

[Choreographer Lily Cai joins East, West in dance](#)

- Ann Murphy, Special to The Chronicle
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Forget G-string, geek or even Google. The g-word these days is globalism. With dreams of the global village gone, the global pressure cooker has taken its place, and everyone seems to be feeling the heat.

Everyone, that is, except Lily Cai, artistic director of the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company. Cai, who came to the Bay Area in 1983 from Shanghai after a career as a principal with the Shanghai Opera House, is a choreographer whose dance is a fusion of myriad Chinese dance forms and ballet and Western modern dance elements. It is a visually beautiful, unpressured mix of global elements that boasts stunning lighting, especially by designer Matthew Antaky.

Cai, who frequently uses compositions or musical collages by her composer husband, Gang Situ, adeptly portrays a world in which space, time and the individual body are perceived differently than in the West.

Where Cai falters is in a choreographic aimlessness derived from her difficulty in building dances Western style -- with overarching internal logic and psychological drive.

This wasn't an issue in "Dynasty Suite" from 1993, which opened the program Saturday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and has become one of her signature pieces. A must-see for anyone with a penchant for Jet Li films, this revue-style display of four historical Chinese dances was a well-planned introduction to the vast range of the country's dance forms. It also eased viewers into the more opaque as well as more daring world premiere of "Beyond," which, claiming an overriding theme, failed in ways "Dynasty Suite" never had to risk.

"Beyond" was billed as a portrait of the passions of a Chinese woman's life through five stages, from her wedding to the "next life." Cai's choice to begin with marriage seemed particularly odd. But if, as in Bronislava Nijinska's "Les Noces," Cai was asserting that personal autonomy for Chinese women is nonexistent, and passion begins with marriage, she needed to make this clear as well as believable. I initially understood "next life" to mean afterlife. I later came to think Cai meant that marriage was followed by four more phases, although these were vague. If there were ghosts in the dance, I missed them.

Although muddled and not deepened by Gang Situ's provocative sound collage of JiPing Zhao, Fritz Kreisler, Claude Debussy and Samuel Barber, "Beyond" was rife with beautiful imagery. There was the opening, startlingly sexual image on the backdrop of a red slit with an array of trees projected in it. There were dances with four women hidden by rectangles of white silk making them resemble strange lunar jellyfish.

There were also gorgeous interludes of women in crepuscular light with moonlike translucent circles they curved and gently swung and rocked back and forth in circles, the central dance shape in China.

The danced culminated with the troupe of seven moving with quiet eloquence as mothers, each dancer cradling, supporting, nuzzling identical dolls with vast poetic restraint, capturing the power of motherhood. Were the babies the "next life" Cai meant? "Dynasty" depicts four Chinese empires through varied movement, costume, lighting and sound and has the visual and educational appeal, along with the revue style, of an Ethnic Dance Festival offering.

Whether it was the Mongolian style headdresses and block shoes of the Court Dance, or the wild figurations by the silk scarves of the Flying Goddess dance, "Dynasty" made me want to open a few more history books, see a few more martial arts movies and renew my belief in globalism.