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Factory Girls and the Dancing Queen: The Gender Politics of Social Dance during China's Early Economic Reforms

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Abstract

This essay examines the gendered politics of social dance and its relationship to the wider societal changes of China's early economic reforms from 1978 to the end of the 1980s. It considers social dance a symbol of contested modernities during the initial decade of the reform period. Through the politics of dancing, this article reveals how state policies that repressed social dance during the early 1980s were part of a larger project to establish a hegemonic modernity in which social order was partly secured through the protection and regulation of female sexuality. Paying attention to class and economic distribution, this essay shows how, after the legalization of dancing in the second half of the 1980s, young women workers used social dance to express their discontents toward China's Mao-era state factory system. The dance hall allowed these women to search for an alternate modernity that provided new sources of self-esteem, social prestige, and upward mobility, fueling a hope to transcend the limitations of an existing work unit system. Using state directives, propaganda materials, and interviews with former women workers from a state-owned steel mill in Chengdu, I consider how conflicting visions of 1980s Chinese modernity unfolded inside urban dance halls and state-owned factories, spelling new social and personal dilemmas for women coming of age during the first decade of the economic reforms.

Keywords

economic reforms – dance halls – social dance – women workers – modernity

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Introduction

I know love is like running water (*ming zhidao aiqing xiang liushui* 明知道愛情像流水)
Who cares whom he loves (*guanta qu aishei* 管他去愛誰)
I want wine and coffee (*wo yao meijiu jia kafei* 我要美酒加咖啡)
Cup after cup (*yibei you yibei* 一杯又一杯)

The wistful 1973 love song by Teresa Teng "Wine and Coffee" (*Meijiu jia kafei* 美酒加咖啡), played by live bands to the 4/4 beats of the tango, was a popular tune that flowed out of dance halls in mainland China in the 1980s.[1] These dance halls, a novel entertainment space that appeared with the onset of the 1978 economic reforms, attracted young urbanites who sought thrills, romance, and a glimpse of a glamorous, modern world to which the socialist state was opening its doors for the first time in decades. Wine and coffee, stylish Western beverages that few who grew up in China's austere socialist command economy enjoyed, symbolized the allure of new commodities, lifestyles, and possibilities for young people in the rapidly changing 1980s.

This essay examines the gendered politics of social dance and its relationship to wider societal changes of China's early economic reforms from 1978 to the end of the 1980s. It considers the transformations within the Chinese economy and the undoing of an urban working class during the reforms and uncovers how the dance hall engaged the desires of young working-class women in the context of such historical ruptures. Bringing together several disparate elements of life in China in the 1980s – the appearance of the dance hall, tectonic shifts in the structuring categories of everyday life, and the hopes of living a fulfilling life for young working-class women – this article reveals how dancing served as a symbol of contested modernities during the initial decade of China's market-oriented reforms.

I draw on the extensive literature on 1980s Chinese modernity to analyze how dancing represented competing visions of modernity between the state and women workers from a state-owned factory. Lisa Rofel and Wang Hui have analyzed the pursuit of modernity in China during the 1980s as a productive process by which historical notions of the un-modern were constructed and

1 Hu Xiaoshi 胡小石, "Yi 'heri jun zai lai' zhilei" 議 '何日君再來' 之類, *Heilongjiang qingnian* 黑龍江青年 6 (1980), 11. Teresa Teng (1953-95) was a famous Taiwanese pop singer who gained a mass following in mainland China starting in the late 1970s. Her music continues to be associated with the cultural milieu of the early economic reforms.

became objects in need of change.[2] The un-modern represented the socialist past, and the modern meant creating a new society focused on economic growth under the guidance of the Communist Party. State power in its pursuit of modernity during the 1980s was fixated on the policing of boundaries, between the past and the present, between activities that contributed to the strengthening of the nation and those practices potentially detrimental to it, and between good and bad reform-era "modern girls."[3] In asserting that there were multiple modernities in China during the 1980s, I analyze how different social actors were making sense of the tremendous changes taking place in China during the reforms and how these expressions did not always fit the mold of a unitary, Western-centric conception of a modern society. Works by Rofel and Wang Hui, as well as Arif Dirlik, have problematized the universality of Western modernity in the context of China.[4] However, their critiques often prioritize cultural and intellectual life over issues of class and economic distribution.

This essay examines how the experience of a working-class woman and her desire to dance reflected a set of economic and social discontents produced by China's Mao-era state factory system. New gender roles and performances in the 1980s enabled some women workers to access fantasies of material abundance and social visibility in ways unavailable to them within the state-owned factories where they lived and worked. The conflicting visions of modernity between young working-class women who danced and a state that sought to police their dancing illustrate the localized and embodied politics of 1980s womanhood and working-class leisure. During the 1980s, gender emerged as a prominent sign under which a state vision of modernity was established. The government's promotion of naturalized gender discourse gained widespread social appeal and converged with the state's project to stimulate the One Child Policy and to cultivate in young women a desire for marriage and family life.[5] The state's ideological turn toward an embrace of natural femininity in the 1980s also meant re-imagining a women's proper place in society, encouraging young

2 Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 29-30; Wang Hui, "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," trans. Rebecca Karl, in Xudong Zhang, ed., *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 166-98.

3 Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities*, 254-55.

4 For a review of discussions on Chinese modernity during the reform period, see Arif Dirlik, "Modernity as History: Post-Revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity," *Social History* 27.1 (2002): 16-39.

5 Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities*, 217-56.

women to see the home as a desirable site of labor and self-identification.[6] Such a re-orientation of female aspirations coincided with a stagnation in urban employment opportunities for young people in the state sector, still a major economic engine of Chinese cities during the 1980s, and discriminatory hiring practices young female job applicants experienced at state-owned enterprises.[7] At the same time, there was a proliferation of gendered images from the capitalist West, which portrayed glamorous female white-collar workers and celebrities who represented new avenues of self-fulfillment. Such a contradictory landscape of gendered imaginations stimulated young women to craft their own ideas of modern womanhood, ones that were influenced by both state propaganda and popular culture. The state sought to establish a gendered 1980s modernity built on the contribution of a new generation of patriotic and family-oriented young women. In contrast, working-class young women searched for a modernity that provided new sources of self-esteem, social prestige, and upward mobility. This alternate modernity held the promise of helping them transcend the limitations of an existing work unit system. These conflicting visions of 1980s Chinese modernity unfolded inside urban dance halls and state-owned factories, spelling new social and personal dilemmas for women coming of age during the first decade of the reform period.

This essay first establishes the larger social background and evolving governmental policies surrounding dance halls and dance parties, focusing on the politics and social meanings associated with social dance or *jiaoyi wu* 交誼舞. Then it draws on factory newspapers published biweekly by the state-owned enterprise Chengdu Wufeng gangguanchang 成都無縫鋼管廠 (Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory), as well as interviews with women workers from the factory, to examine how the politics of social dance, gender, and the contested modernities of the 1980s unfolded within one industrial community in southwestern China.[8]

To Dance or Not to Dance?

Social dance was not always an anathema in revolutionary China. It had been accepted and welcomed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from the

6 Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 103-105.

7 Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 243-48.

8 The names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

1930s to the early 1950s, and the Party did much to propagate social dance as a working-class pastime.[9] Emily Wilcox's publications have shown that the CCP utilized dance performances to promote socialist values and present a positive image of China on the world stage.[10] Specifically, the art of Chinese dance was cultivated by the Party-state as a cultural expression of the patriotic cohesion of Chinese people and the transformative power of the revolution.[11] But during the Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957, social dance was denounced. State criticisms of the activity often referenced how social dance encouraged young people's excessive desire for dating and romance, as well as illicit sex, and thus diverted their attention from more serious matters such as socialist construction. References to unwanted pregnancies among young women as a result of relationships forged in the dance hall designated the pregnant body of an unmarried woman to be a symbol of the moral stain cast by loose behavior among youth in the dance hall.[12] By the end of the 1950s, social dance was strictly prohibited by the government, and those caught dancing were often labeled "rightists." Nevertheless, an underground dance culture persisted with people gathering at secret home dance parties from the late 1950s through much of the 1970s.[13] In 1976, social dance began to be rehabilitated in official discourse. Most notably, the CCP brought social dance into public view at the 1979 Spring Festival Gala, the first celebration of its kind after years of muted state observance of the holiday during the Cultural Revolution. The televised fete showed attractive youth waltzing the evening away in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.[14] As Min Wang has suggested, during the first years of the

9 Hung-yok Ip, *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China, 1921-1949: Leaders, Heroes and Sophisticates* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 143; Yifan Shi, *Living with the Party: How Leisure Shaped a New China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 42-46.

10 Emily E. Wilcox, "Beyond Internal Orientalism: Dance and Nationality Discourse in the Early People's Republic of China, 1949-1954," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75. 2 (2016): 363-86; Emily Wilcox, "The Postcolonial Blind Spot: Chinese Dance in the Era of Third Worldism, 1949-1965," *positions: east asia critique* 26. 4 (2018): 781-815; 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* 120.1 (2020): 33-42.

11 Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 6-8.

12 James Farrer and Andrew David Field, *Shanghai Nightscapes: A Nocturnal Biography of a Global City* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 44-45.

13 Farrer and Field, *Shanghai Nightscapes*, 44-45.

14 Ma Jun 馬軍, "Wufeng chongfu: xin shiqi Shanghai wutingye de licheng" 舞風重拂：新時期上海舞廳業的歷程, in Yu Keming 俞克明, Gu Ming 顧明, Xu Jiangang 徐健剛, and Wu Xianghua 吳祥華, eds., *Xiandai Shanghai yanjiu luncong no. 7* 現代上海研究論叢 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2010), 98; Song Tiehang 宋鐵航, Li Jing 李靖, and Liu Tieguo 劉鐵國, *Xinling de licheng: cong yijiuqiliu nian zoulai de Zhongguo*

economic reforms, the Spring Festival Gala and the events it included constituted an important indicator of the Party's changing ideological outlook and the idealized social relations it sought to promote.[15] The 1979 Spring Festival Gala and its inclusion of social dance gave implicit permission to the rest of the populace to dance, and public enthusiasm for dancing erupted overnight.

In cities across the country, people danced in parks, plazas, on the street, and in their homes.[16] At the same time, social dance became a divisive topic of conversation, and many of the same criticisms leveled against it during the 1950s resurfaced, namely the association between social dance and improper sex. News editorials published in the *People's Daily* in 1979 tried to clarify how social dance might be a healthy hobby when enjoyed in moderation. The article *Wo dui wuhui de kanfa* 我對舞會的看法 (My thoughts on dance parties) advised that within work units, dancing is acceptable if it does not disturb production activities. The author also proposed that cadres should monitor dance parties and prevent *zuofeng henbu zhengpai de ren* 作風很不正派的人 (people who behave improperly) from participating, a term commonly deployed to describe those who were sexually promiscuous.[17] Another article, based on letters to the newspaper's editorial board, emphasized how social dance might help enliven the limited social life of state-owned factory employees. The author stated that social dance could facilitate healthy matchmaking, in which "male workers in heavy industry and female workers in textile mills" might get to know one another.[18] As soon as social dancing was reintroduced into public life in the late 1970s, people immediately connected it with matchmaking, romance, and sex. While the state's initial permission for Chinese people to dance signaled a shift in political winds, the Party wavered in its assessment of the acceptability of social dance if its popularity brought new, potential sources of chaos and confusion in society.

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qingnian 心靈的歷程：從一九七六年走來的中國青年 (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1988), 85; Ming'ai Zhang, "Great Hall of the People," China.org.cn, November 20, 2008, http://www.china.org.cn/china/features/content_16799772.htm.

15 Min Wang, "Between the Past and the Future: The Rise of Nationalist Discourse at the 1983 CCTV Spring Festival Gala," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 23.2 (2022): 203-19.

16 Chen Yu 陳煜, *Zhongguo shenghuo jiyi: Jianguo 65 zhounian minsheng wangshi* 中國生活記憶：建國65週年民生往事 (Beijing: Zhongguo qinggongye chubanshe, 2014), 175; Farrer and Field, *Shanghai Nightscapes*, 49.

17 Xiao Li 肖黎, "Wo dui wuhui de kanfa" 我對舞會的看法, *Renmin ribao* 人民日報, April 18, 1979.

18 "Yao guanxin zhigong de yeyu wenhua shenghuo" 要關心職工的業餘文化生活, *Renmin ribao* 人民日報, September 22, 1979.

Social Dance and Spiritual Pollution

By the early 1980s, a wave of ideological pushback against cultural liberalization was on the horizon, and social dance became one of the issues targeted for control. As Julian Gewirtz's work has shown, within the Communist Party, how best to mediate the sweeping cultural transformations during the reforms was fiercely debated among top Party officials.[19] Some conservative leaders, such as Deng Liqun 鄧力群 (1915-2015), argued for serious political action to address Western ideas and cultural practices that were taking hold in China, especially with regard to *jingshen wuran* 精神汙染 (spiritual pollution) from the capitalist West.[20] Other top-ranking officials, including Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915-89) and Zhao Ziyang 趙紫陽 (1919-2005), advocated for greater tolerance on the cultural front, arguing that the state needed to focus on economic development without the disruptions wrought by sweeping ideological campaigns.[21]

State crackdowns on social dance starting in 1980 demonstrate how the idea that social dance was harmful rested on the connection between dancing and inappropriate sexual behavior. As Harriet Evans points out, the 1980s was a period of renewed official vigilance regarding female sexuality, which accompanied the growing numbers of commercialized images of the feminized body and social contexts in which female sexual innocence was perceived to be threatened.[22] The CCP's efforts to police dancing illustrate the ways in which sexuality, with emphasis on "the female as the main agent of sexual morality," was embedded in the state's conception of social stability itself.[23]

Starting in 1980, the government issued a series of decrees restricting social dance in public spaces. In these official pronouncements, its concern with sexual morality was omnipresent. In June 1980, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Culture released the *Guanyu qudi yingyexing wuhui he gongongchangsuo zifa wuhui de tongzhi* 關於取締營業性舞會和公共場所自發舞會的通知 (Notice on the prohibition of ballroom businesses and voluntary dance parties in public spaces), prohibiting all dancing in public and dance halls, except those that were officially approved and served only foreigners. The document blamed dancing for creating conditions in which inappropriate

19 Julian Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), 37-64.

20 Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back*, 45; Thomas B. Gold, "Just in Time!: China Battles Spiritual Pollution on the Eve of 1984," *Asian Survey* 24.9 (1984): 947-74.

21 Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back*, 49-54.

22 Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 110.

23 Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China*, 110.

sexual behaviors multiplied, including "dancing that is cheap and vulgar" (*wuzi diji yongsu* 舞姿低級庸俗) and dancing that "offends public morals" (*shangfeng baisu* 傷風敗俗). According to the law, social dance parties also made women more sexually vulnerable, and it cited "indecent assault and humiliation of women" (*weixie wuru funü* 猥褻侮辱婦女) as a common occurrence.[24] In a 1982 Tianjin decree prohibiting social dance, officials stated that dance parties "obstruct family relations" and lead to "arguments between the husband and wife," suggesting that dancing caused extramarital affairs that undermined the stability of the family unit.[25]

By 1983, two large-scale campaigns culminated in profound social paranoia about the ills of social dance. They led to severe consequences for individuals whose dancing was determined to be lewd and/or led to illicit sexual affairs: *Yanli daji xingshi fanzui huodong* 嚴厲打擊刑事犯罪活動 (Hard strike against criminal activities) and the *Qingchu jingshen wuran* 清除精神汙染 (Campaign to eliminate spiritual pollution). The *Yanli daji xingshi fanzui huodong* campaign, abbreviated as *yanda* 嚴打, was a national crackdown on crime through an intensification of policing, a rapid increase in arrests, and the meting out of severe punishments.[26] The *Qingchu jingshen wuran* originally focused on regulating artists and intellectuals and their overly welcoming attitude toward Western ideas but soon spread to all areas of daily life for ordinary people, including fashion and leisure activities. Party cadres criticized individuals for wearing trendy clothes and makeup, reading erotic fiction, and listening to popular songs from Hong Kong.[27] Both of these campaigns were state attempts at clarifying a hegemonic vision of 1980s modernity, one that permitted

24 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo gong'an bu 中華人民共和國公安部 and Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wenhua bu 中華人民共和國文化部, "Guanyu qudi yingyexing wuhui he gongong changsuo zifa wuhui de tongzhi" 關於取締營業性舞會和公共場所自發舞會的通知, June 14, 1980, in Jilin sheng wenhuaju bangongshi 吉林省文化局辦公室, ed., *Jilin sheng wenhua ju wenjian huibian: 1978-1981 nian* 吉林省文化局文件彙編 1978-1981 (Changchun: Jilin sheng wenhuaju bangongshi, 1982), 256.

25 Sun Bo 孫波 and Guo Rui 郭睿, *Difang lifa yanjiu* 地方立法研究 (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 2017), 149.

26 While the Communist Party's official narrative on the Strike Hard campaign focuses on the dramatic rise in crime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, scholars have disputed this portrayal and instead argued that the Strike Hard Campaign revolved around establishing an appearance of social stability to ensure the successful implementation of the economic reforms. Susan Trevaskes, *Policing Serious Crime in China: From "Strike Hard" to "Kill Fewer"* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 17-18; Børge Bakken, "Moral Panics, Crime Rates and Harsh Punishment in China," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 37.1 (2004): 67-89; Harold Miles Tanner, *Strike Hard! Anti-Crime Campaigns and Chinese Criminal Justice, 1979-1985* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1999).

27 Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back*, 35.

increased exchange with the West and encouraged economic development, but did so with a conviction to retain the moral order and collectivist social cohesion commanded by the Party-state.

These campaigns also deepened the state's early association between social dance and improper sex by connecting social dance with the crime of "hooliganism" (*liumang zui* 流氓罪). Inspired by their Soviet counterparts, Chinese lawmakers first began developing the legal concept of hooliganism in the 1950s, but the word "hooliganism" was not officially entered into the code of *xingfa* 刑法 (criminal law) until 1979.[28] Core to the concept of "hooliganism" in reform-era Chinese law, defined as acts that violate public morality, was the emphasis on inappropriate sexual engagements. As Harold Tanner writes, during the early reforms, "one of the functions of the offense of hooliganism was to serve as an instrument for the regulation of sexuality."[29]

How social dance, when determined to be associated with hooligan behavior, resulted in calamitous consequences for the individuals involved may be seen through the famous case of Ma Yanqin 馬燕秦. Ma was a divorced restaurant employee in Sha'anxi caught organizing dance parties in her apartment. According to journalistic accounts published in the 2000s, she was arrested and convicted of hosting hooligan (*liumang* 流氓) dance parties, abetting and instigating crimes, and having illicit affairs (*luangao nannü guanxi* 亂搞男女關係). She was also accused and convicted of facilitating the sexual abuse (*wannong* 玩弄) of her own daughters by hooligan men who attended her parties.[30] According to a published interview with a former chemical plant

28 Harold M. Tanner, "The Offense of Hooliganism and The Moral Dimension of China's Pursuit of Modernity, 1979-1996," *Twentieth-Century China* 26.1 (2000), 1-40, and see pages 10-11. For studies on "hooligans" during the 1950s, see Y. Yvon Wang, "Heroes, Hooligans, and Knights-Errant: Masculinities and Popular Media in the Early People's Republic of China," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China*, 19 (2017): 316-56; Liu Yajuan, "Shanghai 'A-fei': The Rolling Logic of Discourse and Grassroots Practice (1949-1965)," trans. Matthew Galway and Liu Yajuan, *Revisiting the Revolution*, 1 (2022): 1-38.

29 Tanner, "The Offense of Hooliganism," 13.

30 According to the judge who oversaw Ma's case, the Strike Hard campaign significantly shortened the time window during which each case was prosecuted, and most of the accused did not have legal counsel. Much of the evidence in Ma's case came from her own confessions, which she offered so readily that her prosecutors suspected she was mentally unstable. Regarding the accusation that she facilitated the sexual abuse of her daughters, a chemical plant worker interviewed recalls that one of Ma's teenage daughters had a boyfriend at the time who also attended Ma's parties, and their intimate behaviors might have been consensual. The veracity of these events is now impossible to assess. However, all those involved in overseeing Ma's case agree that she was unfairly punished as a result of the *yanda* campaign. See Yang Shiyang 楊時暘, "'Liumang da'an' shi zenyang liancheng de" "流氓大案" 是怎樣煉成的, *Zhengfu fazhi* 政府法制, 27 (2009): 30-31.

worker who attended a dance party at Ma's home, Ma's supposed hooligan gatherings took place in her bare 18-square-meter apartment, where the bed had to be leaned against the wall to make room for dancing. The partygoers danced the two-step to the radio turned to the lowest volume until four in the morning. No illicit sex occurred, and the eight participants involved were four monogamous couples.[31] As a result of such parties and the timing of Ma's arrest in 1983, Ma Yanqin and three others associated with the case were sentenced to death and executed. The chemical plant worker was sentenced to life in prison, later commuted three times to a total of seventeen years.[32] Such severe punishments were common during the Strike Hard campaign.[33] The state's rhetoric about the dangerous sexual offenses found in cases of "hooliganism" corresponds to its language about the capacity of social dance to instigate unacceptable behavior. The threat of errant sexuality was reaffirmed as a prominent dimension of regulating social dance during the early 1980s, and women's sexuality was at once an object that induced inappropriate desire and one that demanded the state's special protection.

Losing the Fight against Dancing

State policies against social dance began to relax in 1984, after the end of the *Qingchu jingshen wuran yundong* 清除精神污染運動 (Campaign to eliminate spiritual pollution) earlier that year, signifying a limited defeat of the conservative faction within the Communist Party. What replaced the central state's concerns about the contaminating effects of Western liberal values and cultural influences was a potential backlash against the reforms that had been carried out, making a "leftist" resurgence domestically the primary target of policymaking.[34] Another contributing factor for the central state to start

31 Yang Shiyang, "'Liumang da'an' shi zenyang liancheng de," 30-31.

32 Yang Shiyang, "'Liumang da'an' shi zenyang liancheng de," 30-31.

33 Over a million people were arrested between August 1983 and October 1984; about 975,000 were prosecuted, and more than 24,000 received the death sentence. "Yanda zhengce de qianshijinsheng" "嚴打" 政策的前世今生, *Zhongguo xingshi falü wang* 中國刑事法律網, July 1, 2010. http://www.criminallaw.com.cn/article/default.asp?id=4300.

34 In the conception of the CCP during the mid-1980s, "leftist" meant those who challenged the reform program, especially individuals who were overly cautious about the radical embrace of market economics during the 1980s and local communities which resisted the changes brought by the reforms. Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 166-167. David Zweig, "Opposition to Change in Rural China: The System of Responsibility and People's Communes," *Asian Survey* 23.7 (1983): 879-900.

legalizing social dance was its failure to fully inhibit dancing and the prevailing public opinion that social dance was an innocuous activity.[35] The central state's *Guanyu jiaqiang wuhui guanli wenti de tongzhi* 關於加強舞會管理問題的通知 (Notice on strengthening the management of dancing parties), released in October 1984, stated that dancing was not to be banned but regulated and limited. As a result, four state-run dance halls opened in Beijing, permitting dancing for foreign tourists and businesspeople, overseas Chinese, and Chinese people brought to the dance hall by overseas Chinese.[36] Other dance halls, many sponsored by local governments, also began to appear. Seven new dance halls were registered with the local government in Guangzhou, followed by five more the next year.[37] By October 1985, the city of Tianjin had 56 state-registered dance halls in operation.[38] A broad Party acceptance that social dance was to be a part of everyday life in China came in 1986 when the famous writer Wang Meng 王蒙 (1934-) became the Minister of Culture. Wang's stance toward social dance for the public was one of positive guidance rather than punitive control.[39] In 1987, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Public Security, and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce jointly released the statement *Guanyu gaijin wuhui guanli wenti de tongzhi* 關于改進舞會管理問題的通知 (Notice regarding issues surrounding the improvement of dance party management) announcing that the establishment of dance halls was legal and work units were allowed to host internal dance parties.[40]

35 Qian Wang, "Dancing Desire, Dancing Revolution: Sexuality and the Politics of Disco in China since the 1980s," in Flora Pitrolo and Mark Zubak, eds., *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s, Disco Heterotopias* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 151-72, and see page 160; Farrer and Field, *Shanghai Nightscapes*, 49.

36 Qian Wang, "Dancing Desire, Dancing Revolution," 160. Tianjin shi wenhuaju 天津市文化局 and Tianjin shi gong'anju 天津市公安局, "Tianjin shi wenhuaju, Tianjin shi gong'anju guanyu yinfa 'Tianjin shi wuhui guanli zanxing banfa' ji jianli shi wuhui guanli bangongshi de tongzhi" 天津市文化局、天津市公安局關於印發《天津市舞會管理暫行辦法》及建立市舞會管理辦公室的通知, *Tianjin tongzhi – wenhua yishu zhi* 天津通志-文化藝術志 (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2007), 1068.

37 Guangzhou shi difangzhi bianxiu weiyuanhui 廣州市地方誌編纂委員會, *Guangzhou shi zhi juan shiliu* 廣州市誌卷十六 (Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe, 1995), 430-431.

38 Tianjinshi difangzhi bianxiu weiyuanhui bangongshi 天津市地方誌編修委員會辦公室 and Tianjinshi wenhuaju 天津市文化局, *Tianjin tongzhi – wenhua yishu zhi* 天津通誌-文化藝術誌 (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2007), 899.

39 Wang Meng 王蒙, "Wang Meng zuoke qiangqiang, jiangshu 'yigeren de guojia riji,'" 王蒙做客鏘鏘誌講述 "一個人的國家日記," interview by Dou Wentao 窦文濤 and Xu Zidong 許子東, Qiangqiang sanrenxing 鏘鏘三人行, *Fenghuang weishi* 鳳凰衛視, July 8, 2008. http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/qqsrx/200807/0708_1649_640347.shtml.

40 Wenhuabu 文化部, Gong'anbu 公安部, and Guojia gongshangju 國家工商局, "Wenhuabu, Gong'anbu, Guojia gongshangju guanyu gaijin wuhui guanli wenti de tongzhi" 文化部、公安部、國家工商局關于改進舞會管理問題的通知, February 16, 1987;

The *tongzhi* 通知 (notice) stated that social dance could be a valuable part of Chinese people's lives. It affirmed social dance as an appropriate leisure activity of China's "socialist commodity economy" (*shehui zhuyi shangpin jingji* 社會主義商品經濟).[41] With these decrees, social dance, which many continued to enjoy despite state policing in the early 1980s, was suddenly free of its worse connotations. Official discourse shifted from antipathy to measured encouragement.

The Spread of Urban Dance Halls

Legal dance halls which appeared during this period ranged from upscale settings that served foreign guests to small neighborhood venues accessible to average urbanites. Dance halls typically operated in the afternoons and evenings and charged a fee for entrance from 1.5 to 5 RMB.[42] Each ticket came with a free cup of tea, and visitors were allowed to sit at one of the many tables or booths that surrounded the dance floor. At some of the bigger venues, a live band and singer performed on a stage, while small venues provided music recordings. Disco balls and colorful lighting were common décor, and many dance halls included at least one segment of disco dancing on any given evening. The most lavish dance halls were usually located in five-star hotels.[43] Smaller establishments also popped up in less exclusive locations, such as neighborhood culture centers (*wenhua zhan* 文化站), movie theaters, work unit assembly halls, and urban cultural palaces (*wenhua gong* 文化宮).[44] The music accompanying social dances included classic ballroom dance songs such as "The Blue Danube" by Johann Strauss II and the *Carmen* overture

Reform data. http://rhb.reformdata.org/#/article/A0E9B39681F0F1DB2510FA47EAE2D056 (accessed August 1, 2023).

41 Wenhuabu, Gong'anbu, and Guojia gongshangju, "Guanyu gaijin wuhui guanti wenti de tongzhi," 1967.

42 The average worker earned less than 100 RMB per month in 1985. Earnings for young, entry-level workers were much lower, and this group constituted the majority of the dance hall customers during the 1980s. Mei Mei (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Chengdu, Sichuan, January 11, 2020; Liu Guiming 劉桂明 and Lü Ying 呂瑩, "Qingge manwu zai Jingdu – laizi Beijing yingyexing wuting de baogao" 輕歌曼舞在京都-來自北京營業性舞廳的報告, *Falü yu shenghuo* 法律與生活, 3 (1988): 27-29, and see page 29. For workers' average salary figures, see Marvin J. Levine, *Worker Rights and Labor Standards in Asia's Four New Tigers: A Comparative Perspective* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), 96.

43 Mei Mei (pseudonym), interviewed by author, January 11, 2020.

44 Yuan Jianda 袁建達, "Wu zai Guangzhou – qingnian pian" 舞在廣州 – 青年篇, *Renmin ribao* 人民日報, February 13, 1988.

by George Bizet.[45] Chinese-language pop songs were also widely enjoyed by dance hall visitors, including the 1980 love song *A'mei A'mei* 阿美阿美 by Taiwanese pop star Liu Wenzheng 劉文正, the 1982 track *Qingdao tianya haijiao lai* 請到天涯海角來 (Please come to the end of the world) sung in praise of the economic reforms in Hainan by Shen Xiaocen 沈小岑, the hit theme song to the 1983 Taiwanese movie *Da cuoche* 搭錯車 (Papa, can you hear me sing?), and *Yiyang de yueguang* 一樣的月光 (Same moonlight) by singer Su Rui 蘇芮.[46] Interviewees also listed romantic ballads by Hong Kong superstar Teresa Teng as some of the most memorable dance hall tunes.[47] According to social dance guidebooks published in the mid-1980s, popular dance styles included the four-step, the three-step, the two-step, tango, rumba, waltz, and the jitterbug.[48] New dances came into and out of vogue often, and the dance floor was as much a place of teaching and learning as it was one of consummate dance performances.

On weeknights, many dancers arrived around seven or eight o'clock after leaving work and eating dinner, staying until ten or later.[49] The implicit gendered norms of the dance hall were that only men invited women to dance, and not the other way around. When the music sounded, a male dancer went up to his desired partner who was either sitting at a table with her friends or standing by the periphery of the dance floor, and asked her to dance. The pair might do one or two dances together, and the woman might switch partners.[50] Dance halls were places where new heterosexual friendships and romantic engagements were formed, and oftentimes men invited their women partners to another venue for drinks or a meal after meeting them through dancing. These relationships were not always serious, and flirtations abounded.[51] Romantic exploration became an important element for young people visiting dance

45 Xiao Jian 曉劍, Wang Suyi 王素一, and Sun Daming 孫達明, "Yeda gebi shi wuting" 夜大隔壁是舞廳, *Fuchunjiang huabao* 富春江畫報, 4 (1987), Laohuabao 老畫報, http://www.laohuabao.com/huabao/fcjhb-1987-4/08074048.html; *Fengmi wuting* 2 風靡舞廳 2, Getuan shouxi 各團首席 (Beijing: Beijing shi qingshaonian yinxiang chubanshe), BQY 9034, cassette.

46 *Nanwang jinxiao* 難忘今宵, Beijing aiyue dianzi qingyinyuedui 北京愛樂電子輕音樂隊, Zhongguo changpian gongsi chengdu fen gongsi, 1985, cassette.

47 Mei Mei (pseudonym), interviewed by author, January 11, 2020; Xiao Yu (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Chengdu, Sichuan, July 9, 2017.

48 Wang Kewei 王克偉, *Huashi jiaoyi wu* 花式交誼舞 (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 66, 75, 84; Qian Jiasu 錢家素 and Lü Ye 綠野, *Jiaoyi wu ABC* 交誼舞 ABC (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 2-34.

49 Mei Mei (pseudonym), interviewed by author, January 11, 2020.

50 Tang Zhen 唐鎮, "Dixia wuting" 地下舞廳, *Guangzhou wenyi* 廣州文藝, 5 (1989): 9-14.

51 Mei Mei (pseudonym), interviewed by author, January 11, 2020.

halls in the 1980s. The gendered social norms of the dance hall space meant that women were expected to play passive roles in their engagement with male dance partners. The male prerogative in choosing a female dance partner also made women's bodies objects of public spectatorship. Part of the male dance hall experience was the invitation and freedom to look at attractive women.[52]

Problematizing Social Dance Locally

In light of such dramatic central state reactions to social dance in the early 1980s, from initial embrace to drastic reversal to ultimate tolerance, how did the state's shifting directives about dancing translate into local communities' understanding of its practice? How did class and money play a role in how social dance was received within these communities? Propaganda materials from a state-owned enterprise in Sichuan suggest that, at the height of the state's crackdown on social dance, SOE (state-owned enterprise) cadres used highly sensationalized narratives to caution young women workers against dancing. In addition to the consistent emphasis on female sexuality and its vulnerability in the dance hall setting, messages intended for a working-class audience also drew attention to the ways in which a changing economy was playing a role in how young women workers became victimized while dancing.

At the Chengdu Wufeng gangguanchang, one of the largest state-managed steel mills in Sichuan, the factory's newspaper *Gangguan gongren* 鋼管工人 (Steel tube worker) ran an article and commentary in late 1983 about how a Beijing woman worker's life was destroyed by dancing.[53] The cautionary tale *Ta de chanhui* 她的懺悔 (Her confession), first published in the national paper *Gongren ribao* 工人日報 (Workers' daily) and later reprinted in *Gangguan gongren*, recounts in the first person how worker Li, an upstanding young woman

52 The 1989 fictional narrative "Dixia wuting" 地下舞廳 by Tang Zhen 唐鎮, published in the literary journal *Guangzhou wenyi* 廣州文藝, examined the act of looking in a dance hall, in which a wealthy middle-aged man visits a dance hall not to dance, but to ogle women using a pair of binoculars. Tang Zhen, "Dixia wuting."

53 These articles were cautionary tales typical of the ones described by Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter in *Personal Voices*. Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices* 44. In her work on the history of prostitution, Gail Hershatter also examines tabloid stories about prostitution in the reform era and suggests that in the context of a heavily censored PRC culture, such stories served as sources of sexual titillation for the reader. Cautionary tales about dancing, like the tabloid stories discussed by Hershatter, served to both warn against the potential dangers of dance halls and entertain the reader with lurid details of girls gone wild. Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 387-88.

who worked at a state-owned textile factory in Beijing, visited a dance hall in 1979 out of curiosity and soon found herself hooked. She recalls in the confession, "Everything was new and exciting, and I was fascinated. Quickly, I learned to dance, made new friends, and started dressing up … in fashionable and glamorous ways." (*Yiqie dui wo shi name xinqi, fuyou ciji. Wo zhaolemi, henkuai xuehuile tiaowu … renwei tiaowu, jiao pengyou, daban de hao … cai shimao, guangcai* 一切對我是那麼新奇，富有刺激。我著了迷，很快學會了跳舞 … 認爲跳舞，交朋友，打扮得好 … 才時髦，光彩).[54] Because of her exposure to new people at the dance hall, her outlook on life also began to change, awakening a new set of desires. "I thought, what other people have had to eat and wear, I want those things, too." (*Woxiang, renjia chiguode chuanguode, wo yeyao chiguo, chuanguo* 我想，人家吃過的穿過的，我也要吃過，穿過).[55] And soon, she had fallen in so deep with the wrong crowd that she was doing things against her better judgment. She confessed to doing "cheek-to-cheek dancing" (*tiemian wu* 貼面舞) and "dancing in the dark" (*heideng wu* 黑燈舞)[56] and taking pornographic photographs with her new friends.[57] Later, Li met a Hong Kong businessman who plied her with gifts and promised to find her a better job. In 1981, she was arrested for her affiliation with known criminals and ended up in the Beijing municipal detention center.[58]

In this story, which was likely edited and embellished by state and factory officials, social dance is considered an activity leading to immoral sexual behavior. Moreover, the account suggests that young women are seduced to behave in lewd ways because of the material desires engendered by a changing reform-era economy. The encounter between the working-class protagonist and fashionable youth outside her factory highlights the increasing cleavage between those still embedded in the state's command economy and those outside of it. While the social origins of the lawless young people worker Li met at the dance hall are not known, they were clearly more exposed to the fashions and consumer goods of a market economy than she was. The appearance of the flamboyant Hong Kong businessman and his promise to find worker Li a better job further accentuates their differential social status: increasingly, the

54 "Ta de chanhui" 她的懺悔, *Gangguan gongren* 鋼管工人, November 29, 1983; Yiyan 益言, "Zhide yidu – qiantan 'tade chanhui'" 值得一讀：淺談 "她的懺悔", *Gangguan gongren* 鋼管工人, November 29, 1983.

55 "Ta de chanhui," November 29, 1983.

56 *Tiemian wu* and *heideng wu* were common 1980s terms used by state officials to describe improper dancing, the former denoting an excess of intimacy and the latter suggesting inappropriate touching. Qian Wang, "Dancing Desire, Dancing Revolution," 160.

57 "Ta de chanhui," November 29, 1983.

58 "Ta de chanhui," November 29, 1983.

formerly high-paying and prestigious position of an SOE worker was becoming displaced as a desirable social category. Instead, the financially well-off entrepreneur and those freely participating in China's limited capitalist market were becoming a new class of economic actors, ones with much greater potential access to money and cultural cache. In addition to its melodramatic warning about the dangers of mixed social contact, this narrative also speaks to how the dance hall represented a microcosm of the shifting social dynamics and relations within a changing Chinese economy.

With the central state relaxing its repressive policies toward social dance in the mid-1980s, the factory newspaper published new materials by community members and journalists that spoke more positively of the dance hall. In these fictional propaganda accounts, the "errors" that dancing might induce began to revolve around abstract ethical mistakes that were less consequential, shifting away from irrevocable sexual and legal offenses associated with social dance. In a 1986 poem titled *Chuchun, zai wuting menwai* 初春, 在舞廳門外 (Early spring, outside the dance hall door), an employee reflects upon the sense of hesitation the dance hall still rouses in some steelworkers. The fictional protagonist of the poem is a worker who finds him/herself wavering outside a dance hall, unable to decide whether to enter. He/she wonders if the "enchanting melody will corrode one's spirit" and immersing oneself in the world of dancing might "lead to mistakes and errors."[59] However, by the second half of the poem, the worker realizes that dancing is simply a form of recreation at the end of a long workday. It does not undermine one's ability to be productive at work and in life, and it might also bring enjoyment and contribute to one's general well-being.[60] Social dance was beginning to shed its associations with criminality and sexual impropriety. Officials became more concerned with guiding young people to engage in dancing with the correct attitude.

In the factory's revised discourse during the second half of the 1980s, vices associated with dancing earlier during the decade such as vanity, selfishness, and poor moral judgment, continued to be problematic, and cadres tried to teach those who frequented dance halls to stay true to their moral values. In a 1986 story published in the factory newspaper titled *Huanghou de bei'ai* 皇后的悲哀 (The sorrows of the queen), an attractive young woman falls prey to vanity and self-aggrandizement as a result of her popularity at the dance hall. At the end of the story, justice is served when she experiences a painful romantic rejection. The protagonist of the story, the "queen," is a beautiful young woman

59 Bairen 白刃, "Chuchun, zai wuting menwai" 初春，在舞廳門外, *Gangguan gongren* 鋼管工人, March 13, 1986.

60 Bairen, "Chuchun, zai wuting menwai," March 13, 1986.

known for her excellent dancing abilities. She has many admirers at the dance hall, including a disabled young man with a leg impairment. One night, when the disabled man works up the courage to ask her to dance, she coldly and cruelly turns him down. As a result of witnessing this scene, her love interest, a handsome, able-bodied man, decides to end their budding romance and tries to teach her a lesson about respecting others.[61] In a letter explaining his feelings, the handsome young man writes, "I've always believed that someone who doesn't respect others, someone with no manners, can never really understand true 'love.' I will not be bothering you tonight." (*Wo you yige kanfa: yige budongde zunzhong bieren de ren, yige budong limao de ren, shi bukeneng zhenzheng dongde 'aiqing' de … jinwan wo jiu buzhunbei zailai darao ni le* 我有一個看法：一個不懂得尊重別人的人，一個不懂禮貌的人，是不可能真正懂得 '愛情' 的…, 今晚我就不準備再來打擾你了).[62] With her ego bruised, the dancing "queen" rips the letter to pieces and collapses onto her bed in tears.[63] The dramatic story of the heartbroken dancing queen in 1986 reveals the evolution of the image of the social dance party in factory discourse. It was no longer a dangerous and pornographic social setting. Instead, the focus of the vices dancing caused revolved around selfish and arrogant behavior.

It is also remarkable that almost all social commentaries related to dancing from factory publications in the 1980s were expressed in gendered terms, targeting young women as a group most prone to dancing's potentially ill effects. In a 1987 factory news article about workplace safety, a workshop section leader reportedly chastised a woman worker for wearing her hair loose and forgetting to don a hard hat, yelling, "*Zheli bushi tiaowuting* 這裏不是跳舞廳 (This is not a dance hall)!"[64] The dance hall became a common reference in discussing a variety of youthful, gendered vices in the factory during the 1980s. Despite the progressive rehabilitation of dance halls from an official perspective, the association between dancing and the foibles of young women remained.

A Woman Worker's Impressions of the Dance Hall

Many women workers born in the mid-to-late 1960s and came of age during the 1980s learned about social dance after its legalization. Similar to the

61 Yuyin 余音, "Huanghou de bei'ai" 皇后的悲哀, *Gangguan gongren* 鋼管工人, October 16, 1986.

62 Yuyin, "Huanghou de bei'ai," October 16, 1986.

63 Yuyin, "'Huanghou' de bei'ai," October 16, 1986.

64 Yuan Ge 原歌, "Zhang duanzhang" 張段長, *Gangguan gongren* 鋼管工人, August 22, 1987.

tone of factory propaganda that gradually saw social dance as a problematic but not seriously harmful activity, this cohort of women workers found that dance halls were not dangerous but were an unpredictable, heterogeneous environment that could place their reputations at risk. My interview with a second-generation worker whom I call Zerong echoes the changing social conditions caused by the reforms. It also shows new social relations distinct from those in the SOE were forged in the dance hall. Zerong was in her late teens and early twenties during the 1980s, and went to dance halls a few times after being invited by a close female friend. She thought dance halls were populated by individuals of "unknown origins" who were less socially respectable than people she knew from the factory community:

> We often felt that people who went there, you didn't know where they came from. We grew up inside a singular community, and everything we did was inside this space. When we went out to society, we felt there might be people from all walks of life. It is certain that people whose parents were high-ranking officials or people who were highly educated did not go to dance halls. Why? Because they had an easy time finding potential marriage partners, they did not need to go there. They also might be more ambitious and would spend their time studying or working, so they would not go there.[65]

In describing those who went to dance halls in the 1980s as a mixed crowd, one that contrasted with the "known" and proper backgrounds of factory employees and their families, Zerong spoke to the importance of belonging to a work unit.[66] Her remarks reveal a preference for the organized communal life of the state factory, defined by each individual's awareness of his/her status and function within the socialist state system, rather than the nascent spaces of the dance hall which operated without the moral discipline and entrenched social categories delineated by the Party-state.

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65 Zerong (pseudonym), interviewed by author, phone interview, May 31, 2022.

66 Elizabeth Perry has argued that the work unit or *danwei* was definitive of a person's social identity and status in urban China under the socialist command economy. Perry and Xiaobo Lü describe how the work unit was the foundation of urban life under socialism. Elizabeth Perry, "From Native Place to Workplace: Labor Origins and Outcomes of China's *Danwei* System," in Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 42-59, and see page 42.

The 1980s economic reforms began to undermine the work unit system as a defining feature of urban Chinese society.[67] After its legalization, the dance hall was open to all paying customers regardless of their work unit affiliations. Those from prestigious work units might mingle with people from the countryside, unemployed urban people, and petty entrepreneurs. Moreover, the dance hall also concealed the differences among these individuals, making it difficult to perceive who was privileged within the socialist system. Despite her perspective that dance halls did not attract more privileged members of the urban population, Zerong was quick to recall that the friend who invited her to go dancing came from a cadre family; both of the friend's parents worked as Party officials in a government bureau. Her own youngest sister Xiao Yu also regularly patronized dance halls. Considering these apparent contradictions, Zerong asserted that people from decent family backgrounds were secretive about visiting dance halls, which showed that they knew dance halls were not proper places to spend their time.[68] Who exactly populated dance halls in 1980s China is difficult to assess fully and likely varied based on geographical and economic factors. Zerong's attitude demonstrates a general social unease about the dance hall. In retrospect, Zerong might have also downplayed the legitimacy of dancing as a leisure activity because she did not understand its appeal and did not personally benefit from visiting dance halls. In her recollection, she went to the dance hall several times, and, on a few occasions, found herself standing on the edge of the dance ring waiting for a male partner to approach. Zerong concluded that a girl had to be exceptional at dancing and nicely made up to be popular at the dance halls, and decided it was not for her.[69]

A Factory Girl Who Loves to Dance

Stories about dancing told by Zerong's youngest sister, Xiao Yu, who was a temporary worker and welder's apprentice at Chengdu Wufeng gangguancheng, reveal a personal engagement with dancing in which the troubled gender and social dynamics of the dance hall are more readily observable. Born in 1969, Xiao Yu was in her teens during the 1980s and began frequenting dance halls

67 Cao Jinqing 曹錦清 and Chen Zhongya 陳中亞, *Zouchu 'lixiang' chengbao: Zhongguo 'danwei' xianxiang yanjiu* 走出‘理想’城堡：中國‘單位’現象研究 (Shenzhen: Haitian chubanshe, 1997), 117-68.

68 Zerong (pseudonym), interviewed by author, May 31, 2022.

69 Zerong (pseudonym), interviewed by author, May 31, 2022.

in the middle of that decade. By the time she began dancing, social dance was becoming less controversial. Xiao Yu's experiences of dancing illustrate the ways in which dance halls brought to life a diverse set of social anxieties associated with the reforms and how issues of class, economic distribution, and gender all converged in a young woman's relationship to social dance. By visiting the dance hall, Xiao Yu also realized her own earnest desire to partake in China's 1980s modernity and to re-imagine her identity as a modern woman. Through dancing, an alternate modernity emerged for Xiao Yu, one in which she felt free to define who she was and her expectations for the future. However, Xiao Yu's encounters at the dance hall were also marked by a new set of gendered ideals that emphasized the importance of women's youth and beauty, creating new constraints on how she could access the kind of 1980s modernity that she desired.

Much was transforming in the Chinese state-owned factory during the 1980s. The state's decentralizing policies granted local factories expanding freedom to engage in bottom-up innovations and improve economic efficiency. New state directives also gave them significant autonomy in managing their own finances as well as selling their above-the-plan products on the private market, leading to a golden age in factory income for many SOEs. The beginning of the reforms signaled an end to socialist-era ascetic demands placed on urban workers. Employees of government-managed workplaces witnessed swift improvements in their everyday conditions, most notably through wage increases and better housing conditions.[70] For SOE employees, life during the 1980s became more comfortable, and factory propaganda at Chengdu Wufeng gangguanchang extolled the SOE community for its embodiment of progress and modernization through these changes. However, second-generation factory children faced increased difficulties securing permanent, state-sponsored employment during the 1980s. With the end of 1950s and 1960s labor mobilizations that drew their parents into the state factory, most state-owned enterprises were overstaffed and had little demand for additional labor by the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The overall urban unemployment problem was especially severe for young women, who made up over seventy percent of the urbanites waiting for full-time positions in the early 1980s.[71]

70 Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 222-41; Joel Andreas, *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 166-91.

71 John Philip Emerson, "Urban School-Leavers and Unemployment in China," *China Quarterly*, 93 (1983): 1-16, and see pp. 4, 12; Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices*, 243-44.

It was in the context of such contradictory social changes that the dance hall came into the lives of many young working-class women. Within the state-owned factory, they faced growing pressures to conform to communal and cadre expectations in order to secure a livelihood. Women's behaviors and bodies were policed by factory cadres who encouraged them to become tireless producers on the shop floor and dedicated wives and mothers in the working-class home, a set of performances that contributed to the modernization and growth of the SOE.[72] Cautioning women against the moral risks of dancing played a reinforcing role in maintaining a gendered social order in the state-owned factory. In contrast, the dance hall and the world outside the factory gates appeared all the more liberating and vibrant, presenting a context of gendered embodiments that captivated the women workers' longings.

To understand how dance halls made a difference in Xiao Yu's life and the way she perceived herself, one needs to look at her background as a temporary worker. Xiao Yu was the youngest of three sisters born in a working-class family. Her parents were workers and staff at Chengdu Wufeng gangguanchang. Xiao Yu ended her education after completing middle school with a poor academic record. As a result of her limited education and the timing of her entrance into the workforce, it was difficult for her to get a permanent job at Chengdu Wufeng gangguanchang. She did not have a high school diploma, and her family lacked the right connections.[73] Her two older sisters had better luck. The oldest one, Zerong, received a permanent position at the factory when their mother retired, part of the state's *dingti* 頂替 or replacement policy, which was abolished in 1986.[74] The middle sister excelled in her studies and found a job as an accountant at the factory through her own merits. Xiao Yu worked as a temporary worker at the factory grocery store for close to five years until her mother finally found her a spot as a welder's apprentice. Xiao Yu understood

72 Sarah Chang, "The Life and Death of the Socialist Factory: Spatial Politics and Factory Life in China, 1958 to the Present," (PhD. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2023), 209-30.

73 During the early-to-mid 1980s, the main mechanisms of factory recruitment for new permanent employees were recruitment (*zhaogong* 招工), replacement (*dingti* 頂替), and assignment (*fenpei* 分配). The formal recruitment process meant that the factory had a set number of spots each year, determined by the state, with different quotas for students and workers of different backgrounds. Urban families leveraged whatever connections they had to get their children a place in the recruitment process. Replacement meant that if one parent who was a permanent employee in the factory retired, a child could take his/her place. The assignment system only applied to those who were graduating from universities and vocational schools, which was not the case for Xiao Yu. See Wang Aiyun 王愛雲, "Shixi Zhonghua renmin gongheguo lishi shang de zinü dingti jiuye zhidu" 試析中華人民共和國歷史上的子女頂替就業制度, *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* 中共黨史研究 6 (2009): 44-53.

74 Wang Aiyun, "Shixi zhonghua renmin gongheguo," 52.

that her temporary work status in the factory meant that she was a peripheral figure in the social and bureaucratic scene of the state-owned enterprise. She openly expressed her frustration with this situation:

> If my mom were a cadre, I would have been sitting in the lab, shaking beakers, sporting a big white coat … In our factory, people whose moms and dads are engineers, they had good jobs. Maybe I'd be placed in the hospital, in logistics. Hospitals are very clean. And when people ask, where do you work, you can say the hospital, oh, that's very impressive. But I sold things, and that's inferior …
>
> I was a salesgirl. People would say that it was a job where you play servant to others (*cihou ren de* 伺候人的) if they aren't being polite.[75]

Xiao Yu recognized and wanted to be a part of the factory community in a way that was more meaningful and socially satisfying, but she lacked the means to achieve that. In contrast with the factory, the dance hall presented her with a new environment where her disappointments as a temporary factory employee were shelved, and she felt she could re-invent herself.

At the dance hall that Xiao Yu visited once or twice a week – traveling there by bicycle with her friends after leaving work – she quickly discovered how her beauty, combined with decent dancing skills, made her a star of the dance floor. She remembers the many young men who asked her to dance. A few of them held impressive-sounding white-collar jobs such as "manager" and "bank clerk." She also met her first serious boyfriend at the dance hall, a young man who had an office job at the municipal TV station and maintained high standards for self-grooming, apparently paying multiple visits to fashionable hair salons during their year and a half together.[76]

For young women workers like Xiao Yu, the dance hall was a vast field of potential social connections outside the factory community, and it gave her a series of new opportunities in the realm of dating and marriage. Like her sister Zerong, who discussed the function of dance halls as an alternative site of matchmaking, Xiao Yu recognized the potential to meet someone much more privileged than herself and improve her social status as well as material conditions. It is difficult to know how much effort Xiao Yu expended in searching for an advantageous partner. For Xiao Yu, still a teenager at the time, simply the idea of attractive and successful men vying for her affection was gratifying.

75 Xiao Yu (pseudonym), interviewed by author, July 9, 2017.
76 Xiao Yu (pseudonym), interviewed by author, July 9, 2017.

At the dance hall, she experienced what it was like to be seen and admired. This experience created a shift in her understanding of herself, giving her newfound confidence that she lacked in the factory community.

The dance hall also allowed Xiao Yu to become an active participant in the dynamic reform-era urban world beyond spectatorship and consumption. A boyfriend she met at the dance hall, who eventually became her husband, enlisted her help in business. The boyfriend had a permanent position as an entry-level government employee but also tried to make money after work hours by running a small clothing retail business. He pooled investments with a friend who traveled to coastal Fujian province to purchase fashionable T-shirts, and the two sold the shirts on the street in Chengdu. After finishing her day at the factory, Xiao Yu joined her boyfriend at a large outdoor market on Qingnian 青年 Street, peddling T-shirts. Compared to her job as a grocery store clerk, with its fixed salaries and set hours, conducting business, even at such a low scale, was exciting for Xiao Yu. It allowed her to access fashion styles from the coastal areas and to experience the gratification of making fast cash. While her family, including her two sisters, both permanent employees at the factory, rarely ate at restaurants, Xiao Yu was dining out regularly with the money she and her boyfriend earned. Without the dance hall, her life would have been limited to the routines and narrow set of activities available at the factory. Dancing liberated Xiao Yu from these conditions and allowed her to redefine herself in a rapidly changing social environment. Unbound from her status as a temporary worker, Xiao Yu transformed into a small-time entrepreneur and fashionable modern girl traversing the bustling streets of Chengdu, someone with endless possibilities and a future yet to be defined.

Awareness of the expanding urban world outside the factory lessened Xiao Yu's motivation to pursue a career and a life at the factory. It showed her how small and provincial the state-owned factory truly was:

> Everyone had housing from the factory and rode their bicycles to work … At most, someone had a TV and stereo at home, which counted as being wealthy …
>
> When you looked outside, there are so many great things out there. All sorts of things. Some people bought their own storefronts. We did not have that kind of consciousness (*meide zhege yishi* 沒得這個意識). Besides, you can't afford it. A worker makes so little money, only enough to eat.[77]

77 Xiao Yu (pseudonym), interviewed by author, July 9, 2017.

Dancing and engaging with the economic changes in Chengdu outside the factory had awakened Xiao Yu to a deeper awareness of the effects of the economic reforms, which produced new desires within Xiao Yu to escape the predetermined trajectory of a working-class life in the SOE and appropriate for herself a greater share of the adventures and prosperity generated by the reforms.

As Xiao Yu embraced her evening and weekend exploits outside Chengdu Wufeng gangguanchang, she increasingly associated the factory with a backward gender culture that belonged to the past and not the modern scenes familiar to her in the dance hall and the private market. When peddling T-shirts, she was cognizant of the need to avoid people from the steel tube factory. She worried that if her neighbors and classmates saw her, they would spread nasty rumors about her:

> People back then, their mindset was a bit left (*zuo* 左), close-minded (*fengbi* 封閉), and traditional (*chuantong* 傳統).[78] They would think, she is involved with some Qingnian Street boss, what a wild girl she is. She wants to date a Qingnian Street boss (*laoban* 老闆) for his money. What a bad woman she must be.[79]

Xiao Yu uses "left" alongside "close-minded" and "traditional," conflating gender politics of the Mao period with the "traditional" Chinese gender practices that Mao-era gender ideology tried to challenge. In conflating these two terms, Xiao Yu characterized the social policing of women's sexuality by the state and the SOE community in the 1980s as the quintessentially "unmodern" act, refuting a set of gender ideals propagated by factory and state officials and their paternalistic attitudes toward young women.[80]

Xiao Yu protested against these imagined comments by loudly proclaiming that her boyfriend was not some Qingnian Street boss but an eligible young

78 In its assessment of the Mao period, the Communist Party deployed the language of "left" to characterize past mistakes in state campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward, thus popularizing the term as a form of critique against anyone in favor of a return to China's socialist past. In popular usage in the 1980s, "left" referred to anyone who disliked the social changes brought on by the economic reforms.

79 Xiao Yu (pseudonym), interviewed by author, July 9, 2017.

80 Xiao Yu's conflation of these terms echoes Gail Hershatter's argument that "all of the signposts of campaign time are movable in memory's terrain." For Xiao Yu, who was born in 1969, the economic reforms represented the major rupture in time and space in her life story, making much of what came before and took place inside the state-owned factory both "left" and "traditional." Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 264.

bachelor with a legitimate work unit doing business on the side.[81] By using the term "boss" to describe her boyfriend in what she imagined others might have said about her, Xiao Yu echoed the propaganda discourse about dance halls that imagined young women to be seduced by duplicitous men who promised them access to wealth and glamour in exchange for companionship and sex. She proclaimed her own agency in choosing a partner she liked and refuted a sentiment widespread during the 1980s that women who found romantic partners in the dance halls compromised their sexual virtue in exchange for economic mobility. Moreover, in asserting that her boyfriend was not a "boss," Xiao Yu also tried to reclaim the work unit respectability that she felt she lacked in the 1980s due to her own temporary work status.

Despite enriching Xiao Yu's life with new social encounters, dancing did not increase the structural opportunities available to her. Her boyfriend, whom she later married, went from one small business venture to another, never amassing significant wealth. He eventually returned to his job as an entry-level government employee. Xiao Yu quit her job at the factory after they married in the early 1990s, stopped visiting dance halls, and became a full-time housewife. Nonetheless, Xiao Yu's memories of dancing extend beyond the details of dancing as a 1980s working-class leisure activity and serve as a reflection of the emergent and transformative consequences of China's development out of socialism and the competing notions of modernity that this process engendered. Xiao Yu's dis-identification with her working-class life allowed her to articulate a critique of the state's attempts at policing women's gendered embodiments and social recreation. Xiao Yu saw 1980s modernity as a cultural scene that granted her permission to formulate and pursue her individual desires and to indulge in the joys of dancing and the fantasies of capitalist liberation through commerce and consumption. Dancing also propelled Xiao Yu into a new set of ideological conditions, ones still entangled with the values of the socialist work unit but which additionally fetishized youth, beauty, and financial success.

Conclusion

In the early 1980s, the CCP limited the practice of social dance to contain the improper sexual behaviors the state associated with dancing. Its denunciation

81 Xiao Yu (pseudonym), interviewed by author, July 9, 2017. The figure of the "boss" (*laoban* 老闆) was a common trope in dance hall literature during the 1980s. The boss figure was often an older man of some means who sought to use his economic status to gain romantic and sexual favors with young women at the dance hall. Tang Zhen, "Dixia wuting," 9-14.

of social dance was part of a larger project to assert a dominant vision of modernity during the early reforms, one that required young women to serve as defenders of sexual morality and to promote order and social cohesion during a period of rapid economic change. By the mid-1980s, state regulations of urban dance halls relaxed, switching to a policy of toleration rather than prohibition. These changes resulted in shifting propaganda rhetoric. While state cadres continued to caution young women against the potential moral corruption of the dance hall, they no longer characterized it as a place filled with criminals engaging in lewd acts. Cautionary tales published by worker newspapers also expressed how dance halls were microcosms of the changing economic and social relations facilitated by the reforms, in which the working class within China's SOEs was becoming displaced as a prestigious social category. Instead, those with greater access to cultural and financial capital in the context of the growing market economy represented a new class of rising elites.

Young women workers who engaged in social dance did not always share the state's sensationalized discourse about dancing. For women workers who loved dancing, urban dance halls opened a new world outside the constraints of the work unit. In the dance hall, Xiao Yu found a space where she might redefine her identity and voice new aspirations for the future. Through her experiences in the dance hall, Xiao Yu became aware of her dissatisfaction with the hierarchical and inequitable state factory where she worked and lived. Eventually, she expressed her hopes for an alternate modernity, in which she might gain new sources of self-regard and social mobility, exceeding the limited opportunities granted to her within the state's work unit system. Xiao Yu's stories also expose the ephemeral nature of a dance hall modernity that she found captivating during her late teens. Despite its promise of radical self-making for young women, it also promoted new gendered criteria of youth and beauty that determined how a woman was seen and treated. During the first decade of China's transition toward capitalism, social dance and its imagined excesses represented the anxieties of a patriarchal and paternalistic reform-era state and the fantasies of self-reinvention for young working-class women.

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