

Yen-lu Wong to study Chinese cultural experience

May 18, 1978

The way people move; how they use their personal space can be as important a method of cultural expression as religion, food, art, or language according to Yen-lu Wong, a choreographer and assistant professor of drama at the University of California, San Diego.

Ms. Wong plans to study the Chinese cultural experience in America by looking at the movements of Chinese people now living in the United States. Her efforts will be aided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

"The movement arts have historically been an integral part of the lives and culture of the Chinese people," said Ms. Wong. "They offer a rich subject for study as a repository of and a vehicle for the expression of changing philosophies, values, behavior patterns, life styles and customs."

Ms. Wong and a multidisciplinary team of researchers will conduct their studies in the country's two largest Chinese communities--New York and San Francisco--during the next year.

She added that her research will be a contributing part of a new national program in Technology and Cultural Transformation being developed by the U.S. National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Using videotape equipment Ms. Wong will examine the movements of Chinese people in three different genres.

"One genre would be the movement arts as inherent to the culture such as the martial arts--Tai Chi and Kung Fu, for example. The second genre would be performance; what you see on the stage. And the third would be in everyday life; how people walk and perform tasks such as working in a restaurant.

"We don't know why one people move differently from another," continued Ms. Wong. "That's the whole element of style, which is how a whole group of people interact with the environment, which can include geography, climate and their particular world view.

"The Chinese, for instance, view space more as a sphere than Europeans do," said Ms. Wong. "If you cook with a wok you understand that what is demanded is different from someone flipping pancakes on a griddle in terms of their movements.

"What is important about this project is that we are beginning to combine looking at the biological aspect of movement with the cultural aspect of movement. With this basic kind of approach we can begin to understand movement acquisition the same way we can understand language acquisition.

Ms. Wong is presently teaching the art of movement through the drama department at UC San Diego. A native of China, where she began her dance training, Ms. Wong has been a guest artist at universities and theater centers in the United States as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 1974, she was a Fellow of the National

Endowment for the Humanities, researching Chinese theater as a means of understanding cultural identity and cultural pluralism. She is also the current president of the California Dance Educators Association.

For information contact: Paul Lowenberg, 452-3120

(May 18, 1978)