

January 24, 2023

Dear Colleagues,

I don't usually write about ballroom dance but today I will. My parents (my father and my mother before she passed) have been part of the Asian American ballroom dance community in Southern California since the late 1980s. Like many other first-generation Chinese immigrants who came to the US because of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, they frequented Asian-owned ballroom dance studios like Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park, a city in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California.

The relationship between ballroom dance and Asians is refracted through colonization and migration as bodies and sound move through space shaped by geopolitical choreography. Whether through direct colonial rule or cultural imperialism the French, British, and Americans imported their cultures to East and Southeast Asia, popularizing ballroom dance in the region from the early 20th century. Think of the dance halls and jazz clubs in 1920s Shanghai, and the tangos filtered through Europe in 1930s Vietnam and Japan. Just as ballroom dance was associated with ideas about modernity and progress in early 20th century Europe and the US, these same ideas held true in Asia, particularly among those who were educated and had traveled to Europe and the United States at the time. However, like any medium, dance could also reflect more overtly coded ideas of racism. In our home state of California, the Watsonville anti-Filipino riots of 1930 were instigated by racism-fueled fears of Filipino men as "cheap" contract labor and because their "splendid dancing" of the swing, jitterbug, and lindy hop might seduce white women.

Like many social dances, the different types of dancing included under the umbrella of ballroom dance would fall in and out of fashion. In the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a swing dance revival in the US musically connected to rock, punk, and ska. And when it seemed like network television had exhausted every variation on reality television, ABC came up with *Dancing with the Stars* (the American version of a British show), spurring more interest in ballroom dance in the 2000s. These spaces and images of dancing bodies were decidedly white or at least white-washed and Asian Americans would have to make their own spaces and images for/of themselves and for/of each other.

In the 1980s-90s, Monterey Park came into its own as a destination ethnoburb for middle-class Asian Americans. It's where one went for the best food, the best firecrackers, the best lion dancers, and the best crowds for Lunar New Year. Dance studios such as Star and others like it catered to a demographic no one else outside these ethnic enclaves paid attention to – Asian American baby boomers looking to dance, socialize, and spend their leisure time in the company of others.

Star and Lai Lai (the second location where the gunman was disarmed) had for years been a part of my parents' daily conversations about where they were going and who they were going out with. What started out as a way to get some exercise evolved into

the core of their social lives, as they turned old friends into ballroom dance enthusiasts and met new friends on the dance floor. Asian immigrants like my parents localized ballroom dancing; one could dance all night, and then go out afterwards for a midnight snack of congee and milk tea nearby.

After COVID restrictions were lifted, my father resumed his weekly dance lessons at Star Ballroom Dance Studio, and on any other Saturday night he would have been sitting next to his dance teacher where the shooting took place. But this past Saturday, instead of his usual routine, my father spent the day with a grandnephew and had dinner down the street from the studio before returning home. The next day he would hear from friends and friends of friends on both sides of the Pacific that his dance teacher, Mr. Ma, was among the 11 victims who died.

Dancers often refer to a dance studio as a home. Its smooth wooden floors bear the weight of joy, exhaustion, elation, tears, frustration, discipline, and satisfaction. As their predecessors did before them, the victims of the shooting in Monterey Park may have felt at home, having made ballroom dance their own as a vehicle for self-expression, health, community-building, or escape from the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Asian racism. That day, however, they were unable to escape gun violence and this country's lack of will and courage to eliminate it. My heart goes out to those whose loved ones did not return home to them.

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Hongying Jian
Yu-Lun Kao
Lilan Li
Ming Wei Ma
Mymy Nhan
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Sincerely,
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About the Author

Yutian Wong is professor in the School of Theatre & Dance at San Francisco State University. She is the author of *Choreographing Asian America* (Wesleyan, 2010), editor of *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance* (Wisconsin, 2016); co-editor with Jens Richard Giersdorf of the *Routledge Dance Studies Reader, 3rd edition* (Routledge,

2018); co-editor with SanSan Kwan of *Dancing in the Aftermath of Anti-Asian Violence* for *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* (forthcoming); and co-editor of *Bangtan Remixed: The Critical BTS Reader* (under contract Duke) with Patty Ahn, Michelle Cho, Frances Gateward, Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, Rani Neutill, and Mimi Thi Nguyen.