

THE LOTUS SPIRIT OF DAI AILIAN

Article / Ba Tu

Pictures / Beijing Dance Academy

The lakes of Zizhuyuan Park in Beijing are full of lotus flowers with delicate petals and sweet-smelling fragrance. The scenery of “laughing and chatting across the lotus and paddling a boat in mist-covered waters” attracts countless tourists. Beijing Dance Academy neighbors the park and its students often gather here in crowds and groups, jogging or idling. The youthful figures echo the elegant lotus, presenting a very beautiful scene.

Dai Ailian, the first principal of the Academy, loved lotus. She said, “My Chinese name is Ailan. Later, I thought the character lian (meaning lotus) was more poetic,

so I changed my name to Ailian.” Therefrom, lotus accompanied her life. She had lotus in her name and created Lotus Dance. Pure and elegant lotus is an embodiment of her noble and graceful character as a dancer. She never thought that her statue was permanently placed on the campus by the lotus lake. What a wonderful karma!

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian is rooted with the dancer’s red gene. Following the beautiful footprints of her life, we can always picture three scenes: when the country was in a crisis, she returned to the homeland and actively participated in the cause of national salvation.

Her weak body danced out a great belief of national independence and liberation. At the beginning of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), she created a dance with the image of “Lotus” in response to Premier Zhou’s suggestion. The Dance made an indelible mark on the diplomacy of PRC. She applied to join the Chinese Communist Party (the CPC) at the age of 90. “When abroad, I was influenced by the Party. At that time, I knew the CPC was the only hope of China. I am lucky to witness today’s prosperity!” She dedicated herself to the nation, danced for the people, and worked with

heart and soul for the Party and the country, which were the great qualities of Dai Ailian as a dancer of the times. Her deep love for the Party and country symbolizes in the Lotus Dance. Even after half a century, it still blooms with impressive splendor. “How high is the blue sky and how long is the green river. The lotus is facing the sun and its fragrance is blown a thousand miles by the wind. My motherland, you are shining brightly like a blooming lotus.” The dance presents her skills and thoughts and she immersed herself in the dance. “Green lotus leaves outspread as far as boundless sky; pink lotus blossoms take from



> Portrait of Dai Ailian



1 > In 1931, the three sisters were in Britain (the eldest sister in the middle, Dai Ailian on the left and Jin Lan on the right)
2 > In 1946, Sai Zhenzhu was responsible for Dai Ailian's performance and Ye Qianyu's painting exhibition in the United States.



2

sunshine a new dye." Lotus is dyed with color. The color of Dai Ailian's lotus is red like her candid and profound red heart.

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian lays a foundation for the dancer's cultural character. Exploring Dai's beautiful life always arouses our respect for this great dancer: she herself and her character brought a beautiful quality in her dance, which was subtle and profound. Standing in the wind, the lotus leaves are dressed in the green color. Ancient Chinese poet Li Bai said in his famous verse, "it is like a lotus rising out of clear water: natural and without embellishment." In fact, there is never absolute clear water and naturalness. The blossom of every beautiful lotus will go through an arduous and long growth process. The green lotus leaves stand by the water are like a beauty. The students of Beijing Dance Academy dance gracefully like swans and agilely like Chinese dragons. Is it not the stringent talent selection process that ensures this? Is it not a fact that they are the best candidates in a million in the country? Their beauty is natural and a direct reflection of the core competitiveness and comparative advantages of the Academy. Without this natural beauty, it is hard to obtain the professional one. This is the unique beauty of Beijing Dance Academy. Of course, this beauty, sophisticated and extraordinary, is outstanding quality forged in the repetition of simplicity

day after day, and realized through the ordinary repetition year after year. The lotus of Beijing Dance Academy expresses perspiration and perseverance. This beauty is meaningful, cultured, and eternal. In this way, it is also possible to change Li Bai's poem "it is like a lotus rising out of clear water: natural and without embellishment" into "it is like a lotus rising out of perspiration: natural and without embellishment after perseverance". From the creators and inheritors of the Lotus Dance, it is easy to see the beauty of the lotus soaked in perspiration, tears and even blood.

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian is an interpretation of the dancer's moral character like a gentleman of honor. People often give different life metaphors to flowers, such as "the chrysanthemum is the flower of recluse and the peony is the flower of riches and honor." The lotus flower is unstained from the mud, and its quality is high. It is a gentleman in the flower, keeping itself clean out of the mud, lotus flowers have noble and pure character and symbolize a gentleman among flowers. She herself and her dance denote the character of an honorable gentleman firstly as Confucius said, "Quality is better than literature and wild, and literature is better than quality, history, and gentleness, and then a gentleman." Secondly, she herself and her dance denote the character of a gentleman who takes benevolence

and righteousness as his duty, just like "Gentlemen work hard all day long, vigilant in the evening" and a gentleman unremittingly practices self-improvement and never slacks. Thirdly, she herself and her dance denote the character of a gentleman who is open-to-suggestion, subtle, and upholds the doctrine of the mean. Fourthly, she herself and her dance denote the character of a gentleman who upholds the philosophy that "It is by the Odes that the mind is aroused, it is by the Rules of Propriety that the character is established, and it is from Music that the finish is received" and believes that culture is the foundation, morality the rule, and art is for human use. These "four denotations" interpret Dai Ailian's characteristics. Her life verifies a gentleman of honor and her art accomplishes her character as a gentleman. She cultivated the national spirit with dance, promoted the dance practice of Chinese people and led "everyone to dance" with her personal dance. This is great atmosphere of a dancer and become our great ambition to advance in the right direction. The lotus flower is pure and clean, demonstrating a grand pattern of "being unstained even with roots in mud and snow and blowing fragrance even with green leaves".

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian symbolizes tranquil atmosphere of a dancer. Now, Dai's statue stands peacefully on the campus,



as still as a lotus flower. “Over the ten-mile lotus pond under the moonlight, the lotus flowers are as bright and clear as the moonlight.” With the shadow of trees dancing, the statue looks simple but elegant, tranquil but broad and is well reverend. Previously, Huang Tingjian admired “the fragrant and clean white lotus planted in Donglin Mountain” and “Tao Yuanming who is honest and innocent, and often crossed Huxi to drink”. Comparing tranquil lotus with vibrant life, we can have a view of her life. The school founded by Dai should also be related to tranquility and

dynamic, and accompanied by her spirit and qualities. A dance school should be serene and away from the hustle and bustle. The administrators should respect the academics, avoid making troubles or taking rash actions. Teachers should be engaged in scholarship, and students should be dedicated to learning, and they should enjoy dialectical relationship between exploring the unknown and serving the society. The dance campus should also be placid, where teachers and students can pursue life experience, spiritual enhancement, enrichment of

knowledge and improvement of art. The lotus flower is unstained from the mud and dust. There is a folk tradition of drawing an egret when painting green lotus to imply “being honest and upright along the way”. Always having a social conscience, the universities should boast of agreeable environment and upright atmosphere for academic studies, be home to honest scholars and a placid place. Hence, the dance industry can take on a pure atmosphere that “the gentle breeze embraces the beautiful and clean green bamboo, the drizzle moistens the lotus flowers, and the breeze

blows fragrance.”

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian unfolds the beauty of humanity. “With pink flowers, the lotus is as delicate as a water fairy; possessing one heart, it blooms two flowers”. With twin flowers on one stalk, and its root being severed, but fibered threads still being connected, the lotus is often personified. Chinese folks take two immortals, namely Lotus Goodness and Lotus God, as the Gods of Happiness in charge of marriage. One of the two immortals holds a blooming lotus flower and the other holds a round box with

1 > The shape of solo dance *Princess Yang (Yang Gui Fei)*. This work was performed when visiting Chinese sailors in London.

2 > The family photo of Dai Ailian when she was 14

3 > A group photo of Soviet dance expert, Chen Jinqing, teacher of folk dance group and Dai Ailian in the eastern suburb classroom in 1955

a cover, carrying the symbolic meaning of harmony and affection. In his poem *Ballad of Plucking Lotus*, Wang Bo wrote “while plucking a lotus, affection arouses for its twin flowers; while severing its root, love flows for its connected fibered threads” to portray the love between men and women. The ancients even personified the lotus to depict human emotions in a very exaggerated way. In *Zepi*, *Qinfeng* (a song of Qin state), *Guofeng* (Lessons from the States), the *Book of Songs*, it says, “on the shore of the lake, grow cattails and lotus flowers. There is a beautiful kind

person and I feel sad for her. What should I do? Being awake or asleep, I can do nothing but shed tears like pouring rain.” In the song, the writer compared the lotus flower to a beautiful woman that he had not seen for a long time. He was so sad that he kept shedding tears day and night. Taking the lotus to express our emotions, we can have more open observation and understanding. Closely laying out, lotus leaves are like intimate brothers and sisters, and like-minded colleagues who are kind to each other.

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian shows

the dancer’s beauty of harmony. Chinese Character “(lotus)” is symphonic to “(harmony)” and “(cooperation)”, and “(lotus)” is symphonic to “(coalition)” and “(connection)”. Since ancient times, we have had a tradition of giving a plum tree twig to a travelling friend in spring and plucking lotuses in autumn. Simple and pure, dancers respect and appreciate each other. They consciously regard the success of others as the premise of their own fulfillment. The original version of the Lotus Dance was the result of the collective cooperation of the artists. The

- 1 > Stay with Ye Qianyu
- 2 > Dai Ailian's Dumb Backed Maniac (Ya Zi Bei Feng)
- 3 > Dai Ailian performed Tibetan dance

first part was choreographed by Dai Ailian, the second part by Ma Xianglin, and the third part by Liu Chi. The Dance expressed cheerful emotions. It ended with a large lotus flower formed by the "lotus girls" and blooming to the sun, which was a representative result of collective cooperation. Lotus boasts of rich and colorful varieties. Even with different varieties, the flowers constitute a noble lotus world, denoting that "the lotus (harmony) is the most precious". Folk painters often draw lotuses, begonias and flying swallows together to depict the scene that "The Yellow River is clear and the seas are calm." There is a play term named "Tuanchang", which reflects appreciation and longing for the harmonious atmosphere. People of Beijing Dance Academy believe the concept that only by helping each other can we all attain our goals and prosper respectively and together. No matter it is on the platform, in the classroom or on the campus, they always work together for common goals. "Blooming in the same pond, their fragrance is the same, be a red lotus or a white one". Increasing solidarity brings a greater cause.

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian embodies the dancer's strong will to surpass themselves. The lotus is graceful and unique. "In spring, the lotus leaves are full of vitality, and in late autumn, they turn yellow and bleak." Rooted in the soil, standing over the water, and with dew on its round leaves, the lotus has an independent quality. Being beautiful and fragrant, it can resist sunlight, wind and rain. This symbolizes the ideal of adhering to independence and the character of being free from mundane affairs. Dai Ailian's life was driven by this independent thinking. Her decision to return to the homeland and her lifelong commitment to serving the country are all manifestations of this quality. As a top dance school in China, Beijing Dance Academy undertakes the major mission of leading and demonstrating dance education across the country. Being the top indicates that there are no precedential goals to follow and refer. Hence, the Academy should possess capabilities for independent thinking and action, have determination to pursue self-transcendence in a persistent way, and not blindly follow in others' footsteps.

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian demonstrates the dancer's philosophy of making innovations while keeping true to Chinese traditions. The Dance collects materials from Chinese folks for inspiration. It combines the folk dance of "Lotus Lantern" in Longdong and Northern Shaanxi with the most basic movements of traditional Chinese opera like "Shunfengqi" and "Yuanchang" and traditional Chinese costumes. That said, the unique aesthetic image of "lotus" is created. The Dance has bright images, condensed structure and seeks simplified complexity, unified steps and plain colors. The Dance fully embodies Chinese classical aesthetics in its virtual and freehand beauty. From the Dance, the audience can appreciate the fragrance of the lotus flowers and feel lake ripples without even seeing the physical ones. Numerous images and feelings are condensed in the few dancing moves. As a dancer fully nourished by Western learning, Dai's position on Chinese culture is even more precious. The Lotus Dance she created embodies her innovative spirits as well. With its materials coming from Chinese folks, the





1



2

1 > In 1977, Dai Ailian was creating and rehearsing Heroic Women Drillers at Shandong Shengli Oilfield.
2 > Dai Ailian and her husband Ye Qianyu

Dance however jumps out of the box of country elements. Dai Ailian tapped, sorted out and rectified the materials, which reflects not only her pursuit of innovation but also her attachment to Chinese traditions. Keeping true to traditional materials, she also made changes in various aspects such as the dancing theme, character modeling, action language, spatial composition, moving routes, etc. For instance, she changed the lotus lantern dance performed by kids into a female group dance, and she replaced the elderly leading dancer with a female character "White Lotus". The leading dancer "White Lotus" echoes with the group dancers, and skillfully integrates water, wind and lotus on the stage, just like the freehand lotus leaves huddling together. Dai used music in a clever way and boldly added songs to the Dance, which has the artistic effect of heightens the theme of the Dance. The impressive landscape of the West Lake in June is thus represented. In an era closest to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and an era where the Chinese are standing proudly among the peoples in the world, dancers in the new era should have the courage and broad horizon to surpass their predecessors.

The lotus spirit of Dai Ailian shows her dedication to serving the people. Like the common folks, lotus flowers are resilient, grow fast and are able to survive under various environment. Besides availability for appreciation, lotus can adjust moisture and

purify the air. The Dance created by Dai resembles lotus flowers which embody the qualities of the common folks. Every time we witness Dai dancing merrily with the common folks in cities, in countryside, in classrooms and in fields, we cannot help but feeling the original aspirations of the predecessors in the dancing circle. This year marks 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. To commemorate the special year, our School has sorted out the classic artworks created by the artists from Beijing Dance Academy to honor Chinese revolution history. 100 dances were singled out and introduced to the creative team members, the Academy's education heritage representatives and dancing professionals for analysis and appreciation. To tribute to the 100th anniversary, the videos of the 100 dances are put on line for audience to view. Undoubtedly, the Lotus Dance of Dai Ailian is the 1st among them all not only because she was the first principal of the Academy but also because of the special motive of Dai for the creation of it. The Lotus Dance is deeply rooted in daily life, dedicated to serving the people and it is danced for the people.

Dai passed away in 2006 when I first stepped into the art circle. It is my great honor to work in the university founded by her, but my great regret was that I have missed the chance to talk with her and to learn from her wisdom. The only thing I can do is to be

grateful to her and work hard with no efforts spared. My imagination will sometimes have me seeing her smiling around the lovely lotus in the green lake touched gently by breeze. The vision of her witnessing the growth of lotus buds makes me delighted and content. More than once, the question of who else loves lotus is asked. Dai Ailian loved the flower and thus created the Lotus Dance. Following her spirit, we will cherish and carry forward her love for lotus and we will fight for an even better future for the Academy she founded. Looking ahead, we can fancy the beautiful scenery of pearl-like water drops following off lotus leaves and water ripples in the wake of a wisp of wind. Our imagination will take us to the pretty lotus dancing with the wind, and the lotus lanterns shimmering with charms. Looking ahead, we will see the beauty of lotus, lotus lantern and elegant dancers, and the freehand painting of rising moon.

About the writer :

Ba Tu, member of the National Art Degree Education Steering Committee, President of the Ideological and Political Theory Schooling and Studying Association for the National Art College, member of the Education Steering Committee of Sociology in Higher Education Institutions of the Education Ministry, the Party Secretary of Beijing Dance Academy; professor and doctoral mentor.

Research orientation:

art education and management.