

Provocations for Asian diaspora dance: the Asian American Chinese dance social justice choreography of Kerry Lee and Atlanta Chinese Dance Company

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Abstract

In 2019, dancer, choreographer, and Atlanta Chinese Dance Company co-artistic director Kerry Lee staged her autobiographical mini Chinese dance drama *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment: Chinese Dance through the Eyes of an American*, which dealt with her personal journey of self-acceptance as a Chinese American. Following this, she has since created four other works addressing Asian American themes through Chinese dance: *Together: Yingge and Hip Hop Unite* (2021), *Rising Against Asian Hate* (2023), *White Collar Wuxia* (2024), and *Votes for Women* (2026). Drawing on viewings of these works, program notes and other public writings, interviews with Lee, and scholarship in Asian diaspora dance studies, this essay examines the significance of these productions as Asian American Chinese Dance social justice choreography.

Keywords

Chinese dance; social justice choreography; Atlanta Chinese Dance Company; Kerry Lee; Asian American performance

Introduction

A petite Asian woman dressed in a red business suit with her hair in a long ponytail dances on stage wielding a metal sword. She points two fingers at her opponent, then moves in his direction while sweeping the sword through the air and executing powerful poses drawn from martial arts and Chinese classical dance. The tall non-Asian man standing opposite her dwarfs her in height. He is dressed in a black business suit and holds a blue baseball bat. As the man squares off and faces the audience in a batter's pose, rotating his body in slow motion while the bat follows through at an imaginary target, chills go down my spine. I recall the program notes projected on screen at the beginning of the dance:

Liza Cheuk May Chan (1953-2019) was born and raised in Hong Kong and practiced law in the United States. Growing up, she often fantasized about becoming a *wuxia* 武侠 (ancient Chinese martial arts hero) to defend her family at all costs. While Chan would never become physically adept in combat, she came to realise that her true calling was fighting for justice in the courtroom. In 1983—just two years out of law school—Chan was initially the only attorney who took on the infamous Vincent Chin case, in which two

white killers brutally murdered a Chinese American man with a baseball bat and got off with no jail time. The case became the first federal civil rights trial for an Asian American.¹

This scene is from the mini dance drama *White Collar Wuxia* choreographed by Kerry Lee, co-artistic director of the Atlanta Chinese Dance Company (ACDC). Performed by ACDC and starring Lee and Zachary Pritts, a guest freelance dancer who worked with City Springs Theatre Company, *White Collar Wuxia* premiered at the Gas South Theater in Duluth, Georgia, USA on 28–29 September 2024, as part of ACDC’s evening-length show *Everyday Heroes*. Lee plays the role of Liza Cheuk May Chan, a female Chinese American lawyer who first represented the case of Vincent Chin, the Chinese American draftsman from Detroit who was beaten to death in cold blood with a baseball bat by two white autoworkers Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz in 1982. When the killers were released with only a fine and three year’s probation, the event sparked protests and, in the words of Paula Yoo, ‘galvanized the Asian American movement.’² In the production, Pritts performs the lawyer representing assailants Ebens and Nitz, while also at times embodying Ebens and Nitz themselves, as well as the larger social forces of anti-Asian racism and white supremacy.³ Group dances are performed by adult and teen members of ACDC, a company made up almost entirely of Asian American women who perform Chinese dance as an amateur vocation in addition to their full-time jobs, school, and/or parenting responsibilities.⁴

White Collar Wuxia is one of several dance works Lee has created for ACDC since 2019 that use movement vocabularies and aesthetic conventions of Chinese dance—a concert genre developed by dance professionals in China during the mid-twentieth century building on indigenous movement forms such as Chinese opera, martial arts, and Han and minority folk dance⁵—to tell distinctly Asian American stories. Lee refers to these works as ‘social justice choreographies’ because they explicitly address problems such as anti-Asian violence

¹ *Everyday Heroes*, Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, Gas South Theater, Duluth, Georgia, USA, 28–29 September 2024.

² Paula Yoo, *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021.

³ According to his online bio, Pritts is of mixed African American, Hispanic/Latino, and European descent <https://www.backstage.com/u/zachary-pritts/>. Pritts was not the originator of the role but stepped in when two earlier dancers—Brandon Nguyen Hilton, a former Atlanta Ballet dancer who is half white and half Vietnamese who originated the role, and Scott Wheet, a white male guest artist from Terminus Modern Ballet Theatre who replaced Hilton—were both unable to perform due to schedule conflicts or injury. According to Lee all three male dancers who performed in this role pass as white on stage and thus form a racial contrast with Kerry, who is Chinese American.

⁴ Group dances in the premiere were performed by Maxine Acosta, Emily Blickenstaff, Tia Bi, Kristin Buhrow, Carolyn Butler, Eileen Chong, Sofia Drescher, Lillian Freed, Isabelle Grala, Danica Huang, Ashley Lao, Helen Li, Sunny Li, Tiffany Morgan, Rachel Puvvada, Emily Qiu, and Cynthia Zhang. On the demographics of Chinese dance companies in Atlanta, see Kristin Buhrow ‘Performing Ethnicity and Double Consciousness: Chinese Dance in the American South,’ PhD dissertation, Emory University, 2026.

⁵ On the history of Chinese dance, see Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.

and racism and seek to educate dancers and audiences about Asian American history.⁶ The first piece in this group, *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment: Chinese Dance through the Eyes of an American*, premiered in 2019. It is an autobiographical account of Lee's personal journey navigating anti-Asian racism and finding her identity as an Asian American woman in the US South. Lee uses the Chinese ribbon dance as a symbol to narrate her struggle to embrace her Chinese heritage and to gain pride in performing Chinese dance, an ethnically marked and marginalized artistic practice in the United States. In this work, Lee combines a self-narrated voiceover and visual projections that recount her personal experiences as a Chinese American together with movement techniques, props, and aesthetics typical of Chinese classical and folk dance, combined with sonic and visual signifiers of US identity. Through these juxtapositions, *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment* creates a visceral and moving portrayal of the challenges and possibilities of living in and embracing a Chinese American identity.⁷

The performance program from *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*'s premiere clearly explains the advocacy goals behind this work, articulated in an introductory letter by Kerry Lee and her mother Hwee-Eng Y. Lee, who founded ACDC in 1991 and currently co-directs the company alongside her daughter. Lee and Lee write,

The idea behind this production came about a few years ago as ACDC Co-Artistic Director Kerry Lee was unpacking her own personal journey growing up Chinese American in the South—dancing with ACDC under the direction of her mother Hwee-Eng Y. Lee since the age of five, yet compartmentalizing it from her 'regular American life' for fear of being perceived as inferior. It was performing the ribbon dance hundreds of times for cheering audiences that enabled her to realize not only the power of Chinese dance, but her own power as well. Not wanting the production to have only one viewpoint, Kerry invited ACDC dancers and parents to share their Chinese dance stories too—excerpts from nine of which, along with her own, you will hear through their own words in their own voices. The emotional heart of the story was also inspired by many more informal conversations with ACDC alumni and friends as well as Kerry's experience in the arts and social justice field.

This is ACDC's most original production yet—using a traditional Chinese art form to tell our own modern-day American story. It is a story of the Chinese

⁶ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 6 February 2023. For a summary of Lee's remarks, including photographs, see Gabriel Black-Planas, *The Flat Hat*, 14 February 2023, <https://flathatnews.com/williamsburg-regional-library-hosts-the-chinese-ribbon-dance-of-empowerment/>.

⁷ For more on this work and Kerry's personal narrative of how her upbringing informed the piece, see Kerry Lee, 'Ribbon dance of empowerment: growing up Chinese American in the South,' *Memoirs of a Chinese Dancer*, 30 December 2018, <https://www.kerryylee.com/2018/12/30/ribbon-dance-of-empowerment/>; Kerry Lee, 'Ribbon dance of empowerment: Chinese dance through the eyes of an American,' *Memoirs of a Chinese Dancer*, 1 January 2020, <https://www.kerryylee.com/2020/01/01/ribbon-dance-of-empowerment-mini-dance-drama/>.

American experience that is rarely, if ever, told in the black/white binary of the South. Yet it is also a universal one, about the desire to be confident in one's own skin—commanding the majestic dragons within us that we have somehow convinced ourselves do not belong in the world that we live in. As you watch *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*, we hope you feel empowered to fight for your best self.⁸

This statement makes clear Lee and Lee's desire to ground the work in first-person autobiographical narratives by ACDC members and to use dance to promote a key social justice issue in Asian American communities, what they call 'their search for identity, belonging, and self-acceptance.'⁹

Kerry Lee's second foray into social justice choreography addressing Asian American themes is *Together: Yingge and Hip Hop Unite* (2021), a collaboration with Filipino hip hop guest artist AJ Paug. Lee and Paug co-created *Together* in the context of the 2020 COVID pandemic, a time of increased violence against Asian Americans that fuelled the movement Stop AAPI Hate, and the brutal police killing of African American man George Floyd in Minneapolis that sparked increased attention to the world-wide Black Lives Matter Movement against anti-Black violence. Less explicitly narrative than either *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment* or *White Collar Wuxia*, *Together* loosely takes inspiration from the famous work of Chinese vernacular fiction *The Water Margin* or *Outlaws of the Marsh* that celebrates a group of martial heroes who fight for justice outside officialdom. Imagining an encounter between these heroes and contemporary social justice activists in the US, *Together* explores the broad themes of cross-cultural collaboration and inter-ethnic tensions between Asian Americans and other minoritized groups. As suggested in its subtitle, *Together* blends hip-hop, a counter-hegemonic dance form originated by working class Afrodiasporic and Latinx American communities in the US, and *Yingge* 英歌, a type of Han Chinese folk dance practiced in Chaoshan, an area of southern China to which many diasporic Chinese, including Kerry's parents, trace their ancestral roots. The program notes read,

'Together' is an original cross-cultural collaboration between Atlanta Chinese Dance Company Co-Artistic Director Kerry Lee and guest artist AJ Paug. It imagines a clash between ancient Chinese social justice heroes and their modern-day American counterparts. Will their shared goal of justice bring them together, or will their differences tear them apart? Their journey of finding common ground to overcome a greater force celebrates the potential of what we can accomplish when we come together to defeat universal threats to humankind. The Chinese dance portion is rooted in 'Yingge' (or Hero's Song),

⁸ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment: Chinese Dance through the Eyes of an American*, Infinite Energy Theater, 19–20 October 2019, performance program, 3. Provided by ACDC and Kerry Lee.

⁹ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*, 3.

a folk dance from Chaoshan (on China's eastern seaboard) that has rarely been performed in the United States. The performers paint their faces to honor the 108 Stars of Destiny from the famous Chinese novel *Shui Hu Zhuan* (or *Water Margin*).¹⁰

Together is marked by the pandemic context through its use of masks and limited body-to-body contact between performers. Also, as Lee notes in an interview, '[Paug] is not Black,'¹¹ although there were Black dancers in the hip hop crew, one of whom is also credited as a choreographer. Nevertheless, it marks a significant effort to bridge different minoritized dance forms and to use dance to collaboratively interrogate and re-imagine relationships between racialized communities in the contemporary US.

Lee continues this exploration of cross-racial solidarity and the use of Chinese folk forms to tell Asian American stories in her third social justice choreography on Asian American themes, *Rising Against Asian Hate*, premiered in 2023. This work deals with the murder of Vincent Chin and the Asian American movement that arose in its aftermath, combining dance, choral singing, documentary film, and visual art. It is a multimedia tour de force that doubles as a lesson about Asian American history and a call to arms for cross-cultural allyship in anti-racist activism in the US today. The program for the premiere included a page-long essay by Kerry in which she explains her process of creating the piece and some of the ideas that motivated it. She writes,

It was January 2022, and I was doing research for a new piece of choreography. I'd been thinking of creating a Chinese American wax museum come to life with diverse characters as a counterpoint to the dehumanizing labels our community has faced throughout history. [...] But if I only selected famous people, wouldn't I be perpetuating the model minority myth? Why should our belonging be conditional?

That's when I stumbled upon a new book *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement* by Paula Yoo. Though I'd already known about the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin during a time of high anti-Japanese sentiments due to the decline of the auto industry in Detroit (thanks to a 'V. Chin' t-shirt during the 30th anniversary in 2012), reading the book was still a visceral punch in the gut. Especially just after a 339% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021 and a mass shooting of Asian American women in my hometown. [...]

¹⁰ Program notes provided by Kerry Lee and Atlanta Chinese Dance Company.

¹¹ Kerry Lee, personal interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 March 2026.

Journalist Helen Zia’s reaction resonated deeply with me: ‘The thought that kept coming to me all day long is “This is how far we’ve come in two hundred years?”’ [...]

Forty years later, I asked myself this same question. [...] With that, I had a new direction for my choreography—amplifying past and present Asian American movements.¹²

The program notes for *Rising Against Asian Hate* highlight Lee’s use of Chinese dance elements to tell Asian American stories, which by this point had already become a hallmark of her social justice choreography: ‘Drawing on traditional Chinese fan dance techniques, choreographer Kerry Lee worked with dancers to create new movement by repurposing the fan as objects used in protests (such as megaphones, banners, and posters) and historically significant occupations for Chinese Americans (such as railroad workers, laundrymen, and waiters).’¹³ In my review of *Rising Against Asian Hate* after watching the live premiere in 2023, I highlighted what I call Lee’s strategic resignification of Chinese dance movements by analysing her use of the Shandong Han folk dance form *Jiaozhou yangge* 胶州秧歌 to depict a protest scene:

Advancing forward in an imposing group, twenty-one women, nearly all Asian, performed in unison the signature *Jiaozhou yangge* step, curving their toes inward and pressing their heels forward in a series of sinewy yet punctuated half-moon walks. Eleven dancers in front held the fans open at waist level like a banner, while nine in back pointed their closed fans upward and pumped them up and down above their heads as if shouting slogans. Lee led the group front and center, grasping a closed fan in front of her mouth like a megaphone and pounding her fist into the air. In this brilliant act of resignification, Lee turned the pink silk fans and twisting steps—traditionally a local expression of Chinese femininity—into a vector of Asian American political resistance, anger, power, and unity.¹⁴

Another strategy Lee employs in *Rising Against Asian Hate* that also appears in several of her other social justice works is a multimedia approach that blends dance with other expressive media. In this case, Lee began the piece with sections of a documentary film about Vincent Chin that provided original footage, photographs, and interviews, establishing the historical context in which the dance is set. Lee also collaborated with former ACDC member and

¹² Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *We Belong Here: Rising Against Asian Hate*, Gas South Theater, Duluth, Georgia, 15–16 April 2023, performance program, 14.

¹³ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *We Belong Here*, 23.

¹⁴ Emily Wilcox, ‘Combating anti-Asian violence through Chinese dance in Atlanta,’ review of *We Belong Here: Rising Against Asian Hate* presented by Atlanta Chinese Dance Company (Gas South Theater, Duluth, Georgia, 15–16 April 2023), *Dance Chronicle* 47: 1, 2024, 144–150, 146.

Thai-Indonesian American artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya and The Trey Clegg Singers, a local chorus. As I discuss in my review,

Phingbodhipakkiya's bold, colorful designs used as backdrops in *Rising Against Asian Hate* incorporate provocative statements that call out and resist Asian American racialization. Widely circulated in the Stop AAPI Hate movement that followed the Atlanta murders of 2020, the images include text such as 'When will we be safe?' 'When will you stop denying our humanity?' 'When will you learn to tell us apart?' 'When will you love us like you love our food?' and 'I am not your scapegoat'. Another collaboration that greatly added to the impact and meaning of the work was the live performances of The Trey Clegg Singers, an Atlanta-based racially diverse chorus. In both performances that I saw, the group sang *You Do Not Walk Alone* live onstage [...] This message of inter-racial solidarity was further emphasized in the final segment of the fan dance section through Phingbodhipakkiya's artwork. The transition image that appeared projected above the dancers just before *You Do Not Walk Alone* featured portraits of Japanese American civil rights activist Yuri Kochiyama and African American civil rights activist Malcolm X alongside the stirring text 'Raise Your Voice'.¹⁵

White Collar Wuxia, the work discussed in the opening of this essay that premiered in 2024, continues to explore the history of the Vincent Chin murder and its aftermath by focusing on Chinese American lawyer Liza Cheuk May Chan, whom Kerry embodies physically onstage. The work explores Chan's fight for justice through her work on the Vincent Chin case, which she lost on appeal, as well as her later journey dealing with disability as a paraplegic. In this work, I see a new direction in Lee's choreography in which she merges her earlier idea of the 'Chinese American wax museum' that challenges negative and stereotyped portrayals of Chinese Americans in US culture with her commitment to highlighting average people and amplifying present and past Asian American movements. Lee's goal of presenting Chan as a positive yet relatable figure and even a role model for contemporary Chinese Americans can be seen in Lee and Lee's introductory letter to this production, in which they write, 'To become a hero does not require superhuman strength or courage, but simply a power from within to make a difference in our everyday lives.' They describe Chan as 'an unsung hero [...] Not immune to self-doubt and failure like the rest of us, her poignant story has gifted us strength in the face of adversity.'¹⁶

¹⁵ Wilcox, 'Combatting anti-Asian violence,' 147-149.

¹⁶ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *Everyday Heroes*, Gas South Theater, Duluth, Georgia, 28-29 September 2024, performance program, 3. Provided by ACDC and Kerry Lee.

This approach can also be seen in Lee's most recent social justice choreography *Votes for Women*, premiered in 2026, which also highlights an important but not well known historical Chinese American woman. As described in the program notes,

'Votes for Women' is inspired by Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, a Chinese-born American suffragist and scholar who championed women's voting rights while confronting anti-Chinese racism. Born in Guangzhou, China in 1896 during the Qing Dynasty, she immigrated to New York with her family in 1905, settling in Manhattan's Chinatown at the height of the Chinese Exclusion Act era—the first major U.S. policy to explicitly restrict immigration based on race. [...] In 1912, at just 15 years old, Mabel rode on horseback at the head of a New York City suffrage parade, joining American suffragists in leading more than 10,000 participants through the streets of Manhattan in support of women's voting rights. She was not alone—Chinese American women across the country organized, wrote, and marched for suffrage, even as they were denied the rights of citizenship themselves.¹⁷

Both *White Collar Wuxia*, which I saw live at the public premiere, and *Votes for Women*, which I saw live in rehearsal, offer gripping scenes in which Lee portrays the Chinese American female characters powerfully and movingly, embodying them with a combination of emotional depth and physical strength that makes them appear simultaneously human and heroic. There is a scene in *White Collar Wuxia* in which Lee, as Liza Chan, after losing her ability to walk, sits on the stage beating a giant round war drum, showing her tremendous spirit and will to fight and inspire others despite personal adversity. Similarly, in *Votes for Women* Lee, as Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, performs a duet with two white dancers, representing suffragists, in which Lee is clearly the leader. Lee's insistence that these heroic figures represent ordinary Chinese American women is evidenced in the fact that *White Collar Wuxia* appeared as part of a longer performance titled *Everyday Heroes*, while *Votes for Women* was part of a production titled *Chinatown Stories*. In both works, Lee explores the potential of her own corporeality as a Chinese American woman dancer and social justice advocate to re-animate these important but neglected Chinese American women. Through her research and creative interpretation of their lives, and her dynamic rendering of them on stage through her own moving body, Lee educates both her dancers and audiences—many of whom are Asian Americans—about Asian American history. Both works not only challenge longstanding negative stereotypes of East Asian women in mainstream US media but also present alternative images based on actual historical figures who can serve as new role models.

¹⁷ Program notes provided by Kerry Lee and Atlanta Chinese Dance Company.

Lee's work in historical context

Lee's social justice choreographies using Chinese dance to explicitly address Asian American history and experiences, directly critique anti-Asian racism and violence, and self-consciously use dance to advocate for Asian American issues in contemporary US society alongside those of other marginalized groups breaks the mould of most Chinese dance schools and ensembles in the US and Canada, past or present. In her study of the Chinese Folk Dance Association (CFDA) of San Francisco, established in 1959 as one of the earliest organisations to promote Chinese dance in the United States, Sau-ling Wong explains that in the context of the Cold War US, the CFDA turned to dance as a way to distance itself from politics, to avoid surveillance and pressure from the FBI and Chinese Nationalists due to its pro-People's Republic of China (PRC) stance. 'Apparently, a turn to ostensibly apolitical cultural activities was necessary for the group's survival,' Wong writes.¹⁸ In this context of needing to avoid explicit references to politics to avoid anti-communist suppression, CFDA employed a strategy Wong calls 'cultural long-distance nationalism,' in which they performed Chinese dance as a cultural representation of Chineseness, deriving their legitimacy from a perceived closeness to the imagined homeland culture and not as a reflection of contemporary social issues. In this approach, Wong writes, 'the patriotic diasporic Chinese subject's responsibility was to serve as a conduit for this culture to the best of his/her ability. Absent technical constraints (such as the lack of trained ballet dancers or stage machinery), the CFDA members would have been happy to be exact replicas of their counterparts on the mainland.'¹⁹

As Wong explains, this approach of cultural long-distance nationalism was the opposite of the Asian American cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s: 'In its most radical form, as articulated and popularized by Frank Chin and his cohort in the *Aiiieeeee!* group, the preservation of the so-called ancestral culture should be anathema to the true Asian American artist.'²⁰ For these Asian American cultural nationalists, Wong writes, 'to maintain and re-present the cultural traditions of China is to play the 'ornamental oriental' and succumb to the racist stereotype of the perpetual foreigner perpetuated by white Americans.'²¹ In this context, therefore, the expression of specifically Asian American experiences and concerns came to be seen as anathema to performances of cultural Chineseness, and Chinese dance in the US came to be practiced more as a site of cultural long-distance nationalism than Asian American cultural nationalism.

In reality, the cultural long-distance nationalism of Chinese dance groups in the US such as CFDA and others like it has neither been apolitical nor distanced from Asian

¹⁸ Sau-ling Wong, 'Dancing in the diaspora: cultural long-distance nationalism and the staging of Chineseness by San Francisco's Chinese Folk Dance Association,' *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2: 1, 2010, 3.

¹⁹ Wong, 'Dancing in the diaspora,' 19.

²⁰ Wong, 'Dancing in the diaspora,' 9.

²¹ Wong, 'Dancing in the diaspora,' 10.

American experiences. As Wong points out, CFDA's repertoire of Han folk dance and ethnic minority dance offered a specific vision of Chinese culture that was grounded in working class identity and explicitly multiethnic, values that aligned with the demographics of CFDA and the socialist politics of the PRC state. Meanwhile, a different vision of Chinese culture focused more on elite and classical culture was presented by dance groups aligned with the ROC in Taiwan. In this context, Wong explains, cultural long-distance nationalism became a contested arena for different factions of Chinese American dance groups:

The selectivity involved in the CFDA's staging of Chineseness can be brought into high relief if we compare it with that made by pro-Nationalist performers during the 1970s, when the CFDA took part in 'China Nights' mounted by Stanford University students on campus. At the time, the Nationalist regime in Taiwan was portraying itself as the true heir to traditional Chinese culture, noble torch-bearers of the spirit of Confucianism, in contrast to the iconoclastic, unlettered Communist peasant-bandits on the mainland. A decorous and refined form of classical high culture was to be promoted overseas as a bulwark against the depredations of the Cultural Revolution. The early to mid-1970s was a period of political turmoil and change in China (the Cultural Revolution), in Taiwan (rising *dangwai* and pro-independence opposition), in the US (the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Civil Rights Movement), between nation-states (the PRC's entry into the United Nations, rapprochement between the PRC and the US), in the local Chinese American community (the Asian American Movement), and among overseas Chinese students (the *Baodiao* movement). In such a setting, the annual China Night on the Stanford campus registered a range of geopolitical forces and became a site of contestation for competing visions of Chinese culture.²²

Regardless of a group's political orientation, the very act of performing Chinese culture in the US itself also held great meaning for Chinese American dance practitioners. Ethnographic studies of Chinese dance practitioners in the US Midwest and the South—two regions where Asian Americans have historically experienced high levels of cultural isolation and lack of access to spaces of diasporic community formation—show that engagement in Chinese dance as a mode of cultural long-distance nationalism serves important psychological, social, and cultural needs of Chinese American communities. In her dissertation "'Dancing the tales of China": an ethnographic case of embodied construction of ethnicity,' Hui Niu Wilcox demonstrates that for Chinese dance practitioners in the Twin Cities, 'not only is dance a site for symbolic performance of Chinese ethnic identity, it also provides a site for the construction of Chinese American habitus and identity.'²³ According to

²² Wong, 'Dancing in the diaspora,' 16.

²³ Hui Niu Wilcox, "'Dancing the tales of China": an ethnographic case of embodied construction of ethnicity,' PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2004, 1.

Wilcox, the act of performing Chineseness in the US is both constructive and contextual, meaning that it requires active creation and is grounded in local experience. She explains,

Quite contrary to the assumption of assimilationism that immigrants come into contact with American society with a somewhat clearly defined old-world identity and way of living, the Chinese immigrant community that I study does not have such a neat starting point. Individual immigrants might be able to delineate their identities prior to migration, but there is no such thing as a natural unified identity for the group as a whole. Multiple generations, national and geopolitical origins, linguistic diversity, constructed gender differences and continuing immigration render the so-called ethnic identities fluid and multi-dimensional. The essentialized, authentic Chinese-ness eludes easy definition. Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants have made an effort to construct such a unified identity, by highlighting things they have in common and downplaying their internal differences. This act on the surface would be classified by assimilation scholars as ‘anti-assimilation’ due to its emphasis on group identity versus on individualized American identity and citizenship. However, the Chinese immigrants I study engage with the American society on multiple levels in order to assert and perform a coherent, distinct group identity. They are indeed inventing an ethnic identity in an American context. The immigrants rarely see such invention as problematic, or a misfit in American society. In some cases, they see it necessary to do ‘authentic’ Chinese dance in order to carve out a niche for themselves on the margin of American culture.²⁴

Similarly, in her dissertation ‘Performing Ethnicity and Double Consciousness: Chinese Dance in the American South,’ Kristin Buhrow shows the complex processes of racial, ethnic, and cultural identification involved in the performance of Chinese dance and the value it provides for different participants, including immigrants, second generation Chinese Americans, trans-racial adoptees, people of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds, and performers of Chinese dance who are not of Chinese descent.

One of Buhrow’s most significant findings is that regardless of background, no practitioner of Chinese dance in her research cohort experienced identification with Chineseness as uncomplicated or straightforward.²⁵ In this sense, for Chinese dancers in the diaspora, performing cultural long-distance nationalism involves a constant process of negotiating diverse factors grounded in US life and Asian American experience, ranging from

²⁴ Wilcox, “‘Dancing the Tales of China,’” 45.

²⁵ Kristin Buhrow, ‘The Performance of Ethnicity and the Development of a Double Consciousness: Chinese Dance in the American South,’ PhD diss., Emory University, 2026.

everyday racialization to diasporic community formation to kinaesthetic empathy in the dance studio and on stage.

Reflecting on her own experiences teaching Chinese dance at ACDC, Kerry shared that her students often describe Chinese dance class as a ‘safe space’ where they can ‘be around others who look like me’ and ‘not feel judged.’²⁶ This experience of Chinese dance as a haven, which is also something Buhrow discusses, has tremendous psychological value for Asian Americans in the South who experience frequent racial othering in their everyday lives. Kerry told the story of one of her students who, in her parents’ words, ‘had issues socially at school, but when she came to Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, she felt so at home, and she instantly bonded with the kids.’ Kerry also added ‘This particular student was driving back and forth from Greenville, South Carolina—it’s like two hours away where she lived for a while—because that’s how much it meant to her.’²⁷ In my own experiences observing, collaborating with, and participating in Chinese dance activities in other parts of the US and Canada over the past twenty years—including in places with much larger Asian American communities such as the San Francisco Bay Area, New Jersey, Washington DC, Toronto, Houston, New York, and Vancouver—I have frequently heard Chinese dance practitioners of Asian American descent voice similar reflections about the significance of learning Chinese dance in their lives.²⁸ In these accounts, the performance of cultural long-distance nationalism becomes a way to build an Asian American identity, experience social belonging, and form meaningful friendships and community. In this context, embodying Chinese culture through dance, even when it involves repertoires that have no direct connection to Asian American experiences or social issues, still serves the needs of Asian American communities and serves as a way of expressing self and cultural identity.

Lee’s path to social justice choreography

For most of its history, ACDC served Asian American communities through this more common approach of Chinese dance as a form of cultural long-distance nationalism. In the performance programs, ACDC is introduced as follows:

Founded in 1991 by Hwee-Eng Y. Lee, the Atlanta Chinese Dance Company entertains and educates audiences on Chinese history and culture through the art of Chinese dance. The 100+ member troupe has enchanted diverse audiences through National Endowment for the Arts supported full-evening

²⁶ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

²⁷ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

²⁸ As a scholar and practitioner of Chinese dance in the United States with a strong commitment to public engagement, I follow the Chinese dance scene in North America and maintain relationships with numerous US-based Chinese dance practitioners and organisations. This has included taking classes, observing rehearsals and performances, reviewing performances and festivals, judging competitions, writing letters of support for visas and college applications, serving as a mentor or advisor, giving community lectures, serving as a grant jury member, advising PhD projects, speaking at memorial events, conducting formal and informal interviews, etc.

productions as well as community performances, educational lecture-demonstrations, and workshops for schools and universities, libraries, senior centres, museums, military bases, businesses, cultural events, and more throughout metro Atlanta and beyond. Most notably, the company helped showcase Atlanta to the world as performers in the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games and presented the ‘Chinese variation’ in the Atlanta Ballet’s production of *The Nutcracker* at the Fox Theatre for more than ten years.²⁹

Hwee-Eng Y. Lee grew up in Singapore, where she learned ballet from the age of six and also practiced Chinese dance, both of which she was teaching in Singapore by the time she was sixteen.³⁰ Similar to the United States, in the British colonies of Hong Kong, Malaya, and Singapore during the Cold War, Chinese dance was a cultural activity often pursued by PRC-aligned Chinese youth groups, as a way to organize without facing anti-communist suppression by colonial governments.³¹ Kerry explains that her mother belonged to one of these groups that took inspiration from Mao Zedong’s sayings, and it was eventually shut down because, in Kerry’s words, ‘It was very much left leaning so the government was not a fan.’³² Hwee-Eng moved to the US in 1978 and pursued undergraduate and graduate degrees in economics while continuing to teach and perform dance. By 1986 she had relocated to Atlanta with her husband and, shortly after Kerry was born, began teaching Chinese dance at the Chinese Community Center in metro Atlanta. By 1989, Hwee-Eng was organizing fundraising performances by the Organization of Chinese Americans, ‘the first formal Chinese music and dance performances in Georgia’ and in 1991, in order to have a stable group of dancers for these annual events, she founded ACDC, ‘the first Chinese dance company in Georgia to be granted 501(c)(3) non-profit status.’³³ Describing Hwee-Eng’s motivation to teach Chinese dance, Kerry states, ‘My mom had a friend and much like my parents, they wanted their kids to be connected to Chinese culture and to learn Chinese dance as an entrance point to Chinese culture. So she started teaching with only five students before founding the company and then it grew more and more.’³⁴

Explaining the performance repertoire of ACDC, Kerry describes the mainstage productions, which the company puts on once every eighteen months, as ‘2-hour full-length performances that are a mix of folk, classical, and contemporary Chinese dance with some original choreography.’³⁵ Having attended both showings of this event live in 2023 and 2024, reviewed a recording of the 2019 production, and watched a rehearsal of the 2026 production,

²⁹ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *Everyday Heroes* performance program, 2024, 7.

³⁰ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *Everyday Heroes* performance program, 2024, 5.

³¹ Emily Wilcox, ‘When folk dance was radical: Cold War yangge, World Youth Festivals, and overseas Chinese leftist culture in the 1950s and 1960s,’ *China Perspectives*, no. 1, January 2020, 33–42.

³² Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

³³ Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, *Everyday Heroes* performance program, 2024, 5.

³⁴ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

³⁵ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

I can say that most of the program corresponds to the cultural long-distance nationalism model practiced by a majority of Chinese dance companies in North America. That is, most of the show—with the exception of Kerry’s social justice choreography and, since 2023, works by the late New Jersey-based choreographer Nai-Ni Chen, for whom Kerry previously danced as a company member before she returned to ACDC—consists of dances either directly adapted from or very similar to Chinese dance choreographies originally performed by professional dance schools or companies in China. Xuejuan Dance Ensemble, a comparable Chinese dance company based in Washington, DC, whose performances I also frequent, tends to favour pieces with a stronger Chinese classical dance aesthetic, whereas ACDC leans more toward the folk. Yet, both groups, like other North American Chinese dance companies I have observed, present the standard mix of Han folk dance, ethnic minority dance, and Chinese classical dance that have constituted the Chinese dance gala structure since it was established in China in the 1950s.³⁶ Apart from its mainstage productions and community performances, ACDC also helped improve the representation of Chinese culture in ballet, by performing their own version of the ‘Chinese variation’ in the Atlanta Ballet’s annual performances of *The Nutcracker*.³⁷ ‘Historically there were stereotypes in the *divertissements*,’ Kerry explains. ‘It meant a lot to me to see Chinese culture being represented more accurately.’³⁸

Despite Hwee-Eng’s formative experiences with Chinese dance as part of a left-leaning political organisation during her youth in Singapore, she was initially hesitant when Kerry wanted to have ACDC expand its repertoire to include works dealing with contemporary social issues. Kerry’s desire to create such dances was originally inspired by her experiences working outside ACDC—first as a professional performer in modern and contemporary dance companies and then as a staff member at a non-profit that specialized in arts for social justice. Before Kerry returned to Atlanta and began working alongside her mother at ACDC in 2010, she danced professionally with two prominent Chinese American contemporary dance companies in the greater New York/New Jersey area: H.T. Chen & Dancers in 2008-2009 and Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in 2009-2010. In Atlanta, Kerry also danced with contemporary dance company gloATL in 2010-2011. From 2012 to 2018, while she was working at ACDC, Kerry had a job as a staff member at Alternate ROOTS, an organisation that fosters artistic work for social change in the US South. These experiences were formative in Kerry’s journey to becoming a social justice-oriented Chinese dance choreographer creating works on Asian American themes and to the changes she has implemented in ACDC’s performance repertoire since becoming ACDC’s co-artistic director.

In contrast to dance companies in North America that specialize in Chinese dance, in modern and contemporary dance there is a more established tradition of creating dances that

³⁶ On this structure, see Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, chapter three.

³⁷ According to Kerry, Hwee-Eng worked with Atlanta Ballet on the choreography with then artistic director John McFall.

³⁸ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

represent Asian American stories and experiences. In her dissertation ‘Wrestling with the angels: choreographing Chinese diaspora in the United States (1930s–1990s),’ Yuh-Jen Lu discusses female Chinese American modern dance choreographer Yen Lu Wong’s 1977 work *Golden Mountain*, which staged the history of Chinese immigration to the United States.³⁹ Wong, who immigrated to the US in 1958 from Hong Kong, studied modern dance with Martha Graham and Louis Horst in 1959–1963 and then staged her first evening-length modern dance performance during a year-long visit to Taiwan in 1968.⁴⁰ Upon returning to the US, Wong worked to challenge what she described as ‘a romanticized vision of Chinese tradition’ that was, in the words of Lu ‘incoherent in the wretched wake of Chinese American reality.’⁴¹ In 1972 Wong established her own company New Repertory to pursue what Lu calls Wong’s ‘quest for Self.’⁴² In 1974, Wong received US government grants from the National Endowment for Humanities and the National Endowment of Arts to develop *Golden Mountain*.⁴³ According to Lu, ‘*Golden Mountain* is the first major production of dance theatre that deals with the immigrant heritage of Chinese Americans who have shaped the course of U.S. history, and affirms the worth and presence of Chinese diaspora.’⁴⁴ It was also, Lu argues, ‘the inspirational prototype’ for Cloud Gate Dance Theater’s well-known 1978 work *Legacy*, created by Wong’s former student Lin Hwai-min, which staged the story of Chinese immigration to Taiwan.⁴⁵

H.T. Chen, the first choreographer Kerry danced for professionally in New York, was part of the same modern dance milieu as Wong and later also staged his own modern dance choreographies about Chinese American history, segments of which Kerry performed when she was in the company. Chen, who grew up in Taiwan, performed in Yen Lu Wong’s inaugural modern dance concert in Taiwan in 1968 and later in 1972 staged his own work alongside hers and that of another prominent Chinese American modern dancer Chiang Ching, who had also been part of Wong’s Taiwan production in 1968, in a concert at the University of South Florida.⁴⁶ In 1976, Chen co-founded H.T. Chen & Dancers with his wife Dian Dong, an American born Chinese, in New York Chinatown.⁴⁷ According to Kerry, performing in works by H.T. Chen & Dancers taught her important aspects of Asian American history that she had not been exposed to in school or through other avenues. She explains,

³⁹ Yuh-Jen Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels: choreographing Chinese diaspora in the United States (1930s–1990s),’ PhD diss., New York University, 2002, 239–249.

⁴⁰ Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 237–238.

⁴¹ Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 239.

⁴² Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 239.

⁴³ Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 239.

⁴⁴ Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 247.

⁴⁵ For an analysis of *Legacy*, see SanSan Kwan, *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, chapter two.

⁴⁶ Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 235–237.

⁴⁷ For more on H.T. Chen & Dancers, see Kwan, *Kinesthetic City*, chapter three.

I didn't know that history. I didn't even know about Angel Island [...] I went to Stanford, which is an hour away from Angel Island, I lived in the Asian American themed dorm for two years, and I did not know about Angel Island! [...] I knew Ellis Island but I had no clue that Angel Island was like a thing, at all. I learned that from dancing there, and I was just like WOAHH...⁴⁸

Kerry explains that lecture demonstrations were the most frequent engagements she had while performing at H.T. Chen & Dancers and that these events featured excerpts from several of Chen's works on Asian American themes. It was through Chen's work *Transparent Hinges* that she learned about Asian American detention at Angel Island. Other choreographies dealt with Chinese railroad workers, Chinese workers in a shoe factory in Massachusetts, and the Yellow Power Movement. While Nai-Ni Chen's repertoire had fewer pieces directly dealing with Asian American history, Lee's work there also involved frequent lecture demonstrations that blended performance with educational outreach. This experience crossing the boundary between Chinese dance and modern and contemporary dance broadened her understanding of what dance could be. Kerry states, 'I feel like H.T. and Nai-Ni had a really deep impact on my trajectory, because that was the first time I knew that Chinese American dance was like a thing, you know, you can do that, and it can teach you history.'

According to Kerry, it was later when she was working for Alternate ROOTS that she began to see the potential for Chinese dance to also serve as a medium for educational, social justice-oriented choreography. Initially, Kerry explains that when she joined the organisation she was interested in the intersection between arts and activism. Her role in the organisation was as a staff person working in development, not as an artist. However, through this role, she was exposed to a variety of projects in diverse fields, including dance, music, theatre, and visual arts. One piece that left a deep impression on her was an interdisciplinary artwork by a Japanese American artist Kimi Maeda that incorporated sand art and oral histories with her family members and a famous person to address the history of Japanese American incarceration in the US during World War II. 'I was struck by how she used all of these elements together to tell a story and bring awareness to social justice issues,' Kerry reflects.⁴⁹ Each year, Alternate ROOTS organized an annual conference with approximately two hundred and fifty artists and cultural organizers. It was at this event, Kerry explains, that she experienced an epiphany:

As a personal anecdote, I remember at the conference they would have this late night, kind of like an open mic. People knew that I did Chinese dance because I would talk about it casually. But, I would always be like, 'oh, you know, it's not like what you guys do at Alternate ROOTS.' In my head I was

⁴⁸ Kerry Lee, personal interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 March 2026.

⁴⁹ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

like this is this serious social justice stuff, and what does my happy ribbon dance have to do with it? So, people would ask me are you going to perform at the open mic? and I would make excuses like it's really late and I work really long hours, because it's true, but I think the real issue is that I was afraid that it didn't fit in. But I remember when I finally did perform it, it was very well received. People came up to me and they really enjoyed it. And I remember I was so emotional. I was driving home that day, and I was listening to *I Hope You Dance*, and I was just super emotional. I think one thing that made it so emotional for me was hearing this *Ribbon Dance* music that I grew up with. It's like, those of you from the ballet world may know, *The Nutcracker*. When you hear *The Nutcracker* you're like, oh my gosh, turn it off. So, for me, *Ribbon Dance* almost like got to that point. But hearing it in that particular space, in that whole week of not eating Chinese food, not seeing Chinese people, and being in the mountains in Tennessee, and then suddenly hearing that music, it just feels so comforting. And I was like, why haven't I heard this music before? And I was like, oh yeah, if anyone's going to bring this to this space, it should be me. It's kind of like my responsibility. That really resonated with me. So, it inspired the development of my dance dramas—they owe a lot of inspiration to Alternate ROOTS.⁵⁰

In one of our conversations, I asked Kerry what motivated her to choose the topics for each of her social justice choreographies. Without hesitation, she answered, 'I think relevance to the current times.'⁵¹ Before she created *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*, Kerry began her foray into works on contemporary themes by having ACDC stage two dances adapted from choreographies originally performed in China: *Migrant Workers Go to the City*, about 'the joys and sorrows of the 253 million Chinese migrant workers,' which ACDC staged in 2016; and *Chinese Mother*, about 'rural Chinese families who took in Japanese orphans in the aftermath of World War II,' which they staged in 2018.⁵² ACDC staged *Migrant Workers Go to the City* alongside *Paper Airplane Letters* about migrant workers' left behind children and an original trio by Kerry with a migrant worker mother, her left behind daughter, and the girl's grandfather called *Dreaming on the Train*. Together, the three pieces constituted a mini dance drama. Similarly, to accompany *Chinese Mother*, ACDC staged the existing work *Shanghai Girls*, and Kerry created an original dance commemorating the Nanjing Massacre, together forming a second mini dance drama. In her blog essays about these productions, Kerry explains that *Migrant Workers Go to the City* reminded her of her own experiences

⁵⁰ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

⁵¹ Kerry Lee, personal interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 March 2026.

⁵² Kerry Lee, 'Why Atlanta Chinese Dance Company's finale won't have fans or ribbons,' *Memoirs of a Chinese Dancer*, 4 August 2015, <https://www.kerryylee.com/2016/08/04/why-atlanta-chinese-dance-companys-finale-wont-have-fans-or-ribbons/>; Kerry Lee, 'Choosing love in the face of hate: remembering the Nanjing Massacre through dance,' *Memoirs of a Chinese Dancer*, 8 December 2017, <https://www.kerryylee.com/2017/12/08/remembering-the-nanjing-massacre-through-dance/>.

working as a professional dancer in New York City, while *Chinese Mother* documented an important but often forgotten event in China's history, at the same time embodying Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings about how only love can triumph over hate.⁵³ Reflecting on the significance of having ACDC stage these dances, Kerry cites a desire to challenge common representations and misunderstandings about her community. 'You see us in a certain way on stage, but behind that is an American, a human being. [...] I think, for me, I feel like these pieces humanize us.'⁵⁴ When Kerry began staging these choreographies on contemporary themes, the US was undergoing a major shift in the political landscape, with rising xenophobia emerging as a major social trend along with increased threats to the lives and wellbeing of Asian Americans. In this context, representations of Asian Americans gained increased urgency, and this was also part of what Kerry says motivated her to create *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*. 'People ask me, why do you care if people think you're American? But at the end of the day I think it's a threat to our safety if people don't think we're American. So, I think just being really frustrated with the perpetual foreigner thing and then just a desire to see Chinese American stories, a story like mine told through dance and knowing that [...] a lot of our dancers share that Chinese American experience.'⁵⁵

Choosing Chinese dance

In Kerry's reflections above, it is clear that when creating her Chinese dance social justice choreographies, she has two potentially different audiences in mind as ideal viewers. On the one hand, there are those primarily non-Chinese, non-Asian American audiences who may have misconceptions about Asian Americans and Chinese people—seeing them as perpetual foreigners or as dehumanized representations, for example. On the other hand, there are Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans who can learn about their own history through Kerry's works and, through them, see their own stories or stories like theirs represented on stage. Within the research on Asian diaspora dance in majority white countries, scholars have frequently noted the difference in demographics between the audiences of different dance styles. Specifically, modern and contemporary dance tends to attract more predominantly white audiences, while dance styles rooted in Asian cultural aesthetics attract more audiences of predominantly Asian heritage. In her study of South Asian contemporary dance in the UK, for example,

Anusha Kedhar theorizes what she calls a distinction between South Asian community dance, which tends to be created by and for South Asian communities themselves, and South Asian contemporary dance, which is created by South Asian

⁵³ Lee, 'Why Atlanta Chinese Dance Company's finale won't have fans or ribbons'; Lee, 'Choosing love in the face of hate.'

⁵⁴ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

⁵⁵ Kerry Lee, personal interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 March 2026.

choreographers for predominantly white audiences.⁵⁶ This distinction, Kedhar shows, impacts not only the demographics of audiences but also access to capital, institutional space, and cultural prestige, among other resources, with community dance in general being less funded, less visible in white-dominated arts institutions, and less valued as high art. In her analysis of Yen Lu Wong, H.T. Chen, and other Chinese American modern dancers of their generation, Yuh-Jen Lu points out a similar separation within Chinese diaspora dance in the US, which was associated with class. This perceived distinction, she argues, led to a separation between ‘ghettoized art productions [...limited to] the walls of ethnic enclaves’ and ‘the works of Chinese intellectuals [...] attracting greater funding.’ According to Lu, ‘Unfortunately, the packaging of class difference reproduced what Clive Banes (sic) called the major and minor leagues in the then white mainstream.’⁵⁷

This difference in the economic, demographic, and social positioning of different dance styles makes Kerry’s pursuit of social justice choreography within the realm of Chinese dance—as opposed to, for example, modern/contemporary dance or ballet—especially significant. In her reflections on *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*, Kerry explains that as a young dancer growing up in Atlanta, even though she grew up dancing in a Chinese dance company that her mother directed, she nevertheless placed higher value on ballet than on Chinese dance. Her preference for ballet, as she now understands it, was a result in part of the greater economic resources ballet commanded compared to Chinese dance, though this was not something she consciously reflected on until later. Kerry explains,

In the US as a Chinese American, I feel like ballet where I was growing up was really propped up and Chinese dance was, as you mentioned in one of your piece of writing, Chinese dance was dismissed as culture, not really seen as high art.⁵⁸ So I kind of grew up with that mindset and I thought that Chinese dance was the lesser of the two things. It wasn’t until I was older that I realised a lot of that has to do with resources, right. So if you compare let’s say the Atlanta Ballet to the Atlanta Chinese Dance Company, you’re talking about a multi-million dollar organisation versus you know a much smaller budget, but to a kid you don’t really understand that. I was like oh, Atlanta Ballet does all this stuff, what’s wrong with the Chinese dance world.⁵⁹

From this perspective, it is meaningful that one of the major themes Kerry deals with thematically in *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment*—her first major Chinese dance social justice choreography on Asian American issues—is her personal struggle to learn to value, embrace,

⁵⁶ Anusha Kedhar, *Flexible Bodies: British South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁵⁷ Lu, ‘Wrestling with the angels,’ 234.

⁵⁸ Kerry is referring here to Emily Wilcox, ‘Foreword: A Manifesto for Demarginalization,’ in *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond*, ed. Shih-Ming Li Chang and Lynn Frederiksen (Wesleyan University Press, 2016), ix-xxiii.

⁵⁹ Kerry Lee, dance showing and public interview with the author, Williamsburg Regional Library, 2023.

and be proud of Chinese dance. Within the piece, Chinese dance symbolizes Kerry's Chinese heritage, such that her embrace of Chinese dance is a metaphor for her self-acceptance and cultural pride as a Chinese American. Within the cultural context of the US dance world, Kerry's choice to embrace Chinese dance not just personally but also as the medium for her choreography comes with consequences: it consigns her work and Atlanta Chinese dance company as a whole to the marginalized realm of 'ethnic dance' or 'culturally specific dance'; it means that her company dancers are amateurs and not professionals; it limits her access to funding and visibility within white-dominated performance spaces and institutions; and it attracts audiences who come primarily from within the Chinese diaspora community. At the same time, by insisting on working within the medium of Chinese dance, Kerry is also doing something more innovative artistically and having a greater impact within the community she serves. As Kerry frequently points out, one of the goals of her social justice choreography is to educate Asian Americans about their own history and to present stories that Chinese American dancers like herself specifically can see themselves in. From this perspective, working within the medium of Chinese dance allows her to better achieve this goal.

The success of Kerry's choreographic work has also allowed her to bring Chinese dance to new audiences. This too has fulfilled Kerry's self-professed sense of responsibility, as one of the few Chinese dance practitioners who has been able to move between different artistic milieus, that 'if anyone's going to bring this to this space, it should be me.' Kerry has received numerous invitations to stage her social justice choreography in arts conservatories and university dance programs on students who would otherwise not be exposed to Chinese dance. For example, she set a three-minute excerpt from *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment* on students at the Charleston County School of the Arts High School, a longer section of *Ribbon Dance of Empowerment* on students in the dance program at Agnes Scott College, and *Rising Against Asian Hate* at DeKalb School of the Arts. DeKalb School of the Arts and two other schools also bring her in every year to teach a new group of students a Chinese scene for *The Nutcracker* involving fan dances and ribbon dances. In addition, she has taught Chinese dance workshops for other university dance programs such as Kennesaw State and William & Mary, and she was commissioned to create a Chinese dance and hip hop fusion choreography for a dance program in an IB high school. One reason Kerry says she values these collaborations is that they provide opportunities to lessen the marginalization of Chinese dance by getting it into the dance curricula of mainstream dance programs. Pan American Chinese Dance Alliance, the organisation that hosts Taoli World, the major Chinese dance competition in North America, also invited Kerry to set *Rising Against Asian Hate* on dancers in its Taoli World summer program.⁶⁰ In this way, Kerry has also introduced her Chinese dance social justice choreography to dancers in other Chinese dance schools across the US and North America, potentially fostering future developments within the Chinese dance field.

⁶⁰ Kerry Lee, personal interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 1, 2026.

Conclusion

Much of the scholarship on Asian diaspora dance focuses on how dancers of Asian descent negotiate the gaze of predominately white audiences or how predominantly white audiences and critics misunderstand and stereotype work by Asian diaspora artists.⁶¹ Relatively less attention has been paid to how Asian diaspora dance speaks to and is received by specifically Asian diaspora audiences.⁶² Yet, work such as Kerry's that is created primarily within, by, and for diaspora communities calls for such attention. Kerry's work falls into the category I have called 'Sinophone dance,' meaning dance created using the techniques and aesthetics of Chinese dance but by choreographers working outside or on the margins of China and reflecting local issues and concerns.⁶³ Similar to Sinophone literature, which is written in the Chinese language, Sinophone dance assumes and indeed requires cultural literacy in its expressive medium. In this sense, the medium requires that its main intended audience is other members of the Chinese diaspora, or audiences with the cultural knowledge necessary to understand and appreciate Chinese dance. In this sense, it is an especially appropriate medium to reach and impact Chinese diaspora audiences. At the same time, like Sinophone literature, Sinophone dance has the potential to circulate in and reach a broader artistic community of diaspora audiences versed in Chinese dance beyond its immediate location. While Kerry's Chinese dance social justice choreography is Sinophone dance, it is also accessible enough to be legible to audiences who do not possess specialized Chinese dance knowledge. In other words, audiences can appreciate the messages embedded in these choreographies without having a sophisticated knowledge of Chinese dance aesthetics or even Chinese dance itself as an artistic practice. The extreme accessibility that characterizes Kerry's choreography thus makes it capable of serving the multiple audiences she envisions and indeed fulfilling the dual purposes of challenging misunderstandings about Asian Americans while showing Asian American stories in ways that resonate with and serve Asian American audiences.

⁶¹ See, for example, Joan L. Erdman, 'Performance as translation: Uday Shankar in the West,' *The Drama Review: TDR*, 31: 1, April 1987, 64–88; Ellen Gerdes, 'Mediated meditations: choreographies of Shen Wei and Kun-Yang Lin,' in Yutian Wong, ed., *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016, (145-173); Shobana Jeyasingh, 'Getting fff the Orient Express,' in Giersdorf, Jens Richard and Wong, Yutian, eds., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, Third edition, Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018, (137-143); Okju Son, 'Korean dance beyond Koreanness: Park Yeong-in in the German modern dance scene,' in Katherine Mezur and Emily Wilcox, eds., *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020, (98-114); Casey Avaunt, 'Impermeable bodies: women who lion dance in Boston's Chinatown,' *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 12: 2, April 2021, 149–63. More recent examples include Ann R. David, *Ram Gopal: Interweaving Histories of Indian Dance*, London: Bloomsbury, 2024; Tara Rodman, *Fantasies of Ito Michio*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024.

⁶² For studies that do take up this question, see Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*, University of Michigan Press, 2020; J. Lorenzo Perillo, *Choreographing in Color: Filipinos, Hip-Hop, and the Cultural Politics of Euphemism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁶³ Emily Wilcox, 'Written out: dance and the Sinophone,' in Howard Chiang and Shu-mei Shih, eds. *Sinophone Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2024, (73-88).

In her landmark 2010 book *Choreographing Asian America*, Yutian Wong calls for a greater attention to form, not just politics, in Asian American performance. She writes,

Asian American critique of Asian American performance is often a championing of radical political ideals without regard to artistic innovation [...] It is true that many Asian American performance artists do address issues of racism, sexism, and other forms of social oppression, but it is still a disservice to evaluate such work purely on content without consideration of form. [...] For this reason I believe that it is important to look at Asian American performance not as the bounded entity presented some evening at a particular time, but as a social space in which Asian American artists are grappling with questions of form, content, and process as markers of identity.⁶⁴

The social justice choreography of Kerry Lee and Atlanta Chinese Dance Company is innovative and politically provocative in the content it presents—a Chinese American dancer's path to accepting herself and her cultural heritage through dance, the possibilities of cross-racial solidarity, Asian American activism in the wake of Vincent Chin's murder, and the stories of little-known female Chinese American social justice advocates in history. Beyond their content, these works also enact a major intervention in form. That is, by employing the techniques, props, and aesthetics of Chinese dance in new ways to tell Asian American stories, Lee creatively reworks the form of Chinese dance itself, expanding its possibilities as an expressive artistic medium for Asian diaspora communities.

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⁶⁴ Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2010, 6, 8.