Jin Xing in the New China

Redefining the Mainstream

an interview by Andrew Kimbrough

Introduction

Modern dance has enjoyed a relatively brief history in the People’s Republic of China, hardly a dozen years since the founding of the first modern dance company in Guangzhou in 1992. Yet among the five modern dance companies currently working on the mainland, one figure stands out most for bringing modern dance into the public consciousness. Jin Xing, whose name means “Gold Star” in Mandarin, had the opportunity to live and work in the United States and Europe and pursue a career in those areas of the world where modern dance is known and appreciated. After eight years abroad, she returned to China where in Shanghai she established the Jin Xing Dance Theatre. In her choreography, Jin Xing suffuses a distinctly Western form with a unique Chinese character and perspective, in turn generating an appreciative audience for this latest of foreign fine art imports.

But Jin Xing’s fame arises not only from her position in the world of modern dance. As she states in the following interview, her return to China was not prompted primarily by a will to live and work in her home country. For most of her adult life Jin Xing had desired to change her gender, and at the age of 28 she risked losing a promising career in dance for a sex-change operation, performed in Beijing in 1995. Jin Xing was certainly not the first Chinese citizen to undergo the procedure. The operation was first done in China in 1983 and since then has become fairly routine. But she has definitely become the most famous transsexual in China, garnering enormous media attention, and even finding her way into such U.S. publications as the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Advocate*.

Jin Xing’s attitude is characteristically upbeat. If her personal life brings people to the theatre, she says, then that’s fine. Her achievement is one not easily found in other parts of the world where many gay, lesbian, and transgendered performers suffer marginalization and politicization at the hands of a suspicious and guarded mainstream. On one hand, Jin Xing’s fame stems from her ability to create dance rivaling that found on any international stage. But
it also stems from her ability to work alongside a Chinese government that keeps a close eye on its public performances, and one that has no public policy regarding homosexuality, yet whose attitude is decidedly discouraging.¹

In a sense, Jin Xing’s position typifies the dichotomies apparent in contemporary Chinese society. While the government places great emphasis on the adherence to ideological “correct thinking” in line with Communist Party rule, Deng Xiaoping Theory has allowed for the wholesale embrace of capitalism. New money, brought into the country through joint ventures with foreign companies, has been transforming the cities with the tell-tale signs of Western-style urbanization: large indoor shopping malls, huge neon billboards, pricey high-rise condos, cinemas, nightclubs, and streets congested with luxury autos. On guard against challenges to the political orthodoxy, Chinese officialdom ignores the not-so-subtle ideological threats permeating foreign advertising and foreign programming on radio and television (fashion shows, MTV). True, life for many Chinese is still highly regimented and follows ingrained cultural norms; divorce is practically unheard of and homophobia is rife. But desperate for opportunity, students by the thousands manage to get abroad annually. In such an atmosphere, Jin Xing’s success seems apropos. Indeed, by her own account, she has become one of China’s nouveau riche, earning enormous sums for choreographing special events sponsored by foreign firms, which in turn helps support her Dance Theatre.

After training, study and performance abroad, and the sex-change operation, Jin Xing’s first work was starting the Beijing Modern Dance Ensemble in 1995. But the Ensemble fell apart after three years due to political infighting.² Fed up with interference from the Beijing Cultural Bureau and the Ministry of Culture, Jin Xing struck out on her own. She moved to Shanghai in 1998 and started her Dance Theatre, which she still heads. She appreciates the challenges of working independently and of venturing out into theatre and film, all the while maintaining what she calls a “conservative” life, which in her case means raising an adopted son as a single mom.

I first saw Jin Xing in Shanghai where she was cast in the lead role of A.R. Gurney’s Sylvia, produced by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre in the summer of 2002 (in Chinese with English supertitles). Although not trained as an actor, she was successful in the role. I found the mostly Chinese audience very appreciative of her performance, and I did not detect a prurient motivation behind its desire to see the production. As Jin Xing explains, Shanghai has cultivated an audience for Western-style drama, and this audience is already used to seeing her perform. Still, the choice of play struck me as rather subversive, for in it Jin Xing plays a dog with whom her adoptive owner falls in love—at the expense of his wife (see also Conceison 2003).

Sylvia presents a middle-aged couple whose marriage is, inexplicably, on the rocks. Greg finds an excuse to avoid and neglect his wife of 20 years, Kate, through the adoption of a stray dog, which he names Sylvia. Subsequently, the audience is led to believe that Greg falls romantically in love with Sylvia, en-

1. Jin Xing. (Publicity photo by Zu Zhongren)
joying both an emotional and even physical attraction to her. The climax of the play lies in the ultimatum Kate presents to Greg: his wife or the dog.

While I was dismayed about the image of American life that Gurney’s play communicated to a Chinese audience, I was more interested in the audience’s experience of watching Jin Xing in the role of a vampish and seductive canine. Were they so taken by the illusion of the production that they believed, for moments, that they were watching a dog? Or did they believe at times that they were watching a dog transformed into a woman? To what degree did they, like Greg, become attracted to Sylvia? Pushing the idea of transformations and identifications further, how many, I wondered, sided with Kate in their dislike of Sylvia, and how many felt threatened by this dog who represented a challenge to the heteronormative couple? I suppose that Gurney had some notions about representation and transformation in mind when he wrote the play, but I doubt he had in mind the further complication of a transsexual in the lead. Jin Xing’s presence elevated the play from its simple thematic concerns with bedroom farce to a confrontation with issues of sexual identity and gender.

I next saw Jin Xing with her Dance Theatre in Guangzhou, where she collaborated with British pianist Joanna MacGregor and videographer Kathy Hinde in *Cross Border* (Xinghai Concert Hall, 24 October 2002). Thematically, the performance explored issues of urban life, sexual identity, and the transition China is currently undergoing as it enters the global capitalist economy. These themes were made palpable through dances portraying young harried men in suits with briefcases, large video images of crowded city streets, a young man experiencing sexual awakening in a sauna, and confrontational duets with men and women. But privately Jin Xing let me know that as a subtext she was interested in presenting the different stages of her own life and career. This became most clear in one tableau with dancers in various costumes: military, *Yang Ban Xi* (“Model Opera,” based mostly on revolutionary themes), folk dance, ballet, and martial arts. Overall, the talent and range of Jin Xing and her five dancers—as well as their humor and moments of play—impressed me as deserving of the international recognition they have been earning. I was nonetheless surprised to see two or three couples leave the show before it was even halfway through. There was nothing about the production even remotely offensive or boring.

I interviewed Jin Xing a week after I saw her in *Sylvia*, on 15 August 2002 in the lobby lounge of the Garden Hotel in downtown Shanghai. The interview was in English (her choice), and we spoke for several hours on many topics. Although this was our first meeting, I found her very willing to speak about the more intimate details of her life. This I took to be a result of many years of interviews and of responding to public interest. Indeed, she was very animated for most of the interview, speaking very fast and yet not fast enough to keep up with her train of thought. Despite her English fluency, at times she couldn’t help but get flustered looking for the right word, and occasionally her sentences didn’t quite make grammatical sense, even though her meaning seemed clear. In transcribing the interview, therefore, I tried as best I could to preserve Jin Xing’s cadences and phrasing, and attempted to limit my own editing specifically to issues of comprehensibility.

KIMBROUGH: I’ve read conflicting reports about your place of birth and your ethnicity. Can you set the record straight?

JIN: I was born in Shenyang. I am from Northeast China. I am Korean, completely. On my ID card, it reads “Korean minority” [Chaonian Zu]. My dad
was from North Korea. My mom was from South Korea. My father’s family came to China two generations ago. My mother came to China during the Korean War as a refugee. So I was born in China, and all my education was received in China.

KIMBROUGH: So your upbringing was mostly in the north?

JIN: Yes.

KIMBROUGH: Tell me about your early training. I know that when you were nine years old, you were admitted into the Chinese military’s dance academy. Were you dancing prior to that?

JIN: At that time, I had no idea that I would become a dancer. My dream and my goal were to be on the stage. It did not matter if I would be singing or dancing. I didn’t care. I just wanted to be on the stage. The military selected me at an early age, and I was like a child star when I was in the kindergarten and school. So the officials always saw me on TV. They said maybe this kid had the talent, so they came to my family to ask my parents’ permission to bring me to the military dance troupe. Of course my parents believed their kid would go to college and receive a proper education, so they refused. At that time I knew so strongly what I wanted. I quit school and went on a hunger strike the next day. The end was that I really convinced my parents and my parents let me go. From that age of nine, I was no longer dependent on my family and started living a military life in the military compound. I started training, receiving Russian classical ballet, Chinese classical dance, acrobatics, and Beijing Opera, all kinds of training. When you are in the military troupe, it is not like in an ordinary dance school, where if you are in the ballet department you only receive ballet training and the folk dancers only receive folk dance training. Here, everything. Besides, at this early age, we had scholastic programs as well. The military academy was not taught like other schools, but it had a separate educational regimen. Besides that, because you were a part of the military, you had to receive military training as well. So I remember when I was at the age of 10 and 11, I knew how to use all the machine guns and how to put bombs on bridges. Like we were prepared to be in the frontier of a war!

KIMBROUGH: A trained dancer and a trained killer.

JIN: Yes. A trained dancer and a trained killer, ready to serve the country! So that’s our duty. But I had no doubt about my life. I was committed. It was my lifestyle. Of course we wore uniforms, which made me feel privileged among the other kids. And every day through the gate of the military compound I could see kids of the same age carrying school bags or running around playing football. I had no jealousy and I knew we were different. They had their life. I had my life. I always accepted what happened to me. Never doubting or anything. That’s my attitude toward life.

KIMBROUGH: How many students were in your class?

JIN: That time, there were 32 kids. Half boys, half girls. I was the youngest one. Among the whole 32, I was the only 9-year-old. The rest were at least 11 and most of them were 13, 14.

KIMBROUGH: Were they all training to be dancers as well?

JIN: Yes, all dancers. These 32 kids belonged to the dance program.

KIMBROUGH: So this was specifically a dance academy?
JIN: No, a dance company affiliated with the army—Shenyang Junqu [“Shenyang Military District”].

KIMBROUGH: So your first school wasn’t with the People’s Liberation Army?

JIN: That was later. After three years of training with Shenyang Junqu, some kids were already 16 or 17 and getting taller. They could go onstage. But after three years, I was still only 12 years old, still a kid. They said, “This kid’s not useful!” So they sent me to Beijing to the People’s Army Art Institute Dance Department. So I went to school and got more training. I graduated in 1984.

KIMBROUGH: At some point you enrolled in the only modern dance studio, which was located in Guangzhou.

JIN: Yes. That was 1987. With Yang Meiqi, the schoolmaster. Madam Yang collaborated with the American Dance Festival [ADF]2 and she created the first modern dance research group in China. She ran a research class in Guangzhou. They selected 20 students from all over China for this class.

KIMBROUGH: Between 1984 and 1987 were you dancing professionally then?

JIN: Yes, I was dancing in the military troupe. After graduation in 1984, I had to go back to my old troupe, Shenyang Junqu. But in 1985 I joined the National Dance Company where I was the principal male dancer. Then in 1987 I started to study modern dance with Madame Yang and the ADF. Actually there weren’t many good dancers in the class because people had no idea of what modern dance was. At that time, I had no idea about modern dance at all. I always thought modern dance was something Western, nothing to deal with Chinese. Only one thing attracted me: one person would be selected to be sent to America. I looked at the paper and I knew: “That’s me.” So I went for it. Of course they were dying to have me join the class because I was a famous dancer.
KIMBROUGH: So you were picked to study with Yang Meiqi.

JIN: No, not study with Yang Meiqi. Study with all the teachers sent by the American Dance Festival. This was a cooperation, the American training of the first generation of modern dancers in China, in Guangzhou, sponsored by the American Dance Festival and the Asian Culture Council, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. So there were teachers such as José Limón and Martha Graham. From these 20 students, they chose only one. The Chinese didn’t choose, but the Americans chose who was the one to make a big contribution to Chinese modern dance. All the teachers picked Jin Xing. Me. At the time, I just went there. Yang asked me if I came for modern dance. I said no, I came to be the person to go to America! I was so confident. [Laughs.]

KIMBROUGH: How long was the training in Guangzhou?

JIN: One year. After one year training, they selected one person.


JIN: And they sent me to America. But I was a very difficult case. Twenty students and I was the only one chosen to go. I wasn’t even a member of the class because I still belonged to the military. I was told that if I wanted to be officially in the class I needed to quit the military and get my regular citizen ID card. But the military did not allow me to go. I was one of their best dancers and they did not want me to go. They asked why. I said I wanted to learn modern dance. They said I was perfect for the classical dance; why did I want to go to the modern dance? “You will have to start from the beginning again.” I said, “I want to learn.” I could not say that I wanted to go to America. The military said OK, and they let me go one year on the condition that after one year I would go back to continue to serve the military. I said OK. But then I was selected to go to America, and I could not get my passport because I was not out of the military yet! I had to get out of the military before I could apply for my passport. That’s the procedure. But the Americans did not know this.
They said, “We only want this Jin Xing. Any other student we do not want. He is qualified.” At that time I was a boy. The Chinese company did not know how to explain because the situation was tricky, military. It was delayed for two months. The American Consulate was waiting to give me my visa but I could not go because I did not have my passport. They almost gave up. I was depressed. Then I got a phone call from the Notary Public and they agreed to stamp my application without an ID card. With this stamp I was able to apply for my passport. I don’t know who stamped it—maybe it was the hand of God.

KIMBROUGH: You said you were a boy at that time. You’ve been quoted often saying that since the age of six you felt like a girl inside. Is that right?

JIN: Yeah.

KIMBROUGH: I think of the military as a masculine world. Was the military dance troupe a masculine world too?

JIN: Yes, it was. That was attractive to me. [Laughs.]

KIMBROUGH: Did you feel yourself in an ambiguous situation?

JIN: No. I tried to figure out who I was and what I was doing there. It took a few years for me to figure it out. At that time I was so attracted to some good-looking young military officers, and I thought, “Am I gay?” But I said I do not think so. But my friends said, “You are a boy and you are attracted to boys, so you are gay.” I said no I am not gay. All my best friends I talked to at that time were girls. I never played with boys, and also I was left out because I was too young. The same group of boys never played with me, I was just a little kid. I always played with girls. I felt very comfortable. I knew myself to be a girl. OK, if I am gay, what can I do? This is why I worked so hard—because I wanted to be famous. Then when I reached a certain level people would not care about my personal life.

KIMBROUGH: Or they would care more.

JIN: Yeah. I put all my attention to my dancing to reach a certain level. In 1985, when I entered the first Taoli Cup dance competition [annual student dance competition], I told myself that I should work as hard as I could. I wanted to get the first prize. Also my mom pushed me a lot. She is a very strong lady. She said, “Only the first prize, not even the second one.” People only recognize the first prize. I told myself if I did not get the first prize this time I would never work hard again in my life. Then the result came out and I won the first prize. I figured out at an early age that how much you give is how much you get. So after that, every year something happened. I got first place again and went to the United States. I felt I was lucky and at the same time I felt I was working hard for it.

KIMBROUGH: In the United States you studied with some formidable figures of modern dance: Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, José Limón, Alvin Ailey, the Nikolai/Louis Dance Lab, Paul Taylor. Who impressed you the most?

JIN: José Limón.

KIMBROUGH: What did you bring away from José Limón? What is it that you remember about his teaching?

JIN: José Limón’s style is more connected to my body, my background and education. I had such a strong classical training in my body. I think his style is
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the perfect transition from a classical form to a different breeding. He could work with the formal training in my body, the form. It was just like when you meet different people and you have conversations: I had a much closer understanding of José Limón’s style. I said OK! Even now my dance style is still connecting to José Limón’s. As for Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, I appreciated what they were doing. I have huge respect for the artists. Some part I like but some part I will just go, OK, leave it.

KIMBROUGH: Did you dance professionally in New York?

JIN: Yes, I worked for different companies. I was really fast. Many choreographers knew I was a good dancer. So while I was studying I was also dancing for three or four companies. I worked a lot. I also got a job in a Broadway production. But I did not join it because I was not part of Equity. I auditioned for the Paul Taylor Dance Company, which was looking for two male dancers. From 80 applicants, I made the final five. Then I was cut. I asked why. They said they could not hire me, although I was very good, because they got a phone call from the school and learned that I was on a scholarship and I had to go back to China.

KIMBROUGH: What was your most memorable performance experience in New York?

JIN: Before I went to America, I spoke no English at all. I learned my English in America. At the time I could only take technical classes. I could not be involved in any choreography or composition class. After one year, I studied in the school with Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis. This was from 1989 to 1990. Then Murray Louis, he taught me one of his solos, which he choreographed when he was 57 years old. He danced it once in New York. It’s called “Tremolo,” a solo that was accompanied by guitar music. It was beautiful. He taught me this dance. At that time I had no idea. He showed me a video and said “Jin, look at this piece and learn it.” I looked at it for five minutes and said, “No, it doesn’t suit me.” He asked why. I said there was no jumping, no turning, no technique, and could not show what I have! He said, “No, you do not need these. You have enough. You need style.” At that time I couldn’t figure it out. I said OK and so I learned from the video, every day, in one week. After that week I showed him my dance. I was imitating a 57-year-old man’s body. I had very little understanding of the piece. But the more and more I danced it, I started to really understand what was behind it. Now if you wanted me to choose a piece to dance, I would rather choose his piece, not one that I choreographed myself. It was a wonderful masterpiece. What made the performance the most memorable was because after he performed this piece, nobody had ever danced it. I was the first person who did it. Then all the New York press came to know that one Chinese dancer was going to dance Murray Louis’s piece again. At that time, Rudolf Nureyev also wanted to learn this piece. But Murray Louis did not teach him because he said, “You are a ballet dancer and this is completely modern. This is a completely different dialect.” Before I went on the stage, he was so excited. He said, “This dance is not talking about dance, but talking about experience, age. I always thought some people over 40 would take over this piece. But I never expected a Chinese boy.” I was 23 then. He said, “You did very good job.” It was a really beautiful piece. That taught me a lot.

KIMBROUGH: You were also undergoing a transition to choreography. The American Dance Festival had summer choreography workshops at Duke University, which you started to attend in 1989, and you won their choreographers award in 1991 for Half Dream.
JIN: Yes.

KIMBROUGH: It’s believed that choreographers move from dance to choreography because they have something more to say. Dancers, like actors, oftentimes just take what is given to interpret, but it’s not their own. Would you say that you started to choreograph because there was something more that you wanted to say as a dancer?

JIN: No! I was accepted into the American Dance Festival, and I was so excited to join. But I did not know my position. They put me into the International Choreography Workshop. So when I got there the first time in 1989, they told me that I was in the choreographer workshop. I said no, I wasn’t a choreographer, I was just a dancer. I am a student. But they said no, I was in the choreographer workshop. Then I went upstairs to the choreographer workshop and all the choreographers were there. One of the women on the staff said, “Excuse me, but students are downstairs.” I said, “Yes, I was downstairs, but they sent me to upstairs!” [Laughs.] So I was in the International Choreography Workshop. During those six weeks, you had to see a lot of pieces and give a class experiment and then you had to choreograph one piece for the festival. I thought, “My God!” All the other 20 choreographers were all over 35 years old and they worked in their individual theatres in their own countries and they had many years experience. I am only a young dancer. But they said I had to choreograph. So I said OK. So I choreographed my first piece in America, Crying Dragon. At that time in the Festival, there were about 50 Korean students studying there. So I used all the Korean students in my piece. Three days before the closing of the festival, the international choreographers gave performances. I asked if I could have my piece performed outside of the theatre. My piece came at the end of the program. So the audience came outside. I used available light: moonlight and streetlight. All the dancers were dancing in front of the theatre. That automatically put me into the choreographer position.

KIMBROUGH: So you enjoyed a career as a dancer and a choreographer. When did you realize you had something to say? When you were doing those choreography workshops?

JIN: No. Later. I think during that period—1989 to 1990—I kept choreographing small pieces following my own instinct. I did not know exactly if this was something I wanted to say or not. I just followed my instinct and created something that people liked. So I was not sure what I was doing. The result came out and the audience told me what they felt. I thought OK. I found what I wanted to say from the audience. Then more and more, after I moved to Europe in 1991, I was choreographing again. At that time I had more ideas of what I wanted to say through the pieces.

KIMBROUGH: How did New York strike you?

JIN: When I first arrived in New York, the next morning I was standing in Times Square, I said “Wow.” I learned that I had to be in charge of myself from that day. In China it is completely different. I know what my life would be like until I was 55. They have already planned it for you. In the military, you become this—either a teacher or choreographer or whatever. From that first day in New York I knew everything was in my hands, depending on what I wanted to become. I felt strongly that I was free. In the moment I was really excited but at the same time it was scary. How should I take this freedom? But I accepted it and I knew it was my city and I adapted to it very quickly, even if I did not speak a word of English.
JIN: After being in New York four years, I was dancing with American companies like Pilobolus. I had been to Europe to perform. I had a chance to discover Europe. Up until then I only knew America and China, and I saw that Europe was quite different. I also knew that some American cultural roots came from European countries. I said I needed to discover something there. So I thought about it and decided to go to Italy because I loved opera, the country, the people, and the language. So I packed my things and went to Italy. I got a job right away. I worked for a television company, Rai Uno. I lived in Rome for two years, 1991 to 1992. That was after I got a prize at the American Dance Festival in the summer. I moved. Everyone told me I was stupid and I should stay in New York so I could become famous. But I said New York will always be there, but I wanted to see more when I was still young. I was 24 and I could just pack my bag and go to Europe. If I was older I did not know if I could do that. When I wanted to come back to New York, I could come back because New York is always there.

KIMBROUGH: Italy, then Belgium for a year. Teaching?

JIN: Yes. Teaching. Teaching with the Royal Conservatory Dance Department. I was also teaching at Brussels Dance Academy. It was funny. Working in Italy was a very good life. One of the Italian contemporary dance companies in Pisa asked me to be a guest dancer and brought me to Brussels to perform. When I got there I saw—wow—there was much more happening there in the contemporary arts than in Italy. After the performance, when the company was ready to go back, I told them “Ciao!” I would stay there. So I had my friends bring me all my stuff and I vacated my apartment in Italy. I went to dance in the schools in Brussels. One day in the Modern Dance Department of the Royal Conservatory, a teacher was missing. So I gave a class as a substitute. After I gave the class, the students all wanted me to stay. Then I got a job.

KIMBROUGH: Then you came back to China?

JIN: Yes, I came back to China.

KIMBROUGH: Did that take a lot of thought or were you homesick?

JIN: No, not homesick.

KIMBROUGH: Then why back to China?

JIN: For the sex change.

KIMBROUGH: When did you make the decision?

JIN: Since I was 19 years old. When I was in America, I thought I was gay. So I went to gay society, gay clubs, met gay friends, had gay lovers. But the answer was, no. I was not gay. Gay people did not like me. [Laughs uncomfortably.]

KIMBROUGH: Why not?

JIN: They thought I was too feminine, mentally. I had a lot of gay friends. But gay men never became the type I like. All the men I was attracted to were bisexual or heterosexual. Then I got information about sex change. Then I got the idea: that’s me. That’s my life. It took me from 19 to 28. I came back to China to have the operation. I wanted to make sure. I never went to any psychiatrist. Usually in America if you want to have sex change, you will need to go to a psychiatrist for two to three years. I never did that. I knew what I was
doing. I just wanted to check if I had the right condition. God gave me the ability to become a pretty woman. That’s most important. If I were 1.85 meters tall [over six feet], I would forget about it. I want to look right. I know my life will always be on the stage. So I was really balancing.

KIMBROUGH: You mentioned earlier that if you trained hard, became good in your craft, then your personal life would not be an issue. Did you think you had become that good or were you a little afraid for your professional career?

JIN: I was a little bit worried about it. Maybe it would affect my professional career. It was 50–50. At the same time I had the confidence. It was a decision I considered from 19 to 28; it was not an overnight decision. I’d be thinking it over; I looked at the mirror every night before going to bed. I asked myself, “I want to get to be what I want to be, but at the same time I want to extend and continue my professional life.”

KIMBROUGH: In 1996, a year after the operation, you were conferred the title of Artistic Director of the second modern dance company in China, the Beijing Modern Dance Ensemble. That would say to me that the central government had become a lot more open about sexuality, and a lot more open about contemporary arts.

JIN: They had no comment about sexuality. In 1993, in the Beijing Dance Academy—a wonderful, the most powerful dance academy in China—they established a modern dance department. Students graduated after two years, but they had nowhere to go. The modern dance classes started graduating in 1995. Their teacher was my classmate down in Guangzhou. And they’d have to go into the folk dance company. They had nothing to do. At that time I had just come out of the hospital and was resting. Those students talked to their masters in the Academy and said why not have Jin Xing establish a modern dance company? The government had no idea what to do with these modern dance students. They thought, “Maybe she’s good. Ask if she wants to do it.” They asked me, “Would you want to be in charge and make this company?” I said why not. But they said, “We have no money for you. We are only providing the studio and the dormitories for the dancers. That’s it. All the production money you have to find by yourself.” It was just like a private company. They did not expect I could make such a big success in Beijing.

After three months, we had an opening of a new piece, Black and Red. Before the opening the show was almost closed down. One journalist from the People’s Daily had personal problems with one of the directors of the Beijing Dance Company, which our company was associated with. He wanted to take revenge, and since he did not find other ways, he decided to use this production. This guy pointed out that the colors “black” and “red” are political, meaning communism and something [anarchy] against each other. I said, “Fuck! Black and Red is just one of my dance pieces! The dancers are dressed in black costumes with red fans, that’s all.” Since I had a personal friend in the central government as well, I went up and told them to look at the piece. Then the Beijing Cultural Bureau came to see a rehearsal and said, “Fine, great performance, great work.” And then they talked to the journalist and told him to shut up and that I was a serious artist. Then he pointed out that it was insulting to Chinese culture to put on a show by a person whose sexuality was not clear. The next day’s Youth Daily had a big photo saying “Unclear-Sex Chinese Artist Will Be on Stage.” That was really insulting. I called my friends in CCTV [China Central TV, the State-sponsored television network] and had an interview. The next day I was suing Youth Daily in court. Then I was left alone and the show opened a week later. It was a big success.
KIMBROUGH: Was there public response to the article?

JIN: Yes. We had a dress rehearsal in the biggest theatre in Beijing, Poly Plaza, with 1,800 seats. The dress rehearsal was packed. Full house. There were 120 journalists and 40 cameras in the theatre filming it. Onstage I couldn’t hear the music, I could only hear the cameras!

KIMBROUGH: Any publicity was good publicity?

JIN: Yeah. It was so funny, the opening night seemed to be a big festival for the gay community in Beijing. [Laughs.] They felt they had found a leader or something.

KIMBROUGH: Do you think they did?

JIN: I have no idea, but they had someone who had come out from there.

KIMBROUGH: My wife and I have told our friends here in Shanghai that we saw you in Sylvia, and they all responded that they really admired you. They like your personality; they appreciate your talent. We’ve read about you in the papers, seen you on TV. From what I can tell, you have a great fan base.

JIN: Yes, in China. That’s why my company is surviving. Also in Korea. A month before we go to Korea to perform, all the tickets are sold out.

KIMBROUGH: The Korean press called you “a living legend of modern dance.”

JIN: Yes. Korean dancers have never achieved this in their history. No one was able to sell out tickets a month before the show. They asked me if I was surprised that the tickets were sold out; I said they had to! [Laughs.] Of course, sold-out shows happened in China and in Germany, too.

KIMBROUGH: In the U.S., we would say you have successfully “crossed over.” With the sex change, you’re not stuck in a marginalized or underground art scene. You have a mainstream career, which would be very difficult even in the U.S. Would you say this is all due to talent?

JIN: Courage, I believe.
KIMBROUGH: It seems to me that it is also a kind of success that one does not even encounter in the mainstream. Has this made an impression on you, or are you taking your success for granted?

JIN: Actually, I am under huge pressure in China, no matter where I go, huge pressure. But I am always calm. My appearance and attitude convince people who I am. Before people come to the theatre to see the performance, they already have a picture in their imagination about what kind of person I am. When the curtain opens, they try to match their picture with me. After an hour and a half in the theatre, they will have a new Jin Xing in their mind, something very convincing. That’s how I feel today. I don’t mind, I don’t care how they describe me before they’ve met me. You should allow people’s wild imaginations to go on. But once they meet me, they have to start again.

KIMBROUGH: You accept that the audience may not come to the theatre to see your art, but that they come because of their curiosity.

JIN: Sixty percent of the audience comes to see Jin Xing, not what she is doing.

KIMBROUGH: You’ve said that the press has been too interested in your personal life, not your artistic life.

JIN: Right. For a while I was feeling lonely. I was also disappointed. People paid too much attention to my personal life rather than my artistic achievement. But now my thinking has changed. A few months ago I talked to one of my friends, a philosopher. He said, “Jin Xing, look at it this way: there are many transsexuals in this world. You are not the only transsexual in China. There are many great dancers in this world, and you are not the only one. But because these two traits are combined in one, you have started to affect people in China. Of course it’s your dancing, but it is you as a person, your attitude, your confidence toward life that convinces people. In the meantime, your dancing is also affecting people. Think about that. If you were just a dancer, you would never make such a big influence like you do now.”

KIMBROUGH: So these 60 percent come and they don’t know what they are going to see. Would you think some of them—

JIN: Become a dance audience!

KIMBROUGH: Do they?

JIN: Yes! That’s why my dance performances are sold out: I have a base audience! People who never came to dance performances before, because of me, have become interested in dance. So I think if my personal life helps, it is fine. I benefit from this.

KIMBROUGH: Based on my observation, most of the people who came to Sylvia came to see the play.

JIN: Yes. Shanghai has an audience for theatre plays. Most of those people have seen me dance but they never thought Jin Xing can act.

KIMBROUGH: In February of 2002 you took part in the In Transit festival with Rubato Session in Berlin. The PR for In Transit described it as an intercultural arts exposition confronting and exploring issues of difference, identity, multiculturalism, and biography. This is one case that I know of that might have capitalized on your transsexuality.
JIN: No. People would expect that the piece would be something like that. But no. When I was doing the choreography with the German dancer, Dieter Baumann, he was dancing the European male part and I was dancing the Asian female part. The most interesting thing of this work is not about gender crossing—he’s dressed like a woman, me like a man—no. What is the common movement for both genders? Which movement belongs to man? Which movement belongs to woman? This piece is talking more about this. Now in the society, we have certain gestures for male, certain gestures for female. So we destroy these things. If men are doing the same moves like women, what will affect you? If females are doing exactly moves like men, what will affect you? It’s interesting. I discovered, no matter in which country, doesn’t matter—American or European, Asian or Chinese—when an audience sees me dance, they already have a picture because of my personal history. But this piece has nothing to do with transsexuality. It purely involves two dancers—a male, Western man, on the stage with an Eastern woman. That kind of dialogue.

KIMBROUGH: Western society seems to be preoccupied with identity and difference; so many problems arise because we don’t know what to do with our differences. Do you feel you have a responsibility to help your audience think about contemporary issues of difference, identity, gender?

JIN: No. I do not think I have responsibility. But some people think I am one icon for the young people of China today. I appreciate that my fans who come to see my shows are all well-educated university students.

KIMBROUGH: You are not a pop star.

JIN: I never consider myself as a pop star. All the Chinese magazines try to show me as one. [Jin Xing pulls from her bag an entertainment magazine and shows me a spread on her with a few large, glossy, glamour photos.] I can cope with it, but I do not think this is me. This is too pretty. It is how a pop star looks like. I can do this, but this is not me. If the public wants to see this, it’s fine.

KIMBROUGH: Do you find in a sense it’s a little demeaning, insulting?

JIN: I don’t take it as insulting. I take it as fun. When I see this type of picture, I think, “OK, I’m looking good! Next time I can be in a film. I have the ability.” That’s it! That’s the only benefit. When people ask me if I consider myself as beautiful, I say no, because I consider myself as attractive, but not a beautiful woman. Beautiful is for the 18-year-old girls. They are all beautiful. After a woman becomes 30 years old, she should become interesting, attractive.

KIMBROUGH: Have you been offered advertising deals?

JIN: I always refuse. I don’t do TV game shows or those kinds of popular, public events. I only go do certain talk shows with interesting topics.

KIMBROUGH: You’ve choreographed and danced to Carmina Burana [2000], the scenic cantata by Carl Orff. You were quoted as saying that you wanted to create a dance that reflects the Chinese point of view on sex.

JIN: Yes, sexuality. For me, this original Carmina Burana music piece was very sexually written. For me, as a Chinese artist, I was completely drawn by the music itself. I don’t understand the language [Latin and Middle High German]. I actually don’t care what they are singing. I only care about the quality of voice. So I put in a lot of understanding about individuality and groupiness. At the same time, sexual discovery. This piece is always performed by a chorus
singing. In Europe, there have been three productions with choreography. All these productions had sexual performances, very exposed, always nude, dancing nude, with a duet, everything always involved with sexual scenery. When the producer asked me to produce it in Shanghai he said, “Just go for it.” But I said no. I have my own understanding of how to stage these kinds of ideas. Even though I do contemporary work and I performed for years in the West, I am still very classical, and conservative in my personal life.

KIMBROUGH: Do you think you can put this Chinese view on sexuality into words?

JIN: The Chinese view is “not very wide open.” It is something under, more of a feeling; imagination, rather than action or reality. Chinese tend to have yi yin [“licentiousness of the mind”]. In the U.S., the sexual part is completely opened up. It’s there. You select what you want to be. But in China, it is always covered up. That makes it much more mysterious. Our culture suggests that we enjoy yi yin rather than real things happening.

I can explain this by an example, one duet. My dance partner and I did a pas de deux. We had sentimental body movements, but we did not have any sexual movements. But behind me all the girls were dancing, the men carrying mosquito nets with the girls underneath. You don’t see the face, you only see the legs. We’re dancing the duet in front, and the girls are crossing behind us, you can only see the legs crawling. This is like a woman’s soft thinking or masturbation, whatever. You don’t see a man and woman touching each other, or dancers’ faces, but only the legs. Very oriental. In one part, a man was playing with a long bamboo stick. The bamboo is very soft and the man was waving the bamboo. I told the female dancers never to react to the man, but react to the bamboo, thinking of it as a sex object. This is how I explain sexuality and desire: it’s onstage.

KIMBROUGH: The Ministry of Culture in Beijing has some control over the companies in China. Would you say that today in China the system is still quite rigid?

JIN: Yeah.

KIMBROUGH: Less or more than a decade or two ago, when you left?

JIN: Getting better, but there’s not a big difference, just maybe some programs changing. But still controlled by the propaganda thing. That’s why now I am working with my own company, which is the first private dance company in China. So maybe a different story.

KIMBROUGH: Did the Beijing Modern Dance Ensemble really break up after three years?

JIN: It did.

KIMBROUGH: Did you bring any of the dancers with you into the new company?

JIN: Two or three dancers. Because for me, there are many dance objects, or dance machines, in China. Like myself, I was a perfect dance machine before I studied modern dance. I was a wonderful dance machine without a brain. Just enter the program, I do whatever you want. Maybe more—fantastic technique. I really danced with my brain after I started modern dance. I wanted to see onstage what I saw, what I felt. So now I train my dancers, I never hold auditions. If any dancer likes my style and wants to join my company, they
have to take a one or two week class. Then I say, either you stay continually or you go. I never give one-day auditions. I want to see their technique, I want to see their personality, I want to see if the heart is really willing to dance, not for this job or because the company is well known, because they can go all over the world.

KIMBROUGH: Did you start the company right away?

JIN: Right away, at the end of 1998.

KIMBROUGH: At one time you were also made the artistic director of the Shanghai Opera House.

JIN: Yes. One year. They brought me to Shanghai, but I found the same bullshit as in Beijing Modern Dance Ensemble—still the government wanted this or that. I said no and I wanted to do it on my own.

KIMBROUGH: Are you completely independent? Is it difficult to raise your own money?

JIN: Yes. Very difficult. Now I almost spend 50 percent of my time and energy to look for sponsorship.

KIMBROUGH: Do you agree with the popular view that the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a complete disaster for Chinese art?

JIN: No, I don’t agree. For the artists, the Cultural Revolution destroyed creativity. But it created one treasure for the Chinese culture: Yang Ban Xi. It’s the best form of Chinese musical theatre created during that period. It was created under the direction of the wife of Chairman Mao, Jiang Qing. Of course each piece was a propaganda story. But we are not talking about stories, but form. They put Beijing Opera with Western music and changed ballet. I grew up with these plays.

KIMBROUGH: At the same time, Jiang Qing destroyed artists, burned thousands of scripts...

JIN: That’s true. But we need to see the two sides. One is what’s left. The other is what’s missing. So I don’t think the Cultural Revolution was completely bad.

KIMBROUGH: After the Cultural Revolution, there was great activity because there was a new sense of freedom. But with Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, Chinese artists started to feel the same pressures that Western artists feel.

JIN: Confused.

KIMBROUGH: I’m thinking that they have to depend upon the public, upon funding, and contend with movies and TV. These are pressures that a state-run institution does not have to deal with. Subsidies are no longer available.

JIN: This is what people have to deal with because they are used to having everything funded by the government. Some artists can’t deal with being completely independent. Before, we all talked about Wen Yi Gong Zuo Zhe [“The Culture and Art Worker”]—all the artists under one name. After the break-up [of the Cultural Revolution], I think we started to have real artists. Some people are focusing on art, some people are doing the pop things, some are continuing to do propaganda, and others are going for money. It’s all separated. Now it’s all very clear. Two years ago I gave a speech at a business forum.
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in Shanghai. I said China should separate three things: propaganda, culture, and art. Now the country’s situation is getting better. It’s now a sandwich situation. Art is at the bottom. Above art is culture. Above culture is propaganda. Come on. Separate the three things. You can continue doing propaganda things, we don’t care; you can preserve your traditional culture, but give art some space to create new things.

KIMBROUGH: On top of the sandwich in the United States is the commercial nonsense.

JIN: Yes, money.

KIMBROUGH: Are you afraid of that? When you turn on the TV and see those Chinese music videos, all you see is poor imitations of Western models.

JIN: That’s the transition. Everything comes from the confusion. They don’t know what to do. It is easy for them to adopt things that Westerners have already experimented with. I think the biggest success of Broadway and Hollywood movies is that it makes artistic achievement and business sense. I appreciate that. In China, they are just learning the sketch, but they’re not really into it. People always offer me chances to direct musicals because I directed the first musical in China in 1997—The Sound of Music. I tell them, “Let’s talk about the whole thing. Do you consider it as just one production, or do you consider the whole investment?” They say they are talking about investment and want the invested money back after three months. I say you’re talking bullshit. They have no idea about what a musical is like. Musicals cost a lot of money, a whole business investment. It’s a whole big construction project. I tell them, “If you don’t get the idea, don’t talk about the musical.” No original musical play has come out in China yet. They are still trying. I am waiting to see.

KIMBROUGH: I read a New York Times article about the 50th Anniversary of the P.R.C. and a big arts festival held in Beijing in commemoration [1 August to 15 October 1999]. A competition offered 10,000 U.S. dollars for an original play. According to the article, writers did not submit any because they did not want to mess with the bureaucracy [see Melvin 1999].

JIN: Yes. Like the Shanghai Cultural Bureau approached me three weeks ago and said to me, “Next year we want to do a musical and we want you to be the director, and incorporate another director.” I told them, you are talking bullshit. Either you ask me to direct or you ask this other lady to direct. We cannot have two directors in one play. Is she going to be my assistant or will I be her assistant? Make it clear. Do you want me just as a choreographer? What they wanted to put on is Zhao Yiman, a heroine in Dongbei [the northeast of China] during the Anti-Japanese War [1937–1945]. I said, “Do you want to take this story and make a musical? I doubt it. Why don’t you bring a new idea?” It’s bullshit. It’s propaganda again. They just wanted to use the musical form for propaganda. The musical is just another new Western thing, but the insert is propaganda. I told them to ask someone else. I am not interested and I have no feeling to create this kind of thing.

KIMBROUGH: Can you envision yourself five years or ten years down the road? What do you think you will be doing?

JIN: For now, I am organizing an international festival in 2003 in Shanghai. In April 2003, Pina Bausch will come to China for the first time. After she performs, she will give a one-week workshop. It will be the first international dance festival in China, organized privately. Nothing to do with the government.
Notes

1. “The Categorization of and Diagnosis Criteria for Mental/Psychic Disorders in China,” published 4 April 2001, states that the Chinese Psychological Society would no longer regard homosexuality as a mental illness. The publication does not reflect any official position of the Chinese government.

2. The Ensemble (also called Troupe) has since been reconstituted as the Beijing Modern Dance Company under the artistic direction, since 1999, of Willy Tsao. Their U.S. premier was in Los Angeles on 28 August 2003 as part of the Grand Performances 2003 Summer Series at California Plaza.

3. The American Dance Festival’s mission is to educate and nurture modern dancers and choreographers. It has its roots in the Bennington School of Dance, begun in Bennington, Vermont, in 1934 by Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. Since 1977, ADF has been based at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and is best known for its summer programs of performances, classes, workshops, panels, and exhibits. Besides China, the ADF has sponsored programs in Japan, Korea, India, and Russia, as well as collaborations in countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America. For more information visit the ADF’s website at <www.americandancefestival.org>.

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