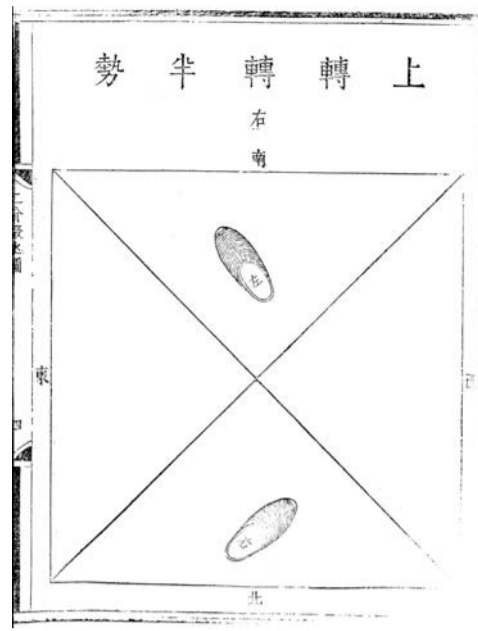
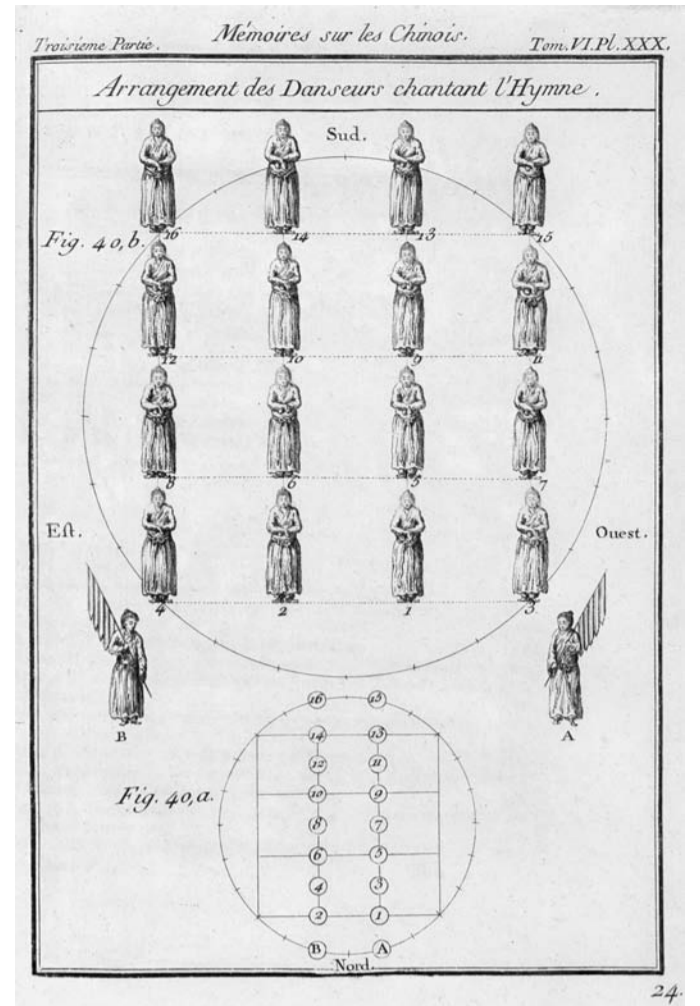


舞人三



Dance positions according to Zhu Zaiyu  
(c) The East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Princeton University



First print of dances in the West, 1790  
(c) K.U. Leuven

# Ancient Chinese ritual dances

From his arrival in China in 1750 as a young Jesuit missionary, Joseph-Marie Amiot took interest in ancient Chinese dances. In his eyes, they were part of a civilization dating back to those distant centuries 'when Europe and most of the other known regions offered only forests and ferocious animals as inhabitants'. But beyond his own writings and two brief articles written in the early 20th century, the topic hardly attracted the attention of European scholars.

Nicolas Standaert

In 1761 the French periodical *Journal Étranger* published two of Amiot's articles and he sent two more manuscripts to Paris in 1788 and 1789. Though they remained hidden in European libraries, these manuscripts can truly be considered forerunners to the field of ethnochoreography.

The dances that Amiot described were 'ritual dances' performed at state sacrifices: ritual celebrations during which the Chinese emperor made offerings to important state divinities such as Heaven, the Sun, the First Farmer and Confucius. Held every fortnight, these rituals were impressively orchestrated, and dances – usually performed by 64 professionals – accompanied the emperor's oblations. The dances had a long history; the first descriptions provided by Chinese classical scholars date back to before 300 B.C. Our present-day knowledge about their practice, however, is derived from texts dating from the Ming dynasty (after 1368 A.D.) and from extensive choreographies printed since the sixteenth century. This is noteworthy, since one has to wait until the development of photography in the late 19th century for the reproduction of similar choreographies in Europe.

In terms of dancing theory, the most important and creative scholar on whose work Amiot based his analysis was the late Ming scholar Zhu Zaiyu (1536-1611). As a young man, Zhu Zaiyu devoted himself to study and took a keen interest in the mathematical principles of music and of the calendar. He left 28 writings and is known in music history for his discovery of the calculation of equal temperament (the formula  $12\sqrt{2}$ ).

## Development of a dance theory

Two specific contexts inform Zhu's accomplishments. First, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Ming empire was experiencing an economic and institutional crisis; its cause was judged to be disrespect of ritual. Improvement of state sacrificial music was proposed as a means to revive the collapsing empire and, as a result, there was a renewed interest in music and dance theory. The second context was the movement labelled the 'concrete or solid studies' (*shixue*). As a reaction against the excessive intuitionist tendencies of the Wang Yangming school of philosophy (named after one of the most influential thinkers of the 16th century), scholars cultivated

an interest in philology and textual analysis, reflected in their study of words and their meanings. Zhu Zaiyu's treatises on music and dance belong to that movement. He saw his studies as part of the effort to 'know better the past so as to put it into practice in the present'. He was interested in the search for 'solidity and principles', not 'appearances and adornment'. It is important to underscore that scholars in the seventeenth century rarely limited their efforts to one domain. Mathematics, calendar studies, music, dance and rituals all came under Zhu Zaiyu's scrutiny because they are all closely linked to essential aspects of ritual. Mathematical sciences, for example, are essential to the ritualization of time (the calendar) and the harmonization of sound (music); dance concerns the ritualization of space, or the geometry of ritual.

Comparison with other Ming era writings on dance, concerning both the sacrifice to Confucius and the proposals to reform the state sacrifices, reveals Zhu Zaiyu's originality and creativity. He is the first to have discussed, described and designed the dances in such detail (his writings contain over 600 illustrations of dancing positions). He created a comprehensive approach, establishing rules for combining dancing with vocal and instrumental music. In doing so, he also created new choreographies based on descriptions of ancient dances. Every choreography was divided into four movements and subdivided into eight positions. To each of these dances he attached moral values, such as 'benevolence', 'respect for the ruler' and 'compliance to husband'. Thus, by attaching moral values to the dances, Zhu Zaiyu created a specialization of ethics. Moreover, he did not limit himself to an analysis of the body's movements; he also investigated the positioning of the feet in minute detail, being unique among all dance illustrators for his inclusion of precise feet positions. In designing choreographies, Zhu Zaiyu also coined a new dance vocabulary and presented the basic curriculum for the 'study of dance'.

## The frozen moment

Comparing these choreographies to the dances that are still performed today in some of Confucius's temples raises the question of whether these really are 'dances', which, by definition, stress the movement of the body. Here the connection between the visual and print representations of these dances is crucial to understanding the specificity of Chinese ritual

dance. In print the visual representation of movement is indeed very difficult to achieve, since movement can rarely be represented by a sole image. That is why dance representations nearly always include multiple images that break the dance down into different stages of movement. In the case of these Chinese ritual dances, however, this is not a shortcoming because the illustrations correspond to a pause rather than to a movement. During this pause, the dancer does not 'move', but remains static as long as the accompanying musical tone and chanting of the corresponding word of the poem last. This succession of pauses can be compared to the concept of 'rhythm' in early Greek texts. 'Rhythmoi' were originally the 'positions' that the human body assumed in the course of a dance. Pauses thus defined the very heart of the idea of rhythm. It was the still stance that was significant; movements were mere transitions. Therefore, one possible explanation for the early development of printed choreographies in China is that the illustrations do not attempt to seize movement, but rather to fix on paper the 'frozen moment' in dance transformation. They emphasize this moment of non-action as the key to the transformation that takes place through ritual action. In Chinese ritual dance, then, stillness is the major step.

Toward the end of his life, Amiot felt even more compelled to introduce the ancient Chinese dances to Europeans. To him it was important to 'assign to the events that took place in China the place that they deserve in world history'. This he did not achieve until the rediscovery of his manuscripts in Madrid and Paris just before the turn of the 21st century. ◀

## For further reading

- Lenoir, Yves and Nicolas Standaert, eds. 2005. *Les danses rituelles chinoises d'après Joseph-Marie Amiot*. Brussels/Namur: Éditions Les-sius/Presses Universitaires de Namur.
- Standaert, Nicolas. Forthcoming Spring 2006. 'Ritual Dances and Their Visual Representations in the Ming and the Qing'. *The East Asian Library Journal* 12-1 (Princeton University).

Nicolas Standaert  
Professor of Sinology  
K.U. Leuven, Belgium