu yanjiuhui* 暹華舞蹈藝術研究會). Later, these two joined hands with the preexisting Thai Chinese drama society to form a new performing entity named the Siamese Chinese Dance Drama United Committee (*Xianhua gewuju lianhe weiyuanhui* 暹華歌舞劇聯合委員會) (CMDDT 1948: 29).

In August 1947, Zhong Yi travelled to the next important stop: Singapore. Unlike Bangkok, Singapore was already a key base for Chinese left-wing intellectuals and cultural workers, most of whom had been promoting Chinese nationalism through left-wing theatre, songs, and musicals during the National Salvation Movement. So,

while in Singapore, Zhong Yi adopted a more radical strategy to propagate left-wing socialist culture, for instance, by sending its staff to teach in local Chinese schools. Wu Dizhou 吳荻舟, a former chair of Zhong Yi, worked as the Dean of Singapore's Yu Ying Middle School; troupe member Huang Liding 黃力丁 taught at Nanyang Girls' School; and Liang Yuming 梁愈明, a communist cadre and the "diplomat" in Zhong Yi, became the headmaster of Zun Kong Middle School in Kuala Lumpur (Liang 1986: 21). When the troupe left Singapore in 1949, many troupe members stayed behind and joined local Chinese schools in order to take part in the anticolonial struggle and the Chinese student activism that swept through Singapore and Malaya in the 1950s and 1960s. Significantly, the aforementioned Yu Ying Middle School and the Nanyang Girls' School were active participants in left-wing student activism (Zhang 2022b: 795). From 1950 to 1959, the students in these schools organised school concerts and fundraising charity shows that included folk dances, dramas, and choruses identical to those of Zhong Yi's performances (Hong 2011: 85-6; Quah 2011).

So, even though Zhong Yi was only present for one year in Singapore and Malaya, it gave diasporic Chinese students a weapon for their anticolonial independent struggle and to express their socialist visions through arts and performances. Many of these youths became pioneers in the performing arts of post-independent Singapore (Goh 2011). Bai Yan 白言, a well-known Singaporean Chinese artist, fondly recalled watching Zhong Yi's performances in amusement parks in Singapore. Reflecting on this experience, Bai Yan held that Zhong Yi should be remembered not so much as a performing troupe, but as a dedicated educator.[1] Compared with the outreach of the Bangkok tour, Zhong Yi's activities were overtly more daring in Singapore. One important reason was that the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) grew stronger during the Second World War and became very influential in the postwar decolonisation movement. When Zhong Yi toured Malaya, some MCP members also joined the troupe to become part of the "cultural army" to propagate leftist socialist art in Malaya.[2] More profoundly, there was relative political openness and freedom in postwar Singapore and Malaya, which was largely facilitated by the British decolonisation plan that aimed to foster local political development. Notably, the 1945 to 1948 period was known as the first phase of the Malayan Spring, which saw the rise of left-wing politics and found a ready audience among Chinese school students, workers, and trade unions (Harper 1999).

Nevertheless, the British always saw communism as the main threat to its peaceful decolonisation. The Malayan Security Service (MSS), a major British intelligence organisation from 1945 to 1948, had been collecting and producing intelligence reports on local communist activities on a fortnightly basis. Whereas its main target was the MCP-controlled trade unions and labour organisations, the report cast suspicious attention on all Chinese-related domains in the colony. It had a special section on "Chinese affairs," which examined in great detail the differentiations between left-wing and right-wing organisations, publications, and key individuals (FCO141-15672: 187-95). Moreover, the encounters between Zhong Yi and the British colonial government revealed colonial anxiety on issues not just about communist infiltration but also on differentiating the left-wing and right-wing factions that split the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya. Upon arriving in Kuala Lumpur in March 1948, KMT mouthpiece 中國報 *Zhongguo bao* attacked Zhong Yi for being a communist propaganda tool in Malaya. However, this incident did not cause much turbulence, nor did it attract British attention to the newspaper. Surprisingly, in a political intelligence journal made by MSS, Zhong Yi was placed in the KMT propaganda category. This was partly because, as the report highlighted, the president of the troupe, Teng Bor (Ding Bo 丁波), had approached the Penang KMT secretary, Cheah Heoh Leong (Xie Houlong 謝厚隆), for assistance (FCO141-15672: 187-95). It was this action that convinced the British authorities that Zhong Yi was affiliated with the KMT, not the CCP.

Having performed in Singapore for two months, the troupe set out for the Federated States of Malaya from November 1947, travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Kajang, Seremban, Klang, Pusing, Ipoh, Taiping, and Penang. It returned to Singapore in August 1948, where it performed for a further three months. By the end of 1948, the Malayan Emergency[3] was in full swing and had made the overt expressions of Chineseness even more difficult. At this juncture, Zhong Yi decided to halt its overseas tours and returned to China in January 1949 to celebrate the founding of the New China led by the CCP. Overall, the Southeast Asian tours were influential and successful, covering wide-ranging localities with a huge audience size of 336,400 (Xia 1986: 2).

Performing the CCP's wartime socialist culture

The repertoire of Zhong Yi consisted of three categories. One was the programme performed to boost the spirits of soldiers with the distinct motifs of war and national salvation. The second category featured new performances developed from the "national form" (*minzu xingshi* 民族形式) experiment in Yan'an (Hu 1947: 1). The most celebrated piece under this category was the *yangge* theatre, such as *Brother and sister reclaiming the wastelands (Xiongmei kaihuang* 兄妹開荒), which was based on northern-Han folk culture to reflect the liveliness of peasant communities (CMDDT 1947a: 23). Additionally, there were the "now and here" (*cishi cidi* 此時此地) works, namely, new artistic creations based on the experiences of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia (CMDDT 1947a: 2; CMDDT 1948: 41-58). This last category came to occupy an increasingly important proportion of the overall performing repertoire during the latter part of the tours to Singapore and Malaya. One main reason was that Zhong Yi accumulated additional experiences and resources

1. "中藝南下, 海外尋夫: 回顧40年前南來的中國歌舞團" (*Zhongyi nanxia, haiwai xunfu: Huigu 40 nian qian nanlai de Zhongguo gewutuan*, Zhong Yi's southward tours: Looking back on China's dance troupe that came to the South 40 years ago), *Xinming ribao* (新明日報), 15 November 1987.
2. Zhongshan Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese 中山市歸國華僑聯合會, "情歸中山: 紀馬來西亞歸僑曾漢松" (*Qinggui Zhongshan: Ji Malaixiya guiqiao Zeng Hansong*, Returned to Zhongshan with love: Stories about returned Malaysian Chinese Zeng Hansong), 10 November 2020, www.zsql.org/article/view/cateid/83/id/32672.html (accessed on 10 June 2021).
3. The Malayan Emergency was launched by the British colonial government from 1948 to 1960 to fight against the Malayan Communist Party. More generally, it refers to the intense atmosphere, escalated by the politics of the Cold War era in which the government took aggressive measures to curb leftist/communist influences in Malaya. During the Malayan Emergency, communist sympathisers were deported, radical school and labour organisations were banned, and people conducting strikes were arrested for being communists.

through interactions with the local Chinese diaspora communities. These local materials enabled artistic workers in the troupe to produce new plays, music, and dances to address contemporary life and the accompanying struggles that were more pertinent to the Chinese diaspora.

In propagating new national forms defined and promoted by the communist regime in Yan'an, *Brother and sister reclaiming the wastelands* was a regular programme throughout its journeys from Bangkok to Malaya. One reviewer commented that the Chinese in Southeast Asia found this style of performance particularly suited to their tastes and that this programme should be passed onto future overseas generations (CMDDT 1948: 42). The reason was that, according to the reviewer, the majority of the diasporic Chinese were illiterate and oppressed and yet had a penchant for humorous and delightful shows. Therefore, by combining light-hearted choreographic movement and folk operatic tunes to eulogise the spirits of peasants, this play was effective in arousing sympathetic identification with the new socialist culture.

Secondly, there were programmes that featured the folk and vernacular dance "Dance of Youth" (*Qingchun wuqu* 青春舞曲), the Uyghur-style group dance "Dance of Baiyi" (*Baiyi wu* 白彝舞) featuring the ethnic dancing style of Baiyi in Yunnan, etc. (CMDDT 1948: 44). These cultural forms differed from the *yangge* theatre in the sense that they reflected the CCP's commitment to redefining the national cultural form in line with "ethnic and spatial inclusiveness" (Wilcox 2019a: 10). Liang Lun 梁倫 and Chen Yunyi 陳蘊儀, two of the most prominent dancers in the PRC's dancing history and ardent supporters of ethnic and frontier dances, played key roles in promoting these diverse ethnic dancing styles among the Chinese in Southeast Asia (Wilcox 2019b). For instance, Liang Lun created a piece called "Axi Moon Dance" (*Axi tiaoyue* 阿細跳月) based on his performing experiences with the ethnic Yi people in Kunming, Yunnan Province, in 1946 (Liang 1990).[4] When transplanted to stages in Southeast Asia, Liang used the Cantonese dialect in the show to bring the performance close to the local Chinese, yet the Overseas Chinese still found such "rough" dances uncomfortable (CMDDT 1947b: 5). In his contemplative post-reflection, Liang astutely pointed out that troupe artists needed to develop original creations to address local realities, rather than relying on their old "masterpieces," so as to speak to different audiences (CMDDT 1948: 58). Drawing on experiences from earlier tours, Liang began to explore new locally rooted cultural expression, signifying a mature phase of his artistic production. From 1948 to 1949, during Zhong Yi's tours in Singapore and Malaya, Liang and Chen created "Son and daughter of Indonesia" (*Yinni er nü* 印尼兒女) and "Love song of Myanmar" (*Miandian qing ge* 緬甸情歌), which were both based on local vernacular folk materials (CMDDT 1947b: 1).

For a socialist artist such as Liang Lun, the Southeast Asian tours turned out to be extremely inspirational. The culture, customs, and living styles of not just the ethnic Chinese, but also the native Malays and Thais had a far-reaching impact on his artistic epistemology. In addition to advocating the new national form for the Chinese people, Liang was able to look beyond Chinese national themes by articulating the importance of developing "Oriental" dances, including those of Indonesia, Malaya, and Myanmar. "Their dances were cheerful and religious, filled with alluring passions and sensory excitement. Male and female performers candidly expressed their longing for love and freedom, which is clearly different from the erotic scenes born from urban colonial culture, such as American movies." (Liang 1948: 61) With an emphasis on the common characteristics of Oriental/Asian peoples and their cultural expressions, Liang's conceptualisation also foreshadowed a later development of socialist culture, one that came to stress pan-Asianism to unite the formerly colonised peoples in their search for national independence in the 1950s. Liang's observation displayed a sophisticated exploration of early socialist dancing forms by drawing on exotic experiences in Southeast Asia.

There were also other interesting comments made by the perceptive artist-dancer Liang Lun. For instance, as he wrote:

> The local folk dances were pure and simple yet tinted with a slow-paced idleness that nonetheless has been naturalised by the tropical environment. The most favoured costume by local women, the "sarong," greatly limits the extent to which the body moves and jumps, resulting in a kind of soft yet laborious choreography made through hands, wrists, fingers, and waists. (ibid.)

Evidently, Liang expressed a dissatisfaction with the existing local dances, as they lacked the sort of technique required to use bodily power to express human feelings. This observation largely came from Liang's earlier professional training in Western modernist dance theory developed by the influential dancer Isadora Duncan. More importantly, he interpreted such a lack in light of the cultural and ecological differences unique to Southeast Asian peoples. He elaborated that the unbearable heat under the tropical climate was the underlying factor for the idleness of native people. The gentle movement made by hand gestures drew inspiration from their cultural and religious symbols such as snakes as well as rubber and coconut trees. Liang's short comments on local folk dances had a rare ethnographic gaze that not only respected local culture and customs, but also took an emic position to understand their dances from an insider's view. If Liang Lun's experience in Yunnan had shaped his early artistic quest, then the Southeast Asian tours deepened his epistemological understanding of dance in a more cross-cultural language.

In hindsight, even though the performances by Zhong Yi were supposed to forge identification with the CCP's socialist culture, the troupes and performers often found themselves speaking to the heterogeneity of the Chinese diaspora. What was originally intended for the diasporic Chinese had to be constantly adjusted, appropriated, and reframed to speak to their "here and now" contingencies. In this homeland-diaspora interaction, what was often neglected was how Southeast Asia's "contact zones" helped to shape and enrich the worldviews and choreographic epistemology of returning socialist artists. Furthermore, Zhong Yi did leave an important

4. Liang's dedication to ethnic dances was part and parcel of the wartime "national dance movement," whereby there were several parallel projects led by Dai Ailian 戴愛蓮 in Chongqing, Wu Xiaobang 吳曉邦 in Yan'an, and the Uyghur dancer Qemberxanim in Xinjiang (Wilcox 2019a: 32-44). The piece "Axi Moon Dance" was first shown at the Yi Compatriots Music and Dance Performance (*Yibao yinyue wuyonghui* 彝胞音樂舞蹈會) in Kunming and garnered nationwide attention.

cultural legacy for the diasporic Chinese to mobilise during their anticolonial struggles in the 1950s. The emergent socialist dances disseminated and circulated by Zhong Yi would come to empower oppressed Chinese youth, working-class proletarians, and trade unions in articulating their visions of decolonisation and the national independence of Singapore throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Dancing KMT's Cold War cultural diplomacy

During the 1950s, the Chinese diaspora in Thailand was influenced by important regional and international political turbulence. First, after the war, the US became a foreign patron of Thailand that was more intrusive than in prewar times. The US used Thailand as an ally and base to counter the spread of communism in Asia. To consolidate its role in the free world during the Cold War, the US helped to revive and strengthen Thailand's military rule, and promoted development through capitalism. In order to appeal for US support in education, technical, and military aid, the Thai government espoused strong anticommunist commitment throughout the 1950s (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014: 143). Second, in 1958, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat established a military absolutist regime in Thailand, declaring the start of Thailand's "American Era" (Anderson 1985: 19; Fineman 1997: 4-5). As the regime developed a more intimate relationship with the US, it accelerated the pace of anticommunist activities, resulting in the arrest of a large number of Chinese in Thailand, cleansing Chinese stores and schools, and closing down Chinese newspapers (Wyatt 1984: 267).

A more serious crisis for the Chinese diaspora in Thailand was the split between the pro-CCP/left-wing and the pro-KMT/right-wing factions. Every effort to counter the Thai government's containment of the Chinese was frustrated by the left-wing-right-wing rivalry (Skinner 1957: 323-4). The ROC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs often collaborated with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Council (*qiaowu weiyuanhui* 僑務委員會) in Bangkok to gather information about Chinese communist activities in Thailand. They were successful in stopping left-leaning Chinese in Thailand from visiting the PRC from 1950 to 1962 (MFA, 020-091300-0006). In 1956, Thai police had worked with the ROC's Department of East Asian and Pacific Affairs to track down pro-communist Chinese journalists in Thailand (MFA, 020-010408-0044). This anticommunist alignment explains why ethnic Chinese in Thailand openly sided with the US, whereas the left-wing or pro-Beijing influences were very limited despite transient growth immediately after 1949. As Skinner (1957: 337) puts it, "In the new political climate created by the vigorous anticommunist campaigns, the KMT staged an impressive revival in Thailand."

The politics of the Cold War era had indeed brought about Taiwan's close relationship with Thailand, which was basically channelled through the diasporic Chinese in Thailand. Exchanges in sports (Kuo 2019: 380) and education (Wang 2011: 78) between Taipei and Bangkok were very frequent. As part and parcel of the exchange programmes targeting the Chinese diaspora, dance troupes and dancers were sent abroad to teach and coach Chinese dance overseas (Li and Yu 2005: 243). Dance became a powerful symbol of Chineseness as defined and represented by the KMT. Dancers also became messengers of the KMT's political and ideological propaganda in the battle for the hearts and minds of millions of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (Chang 2006: 82).[5] Among the earliest batches of the "cultural army" sent by the KMT was Lee Shu Fen, who joined the earliest endeavours in various cultural-diplomatic missions overseas. She was one of the principal dancers in the ROC's first official delegation to Thailand in 1956. The delegation consisted of 131 performing artists specialising in Peking opera, Chinese traditional music ensembles, Chinese lyric songs, and folk dances.[6] Soon after this mission, Lee was selected to join the China's Youth Friendship Troupe (*Zhongguo qingnian youhao fangwen tuan* 中國青年友好訪問團) to participate in the World Moral Re-armament Congress held in the US in 1957 (Lim and Shen 1995: 30). This was an international anticommunist organisation that aimed to promote peace and moral recovery.[7] In 1957, the Lee Shu Fen Dance Troupe conducted a performing tour in South Korea. This cultural exchange was claimed to have fostered diplomatic relationship between the ROC and South Korea.[8] These overseas tours were in line with the KMT's ideological campaign against communism and to represent the Chinese nation on the global stage during the Cold War.

In all these cultural and diplomatic exchanges, Lee's performing repertoire exclusively featured dances in unequivocal Chinese folk and traditional styles, even though she was trained in Western ballet in Japan. The programmes included traditional opera-adapted music, dance and drama as well as dances that embodied Han-based folk culture and ethnic diversity. There was one instance in which Lee's performances were criticised by the ROC's domestic reviewers due to her Japanised rendering of the tea picking dance (*caichawu* 採茶舞) during the tours in Thailand.[9] It highlights the KMT's particular concern over the purity of Chinese national culture due to the pressure to compete with the CCP regime in mainland China. Evidently, to perform the authenticity of Chineseness with an emphasis on tradition and inheritance was of paramount importance during these diplomatic interactions.

From 1960 onwards, Lee's role as a cultural ambassador became more prominent with her frequent tours to Southeast Asian countries; e.g., she toured Thailand in 1961 and 1962, the Federated States of Malaya in 1962, and finally Singapore in 1964 (Lim and Shen 1995:

5. According to Chang's research, the KMT government sent prominent dancers and troupes to Southeast Asia from 1955 to 1973. To name a few here, Tsai Jui-Yueh 蔡瑞月 toured the Philippines in 1956 and led a troupe to South Vietnam in 1971. Kao Yen 高棪 toured Manila and Hong Kong many times from 1960 to 1964; the Taiwan Acrobatic Troupe performed in Bangkok in 1956, which was soon followed by a circus tour in Southeast Asia in 1957. It conducted another tour in the Philippines in 1962 (Chang 2006: 168-78).
6. "我赴泰藝術演出團: 月底起分兩批出發" (*Wo fu Tai yishu yanchutuan: Yuedi qi fen liangpi chufa*, Our arts troupe plan to set out to Thailand in two dispatches by the end of month), *Central Daily News* (中央日報), 20 November 1956.
7. "世界道德重整運動國際訪問團: 定二十日來台" (*Shijie daode chongzheng yundong guoji fangwentuan: Ding ershi ri lai Tai*, World Moral Re-armament Congress visited Taiwan on 20th), *Union Times* (聯合報), 12 June 1955; "亞運代表團職員應減少" (*Yayun daibiaotuan zhiyuan ying jianshao*, Cut down the quantity of Asian Sports Congress), *Union Times* (聯合報), 18 August 1957.
8. "李淑芬赴韓: 今審查節目" (*Li Shufen fu Han: Jin shencha jiemu*, Lee Shu Fen toured South Korea: The programs are under review), *Union Times* (聯合報), 5 June 1959; "李淑芬載譽韓國: 凱旋歸來" (*Li Shufen zaiyu Hanguo: Kaixuan guilai*, Lee Shu Fen gained world reputation in South Korea and returned with huge success), *Union Times* (聯合報), 4 November 1959; "李淑芬舞蹈團今赴韓" (*Li Shufen wudaotuan jin fu Han*, Lee Shu Fen dance troupe set out to South Korea today), *Central Daily News* (中央日報), 14 September 1959.
9. Fang Zheng 方正, "我對出國舞蹈的淺見" (*Wo dui chuguo wudao de qianjian*, My views on dancing abroad), *Union Times* (聯合報), 2 December 1956.

33-40). In 1961, invited by the ROC ambassador of Thailand, Lee Shu Fen joined a Thai Chinese cultural festival in Bangkok, at which she performed the classic Chinese sword dance (*jianwu* 劍舞) (Figure 2), folk dances, and frontier dances. The performance of these assorted choreographies was aimed at perpetuating the idea that the KMT still governed and represented all ethnic and geographical groups in China.[10] Suffice it to say that by invoking the glorious tradition dating back to ancient Chinese civilisation, Lee Shu Fen's folk dances "fit perfectly into the scheme of claiming cultural authenticity and political legitimacy" in the Chinese diaspora (Chen 2003: 44).

Figure 2. Lee Shu Fen performing the sword dance in Thailand

Source: "潮劇歌舞音樂大會串" (*Chaoju gewu yinyue dahuichuan*, An assorted gala of Chaozhou music and dance), *Huafeng zhoubao* (華風周報), 10 January 1961.

However, a close examination of the programmes reveals that they were basically identical with dances performed by Zhong Yi and by and large on the communist Mainland. So, the more important question to ask is, against the Cold War ideological rivalry, how did Taiwanese dancers perceive the dancing vocabularies that were also widely practiced in mainland China, and in what ways did they acquire the choreography method? Here it is necessary to examine Lee Shu Fen's choreographic epistemology by starting with her biography.[11] Lee Shu Fen is a Taiwan-born dancer who later received professional training in Tokyo, Japan, under imperial influence during the Second World War. She intended to study Western ballet, but interestingly Lee learned Oriental dance, including the dances of Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and India (Lim and Shen 1995: 22; Chen 2003: 27). This was because during the Second World War, imperial Japan promoted the study of ethnic cultures of Asian peoples to legitimise its conquest of the region (Hsu 2014: 17-8). This early exposure to the conglomeration of ethnic dances was, however, underwritten by Japan's imperial ideology, yet laid the foundation for Lee's dance epistemology, which she acquired after returning to Taiwan.

In Taiwan after 1949, in order to consolidate its power and control on the island, the KMT launched a series of cultural programmes to cultivate loyalty, patriotism, and most importantly to carry out anticommunist propaganda on the island. In 1952, the National Dance Movement (*minzu wudao yundong* 民族舞蹈運動) was launched by the KMT in full scale to mobilise the Taiwanese into collective dancing activities, with an emphasis on pan-Chinese national culture (Chen 2003, 2008; Hsu 2014, 2018). Lee Shu Fen's homecoming in Taiwan from 1944 to 1960 aptly reflected the dynamism of Taiwan's society in transition. Her background in ethnic and folk dances made her a perfect fit for the new milieu. For instance, in 1954, her presentation of Chinese folk dances, e.g., tea picking dance, north-eastern drum dance (*dongbei guwu* 東北鼓舞), and fisherman dance (*yuren wu* 漁人舞) all won the championship in the dance contests (Lim and Shen 1995: 26).

Parallel to the propagandist mobilisation through dance, another significant episode that shaped Lee's dance epistemology was the frequent contact with Mainland dancers who migrated to Taiwan after 1949. These dancers facilitated the transplant of dance heritage that had been explored and cultivated in Chongqing by Dai Ailian 戴愛蓮, the mother of Chinese national dance (*Zhongguo wu* 中國舞) in the 1940s. One of these senior dancers from whom Lee learned a great deal was Kao Yen 高棪. Kao was a Mainland-migrant choreographer who had accumulated first-hand experiences with dance activities promoted by the CCP in postwar China. Kao herself had once taken lessons from Dai Ailian in Chongqing during wartime (Chen 2003: 52). Learning from and performing together with Mainland dancers was a significant episode that shaped Lee's identity as well as her choreographic epistemology. In retrospect, Lee attributed her love for Chinese national dance to her identification with a pan-Chinese culture and identity that defied the ideological struggles of competing political regimes (Lu 1995: 92).

Notably, throughout Lee Shu Fen's overseas tours in Thailand and South Korea, there was one choreography that was performed most regularly. It was a folk dance called "The mute carries the cripple" (*yazi bei feng* 啞子背瘋) (Figure 3), also known by the name "The old carries the young" (*lao bei shao* 老背少), which was first created by Dai Ailian during a fieldtrip she made to the southwest region (Wilcox 2020b: 122). The dance was so popular that it was widely circulated in mainland China before 1949. Lee's version was based on an oral account made by the parents of her students who encountered the performance at various occasions in mainland China (Lu 1995: 92). This corresponds to Wilcox's finding, which basically proves that Dai Ailian's dance epistemology was carried further into the diaspora by her students-cum-dancers when they migrated to other Sinophone communities, not only to Taiwan,

10. "潮劇歌舞音樂大會串" (*Chaoju gewu yinyue dahuichuan*, An assorted gala of Chaozhou music and dance), *Huafeng zhoubao* (華風周報), 10 January 1961.
11. In articulating how certain Sinophone epistemology was acquired and shaped, Emily Wilcox (2020b: 126) uses the biography of Dai Ailian and further contextualises Dai's diasporic experiences in the multiply-angulated critiques. I find Wilcox's work very inspiring and thereby have taken a similar approach in this article.

but also to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia (Wilcox 2020b: 126). Evidently, the ideological struggle between the ROC and the PRC did not reflect the on-ground experience of dancers, whose aspirations could hardly go along with the ideological rivalry propagated by the Cold War discourse.

Figure 3. Lee Shu Fen performing "The mute carries the cripple" in Thailand

Source: "潮劇歌舞 (…)" (*Chaoju gewu (…)*, An assorted gala (…)), op. cit.

Finding a new home in multicultural Singapore

From the 1950s onward, left-leaning Chinese youth in Singapore had been dedicated to organising various school concerts to support ongoing anticolonial pro-independence movements. These public performances often featured folk dances, choruses, and dramas from socialist China, and were staged to express their vision of building a socialist Malayan nation (Goh 2011: 303; Hong 2011: 73; Quah 2011: 294; Zhang 2022b). Late British colonial rule was wrestling with a local communist insurgency and therefore obstructed access to cultural materials from communist-ruled China.[12] This included stopping professional dancers from China coming to teach dance. Chinese students had to draw on choreographic resources either from books smuggled from Hong Kong or from old materials left before or during the Second World War, for example by the aforementioned theatre troupe Zhong Yi. Into the 1960s, the new government led by the PAP adopted a new cultural policy that used performing arts to construct a new multicultural Malayan identity (Koh 2018: 15-6; Zhang 2021b: 150-1). The officially endorsed open-air variety shows, the people's cultural concerts (*Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*),[13] were a great boost for local Chinese, who were mostly amateur dancers craving for professional knowledge of Chinese dance. Hence, by the time Lee arrived in Singapore in the early 1960s, she found it a promising place where she could fulfil her role as a bridge and could impart knowledge about Chinese national dance to the Overseas Chinese.

However, the lively scene of Chinese cultural performances quietened down after swift and repressive measures were taken by the ruling government against left-leaning organisations. Understanding the undercurrents, Lee continued to teach Chinese dance and stage public performances featuring traditional Chinese folklore in Singapore. In 1964, she performed the world-renowned *Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* 梁山伯與祝英台) in Singapore's Victoria Theatre for two nights (Lim and Shen 1995: 45). In 1966, she directed an iconic piece of choreography called *Hua Mulan* 花木蘭, which greatly boosted the spirits of alienated Chinese in Singapore.[14] Drawing upon an ancient epic about a Chinese woman warrior fighting to safeguard her country, Lee's version of *Hua Mulan* was a readapted work of patriotism that spoke to the nation-building of independent Singapore, not the bifurcated homelands as represented by either the ROC or the PRC (Zhang 2022a). Against the oppressive political atmosphere caused by the denunciation of Chinese education and culture from the government, these stage performances led by Lee Shu Fen can be read as a bold yet careful reassertion of Chineseness in public space. Most importantly, Lee Shu Fen sought to reconcile her love for Chinese dance with Singapore's multiculturalism and nation-building efforts. This was achieved mainly through Lee's active collaborations and interactions with multiracial dance communities that included the Indian Fine Arts Academy, and choreographing multicultural dances with assorted Chinese, Indian, Malay, and ballet elements to support Singapore's founding ideology of multiculturalism and multiracialism (Lim and Shen 1995: 49).

Born and raised in Taiwan, Lee Shu Fen was more than familiar with the KMT's anticommunist propaganda. She also actively participated in producing various propaganda tours through the ROC's cultural-diplomatic exchanges. Yet the way she embraced rather than rejected dancing vocabularies from mainland China justified the need to break away from a binary Cold War view. The ways in which she immersed herself in articulating the meaning of Chineseness within Singapore's postcolonial nation-building context challenges the bipolar influences from the bifurcated homelands, and thus offers some valuable bottom-up perspectives as opposed to what was designed by the competing regimes.

12. In 1958, to curb the communist infiltration of Southeast Asia, the government of Singapore issued the Control of Imported Publications Ordinance to ban all PRC-related cultural materials (Taylor 2019: 798).
13. "Lee: We'll Breed New Strain of Culture," *The Straits Times*, 3 August 1959; "Artistic Talent," *The Straits Times*, 6 December 1959; "A Memorable Week," *The Straits Times*, 10 December 1959.
14. "花木蘭定期在星演出" (*Hua Mulan dingqi zai Xing yanchu*, Hua Mulan will be shown in Singapore soon), *Nanyang Siang Pau* (南洋商報), 7 August 1966.

Conclusion

The end of the Chinese Civil War and the descending Cold War over Southeast Asia signified what Chan (2018: 13) refers to as a crucial "diaspora moment," when the daily lifeworld of diasporic Chinese was disrupted, and the multiple meanings of Chineseness and the imaginings of the motherland were explored and challenged (Taylor 2021: 8). The performative linkages formed by two distinct diasporic tours and travelling troupes/performers were evoked at such a diaspora moment, which enabled a new understanding of how the Chinese diaspora interacted with temporalities occupied by global and regional forces generated under the Cold War framework and outside the diasporas.

Earlier scholarship has been preoccupied with the ways in which the Chinese presence was dealt with arduously by host societies, either through assimilation or suppression (Leo 2007; Hui 2011). Shu-mei Shih (2011: 714) even calls for an "expiration date" of the diaspora, as people living in adopted lands have largely been assimilated into the host culture. Arguing against the theory of an expiration date on the diaspora, Lingchei Letty Chen (2015: 54) emphasises how diasporic subjects inherit past migration through the inscription of prosthetic memories created through cultural sources such as films, novels, museums, and rituals, etc. Chen's argument is well exemplified in the stories of travelling theatre troupes/performers and their tours in the diaspora. Chinese cultural expression as reified in dance was not only rejuvenated in a turbulent era, but was also carried on into later generations and practiced as the ethnic heritage of the Chinese living overseas. It proves that rather than undermining one's national identity, Chineseness can coexist with and enrich the culture of one's adopted homeland, in just the same way that Lee Shu Fen did.

The infrastructure of travelling – those of routes, journeys, and networks – and the bodily enactment of Chineseness in dance demonstrate both the ambivalence and prominence of connecting the diaspora with the bifurcated homelands, thus entailing a "performative" turn in studying homeland-diaspora engagements. At diverse contact zones of the diaspora, the performed Chineseness, which was supposed to propagate certain political or pragmatic ideas by the competing regimes, was actively altered and appropriated through diasporic agencies (Zhang 2021b: 179-80). Above all, the performative repertoires practiced by both Zhong Yi or Lee Shu Fen displayed identical features. This was because they not only drew from a shared vocabulary of Chinese culture and tradition, but also constantly mimicked each other. The mirroring effects as elaborated in the dancing epistemology of Lee Shu Fen further complicates the competing nature of bifurcated motherlands, enabling us to unpack the porosity of cultural practices during the Cold War era.

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