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Dance for Development: Uyghur Women in the Chinese Diaspora Creating Self-Empowerment Through Dance

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**Dance for Development:
Uyghur Women in the Chinese Diaspora Creating
Self-Empowerment through Dance**

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*“...We can’t live without music...we can’t live without dance...
so I don’t think it’s going to ever die any time soon...when dance dies...Uyghurs die...”*
Zaida¹

Abstract

Socio-economic development in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has significantly impacted Uyghur culture. Proponents of the Chinese Western Development initiatives claim improved quality of life and technological advancements, while critics cite that Han in-migration and assimilation has resulted in acculturation of Uyghur identity. As performing arts, especially dance, are essential components of Uyghur culture, Uyghur women employ dance as a reaction to reaffirm cultural identity. Through dance, women send messages of cultural survival, enabling them to negotiate positions of power for themselves. Their negotiation through dance has resulted in a unique form of self-empowerment, cultural revival and pride. This paper analyzes the dialectics of the dance revealed through interviews conducted with Uyghur women in the diaspora. These accounts illustrate Uyghur analysis of development processes while also providing a stage from which they reaffirm their cultural distinctiveness.

Keywords: Uyghur, dance, gender, China, development, cultural empowerment, identity

Kristie N. Smith received her M.A. degree in International Development and Social Change from Clark University and B.A. degree in Asian Studies from Florida State University. A current Fulbright Scholar at Xinjiang Arts Institute, her research is exploring the meanings and stories behind traditional Uyghur dance, the means of cultural transmission and the impact of development on such art forms.

¹ When asked, “How important is dance to Uyghur culture?” Zaida responded with this answer. Interviewed by author in Washington, DC on July 27, 2005. A fictitious name has been used.

Prelude

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between the Chinese Western Development Policy (WDP)² in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and Uyghur culture, particularly dance. As dance is an essential component of Uyghur culture and carries with it centuries of traditions and stories, Uyghurs attest to the importance of the arts in their culture. A further analysis of the traditional Uyghur dance demonstrates that dancing and singing at family gatherings not only bonds the community, but also reflects creative ways in which Uyghurs embrace their culture and identity.³ Uyghurs are utilizing dance, music, and song to enforce a sense of belonging and unity in response to the implementation of recent cultural restrictions. Furthermore, as there is a lack of literature that reflects the experiences of Uyghur women and the impact these development policies have on their lives, dance is identified as a means of measuring Uyghur women's engagement in addition to analyzing how Uyghur women theorize the processes of development as it relates to gender and their position in society. By using a gendered analysis of development, the paper will illustrate the differential effects of development policies on Uyghur women due to their lack of access to resources and space for decision making (Sen and Grown, 1987). The feminization of poverty⁴ (Sen and Grown, 1987) as a result of cultural norms, the sexual division of labor, male domination, and insufficient participation in the development process is adversely impacting Uyghur women and through narrative analysis, I will explore Uyghur women's agency and creativeness in thwarting the effects of development while simultaneously promoting their cultural identity.

Methodology

I employed various methods including formal and informal interviews, participant observation, semi structured interviews and a review of literature focusing primarily on

² Also known as the "Develop the West" or "Western Development Campaign". The terms are used interchangeably.

³ As a Peace Corps volunteer in Sichuan, China (1999-2001), I was introduced to Uyghurs and found their ethnic classification and linguistic traits unique. In the summer of 2000, my travels to Xinjiang included cities such as Turpan, Kashgar, Hami, and Urumqi.

⁴ A term recognizing that social and economic conditions, development policies, and patriarchal structures contribute to the differing and adverse impact poverty has on women in comparison to men. This theme will be elaborated in greater detail.

development in Xinjiang, Uyghur culture and dance, and identity politics. Some of the questions I attempted to answer included: (1) How have Chinese development policies impacted Uyghur culture? (2) What is the significance of dance to Uyghur culture and identity? (3) To what extent do Uyghur women's understandings of their participation in dance reveal how Uyghurs are assessing and responding to the new developments in the area? These questions provided the foundational structure with which to adequately understand how Uyghur women in the diaspora assess the development situation in Xinjiang as it relates to their cultural identity.

Ten Uyghur women living in and around the Washington, DC area and surrounding suburbs⁵ were interviewed for this paper. Additionally, formal and informal interviews were conducted with two male Uyghur scholars. The women ranged in age from early 30s up to 77 years old and showed a diversity of educational and socio-economic standing. Additionally, the length of time in the United States varied as some of the women had been living in the United States for over 10 years, while others arrived a few months ago. The path of migration also varied greatly. Many of the women had lived in Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan before resettling in the United States, and a few had recently arrived from Xinjiang. Half of the women spoke English, and I relied on the assistance of a Uyghur translator in order to facilitate communication with the remaining women.

The Stage

Background on Xinjiang

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in northwestern China on its Central Asian border, is populated by nomadic pastoralists and sedentary oasis dwellers and has an ethnically diverse population. At one time the majority population of Xinjiang consisted of the Uyghurs, one of China's fifty-five ethnic minorities. However the recent influx of ethnic Han Chinese and other minorities has changed the region's demography and impacted various facets of Uyghur

⁵ I was introduced to a Uyghur woman whose family immigrated to Turkey and currently resides in Washington, DC. We communicated for several months and I was later invited to celebrate the New Year with the Uyghur community. This opportunity was viewed as a chance to acquaint myself with community members, engage in participant observation and also to build rapport with individuals I would be interviewing.

lifestyle and culture. The region, rich in natural resources such as oil and gas reserves, has a population of approximately 17 million - 9 million of them Uyghurs (Toops, 2004; Gladney, 1999). As a strategy of developing the western region, the Chinese government has actively encouraged the influx of other ethnic minorities, residents of over crowded eastern provinces, such as Shanghai, and as a resettlement effort, residents of Hubei province.⁶ However, as a result of the terrorist attacks in the United States and the shift in the modus operandi of U.S. security strategies and protocol, the Chinese government has mirrored anti-terrorist strategies in an attempt to quell possible resurgences in Xinjiang. This has resulted in the systematic restriction of their movements thereby exacerbating tensions with the Uyghurs, who have witnessed the Han population in Xinjiang, once a mere 6 to 7 percent, balloon to approximately 40 to 45 percent of Xinjiang's total population. (McNeal, 2001)

Lights

Women and Dance

“The only way we can tell people of who we are is through our art like dancing.

That's how people will recognize us...through our dancing.”⁷

Renowned for their performing arts - dance, music and song are essential to Uyghur culture and foster a sense of belonging and unity in the community and at social events. Most popular are the Twelve Mukam, which are long narrative poems, song and dance, and music. The Mukam essentially form the foundation of the Uyghur performing arts.⁸ In Nathan Light's *Slippery Paths* (1998), he notes the importance of the Twelve Mukam by describing it as “an

⁶ The residents of Hubei have been displaced by the hydroelectric dam being built in the area. It is estimated that approximately 1.2 to 1.9 million people will be flooded out at the conclusion of the project. See Jackson, S. and Sleigh, A. 2000, Resettlement for China's Three Gorges Dam: Socio-economic impact and institutional tensions Communist and Post Communist Studies, Volume 33, Issue 2

⁷ Belika, 35 years old, a young mother and student was interviewed on January 4, 2005 in Washington, DC.

⁸ The long melodious stanzas are believed to have been created in the 16th century by the Queen Amannisa Khan, married to King Abdurishit. Queen Khan was believed to be a magnificent musician and talented musician. Kamberi, Dolkun. “Uyghurs and Uyghur Identity”, Sino-Platonic Papers, 150 (May, 2005) Was given to the author on January 3, 2006.

artistic encyclopedia”⁹ that captures the essence of Uyghur life through music, song and dance. These dances reflect the ways of life, the customs and traditions, and religious beliefs of former times. The Mukam also holds significance of a time in Uyghur history when there was prosperity and peace in the region. The most popular of the dances, Sanam, Dolan, and Sama, are regionalized to one particular place (Mackerras, 1985; Light, 1998); therefore Uyghurs from different regions of Xinjiang can express their dance with a level of ingenuity and creativeness.

In *The Politics and Poetics of Dance*, Susan Reed (1998) notes that dance is quite powerful: “In some colonized areas, dance practices posed a genuine threat of political resistance or rebellion, particularly in societies where dance was a site of male collective performance, in which a sense of unity and power was heightened, potentially spawning uprisings against colonial rulers or slave master” (p. 506). Moreover, the Uyghur women I interviewed described the stages of dance and the symbolism of “*storytelling*” or of a certain type of “*body narrative*”¹⁰ that it embodied and the significance it held in Uyghur culture.

Culture

*“The stories are the real important thing. Of course I will teach her to dance. It means everything that our culture will continue. Our hope lies in our children.”*¹¹

As women are the primary conduits of cultural knowledge, they ensure that cultural identity will survive by passing it on to their children (Beoku-Betts, 1997). When women of childbearing age¹² were asked if they would teach their children the art of Uyghur dance, they all explained that dance and song are essential to Uyghur culture. Though most Uyghur women dance, it was explained to me by Kareema that in Uyghur culture, “If you can walk, you can

⁹ Also see Light, Nathan, (2003) *The Uyghur 12 Muqams as Ethnic Cultural Symbol* for additional information.

¹⁰ Lisa Law describes this in *Dancing on the Bar: Sex, Money and the Uneasy Politics of Third Space*, as it relates to Filipino go-go dancers working the sex industry and the perception of power.

¹¹ Kareema, a young mother and former elementary teacher. Interviewed by the author on January 7, 2006 in Washington, DC.

¹² For the purpose of the paper, the group of women I interviewed who were under 40 years old were considered to be of childbearing age. However the actual childbearing age is significantly younger in Xinjiang.

dance, if you can talk, you can sing”. These women placed special emphasis on cultural preservation, since experiences of oppression and marginalization were themes that reemerged in the interviews. The Uyghur women in the diaspora reaffirmed the need to pass on aspects of their culture to their children, and by using dance as a means of challenging convention.

In *We Got Our Way of Cooking Things*¹³, Beoku-Betts (1997) argues that as slaves, black women were marginalized within a larger community, but as a means of organizing themselves around cooking, they told stories, and spent time with family in an effort to maintain their culture. This was a way of promoting their cultural identity. In fact as Beoku-Betts claims, this method of organizing provided “great potential for an understanding of gendered social relations, knowledge construction, and cultural identity” (p. 535). Beoku-Betts then argues that these seemingly “domestic” duties need not be seen as a form of gender inequality, but as black women cooked, Uyghur women dance; they are using this medium as a means of preserving culture (Beoku-Betts 1997, p. 536).

When asked, “*How important is dance to Uyghur culture?*” Salima explained “It’s a way of expressing ourselves...first it’s our culture from ancient traditional times from my grandparents, parents, me, and now my children dance. I see them dancing [and] it’s like a treasure that has been carried out over generations, so I feel like it’s a treasure that I should keep and I should preserve, so to me dance [is] like a tradition, something very valuable and very sacred. It’s also a way of expressing yourself”. This tradition of passing down knowledge is what Uyghur women feel will allow them to preserve their culture as a treasure and assure them their children will continue to pass it on in the future.

In *Women, Culture, Development*, Chua and his colleagues (2000) declare that in the development field, culture has at times not been considered of great importance as compared to more “traditional” means of evaluating development, i.e. economics, agriculture, and so forth (p. 824). However, culture is extremely important to the success of many development projects. In fact, recognition of culture and cultural identity is central to many debates and if not adequately addressed, may hinder development (Chua et al., 2000). Therefore, the authors note that culture should not be seen simply as the “habits, customs and mores of a particular society but rather that culture refers to structures of feeling or “as lived experience and struggle of people in a society”

¹³ Also see Bernice Johnson-Reagon’s (1986) work, *Africa Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers*, for an additional account of women as cultural cheerleaders.

(Chua et al., 2000, p. 821). For Uyghur women, *dance* embodies the struggles of their society and their lived experience. It is these lived experiences that contribute to the life narratives of dance.

Identity

*“Music is in our heart. The more they oppress us,
it seems like we kind of cling to our culture and civilization even more...”*¹⁴

It is important to note that the women interviewed, particularly 52 years old Suhar, made sure to emphasize that Uyghur women are *not* employed in a systematic process of expressing their discontent. This is not an organized social movement. They have little opportunity to formally organize. In fact some intellectuals, writers and cultural activists have been arrested for challenging the Chinese government’s position on Xinjiang’s autonomy. “If you are writing a poem¹⁵ you are getting arrested, so expressing political dissent in dance and teaching it to everyone is a long process, so it would not be done.” However, Suhar reiterates that, there is no open expression of political views, but rather, she explains, just a way of reaffirming Uyghur culture.

As a visible and documented minority group, Uyghurs are acknowledging their racial and ethnic identity by embracing and immersing themselves in cultural and traditional practices and illicit a sense of pride and connectedness. Through dance, Uyghur women are creating a space and overcoming the idea of the monolithic Chinese (Gladney 2004, p.230) and as a result, Uyghur women are engaged in a process of theorizing and reflection. Cynthia Enloe, Clark University Research Professor, has described this process as “fresh noticing” and explains the process as:

¹⁴ Darah, a radio announcer currently living in Fairfax, Virginia. She has family members in the United States. Interviewed by the author on January 4, 2006.

¹⁵ She is describing the poem “Wild Pigeon” written by Nurmuhemmet Yasin in 2004. The poem is about a pigeon told in first person narrative that is trapped and caged by humans when he attempts to travel from his home. Rather than live under the rule of the humans, he swallows a poisonous strawberry since he can not live in freedom.

“It starts to be done explicitly and collectively, can move a group towards being aware of their current situation in new ways. In turn, this consciousness raising can enable some members of the group to fashion new explanations – new theories – for why they feel so constrained or even oppressed. These new theories might then motivate a significant proportion of the group’s members to take new actions to address or confront those perceived obstacles”.¹⁶

It is through this “fresh noticing”, and insistence of strengthening their cultural identity, that Uyghur women are contending with current policies. The significance of this process is that by analyzing aspects of Uyghur culture that have been modified due to development and governmental policies, practitioners can assess the impact of negative consequences which may come in the form of marginalization or encroachment of resources.

In the *Power of Identities*, Castells analyzes the construction of identities and their effect on civil society. Castells states that “identity is people’s source of meaning and experience” and as social beings we are prone and somewhat expected to have several identities (Castells, 1997, p.6). The difficulty arises when we are expected to choose one identity over another; for example, Muslim, Uyghur, minority, and so forth. He argues, that “identities can also be originated from dominant institutions, they become identities only when and if social actors internalize them and construct their meaning around this internalization” (Castells, 1997, p.7). Uyghurs are then “constructing identities” of self vis-à-vis dance. It is this construction of identity that results in their capacity to *deconstruct* the treatment they receive by being ethnic minorities in a society that is conventionally opposed to their cultural autonomy.

Camera

Chinese Development Policies and Uyghurs

In 1999 the Chinese government launched the “Develop the West Campaign” in hopes of promoting economic development (Starr et al, 2004). The Office for Western Region Development is the governing body that dictates the extent of development that will be planned

¹⁶ Cynthia Enloe discussed this process in the *International Feminist Thinking* seminar, Clark University, fall semester 2005.

and executed in the region.¹⁷ Under the leadership of Zheng Peiyuan, Minister of the State Development Planning Commission, the initiative supports projects that invest not only in infrastructural advancements but also investments in human capital, which encompasses the resettlement of Han Chinese in the region (Asian Development Bank, 2002).

With large income disparities between the Han and Uyghurs, the benefits of the development schemes do not necessarily trickle down to the most marginalized and often overlook qualified ethnic minorities (Asian Development Bank, 2002). The Asian Development Bank notes that the per capita GDP for the Eastern, Central and Western region in 1980 was ¥488¹⁸, ¥337, and ¥274 respectively, however by 2000 the GDP for these regions were ¥11335, ¥ 5,982, and ¥4687. The telling signs of economic disparity translate into Uyghurs having less access to necessary resources (ADB 2000, p.10). Through the economic reform strategy that was implemented in 1979, China has made significant strides in economic and social development (Asian Development Bank, 2002; Toops, 2004). However, the ecological exploitation of such resources such as crude oil and petroleum has wreaked havoc on the environment, especially in western provinces such as Xinjiang. This has placed an undue burden on natural resources as well as human capital resources. This has also placed an undue burden on Uyghur women in Xinjiang.

When asked how the economic development in the region impacted her life, Fatar¹⁹ a recent college graduate who had been in the U.S. for less than one year, recalls the first time she felt these policies were unjust and exclusionary:

‘The policy is very good. When you read it you can’t find any mistakes...But you will feel it [in a]... different way. I read the newspaper [and] when I was looking for the job and they say ‘No Uyghur’...when I [was] looking at [it I thought]...it can’t be true...because I never go through [this] till I finish my high school. How can they put ‘No Uyghurs’...what [does that] mean? At least say...we require somebody good in Chinese...I understand that...if someone is not good in Chinese, ok you can’t apply...how [can] you say ‘No Uyghurs’? What does that mean?’

¹⁷ Per the Asian Development Bank’s *The 2020 Project*, The Western Region consists of Sichuan province, Yunnan province, Chongqing municipality, Guizhou province, the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Shaanxi province, Gansu province, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Qinghai province and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Additionally the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region are considered part of the development strategy although they are officially recognized to belong to the Central Region (2000).

¹⁸ Chinese yuan or Renminbi is the PRC’s currency.

¹⁹ Interviewed by the author on January 4, 2006.

The effects are that recent Uyghur graduates like Fatar, although well qualified, will be unemployed and will be among the masses of Uyghurs denied professional employment opportunities. As illustrated in the Asian Development Bank's report on *The 2020 Project*, the burden of rural life, lack of access to land and resources, and restrictive family planning policies are among a few reasons cited as to the contradictory impact development policies have on Uyghur women as compared to men (ADB, 2002). These new development policies do not address the feminization of poverty nor do they acknowledge that as the Western Region Planning Commission is encouraging tourism in the region to promote economic growth, undue physical and emotional burden is placed on Uyghur women, debunking the myth that a homogenized model of development is good for all.

Action

Chinese Development Policies and the impact on Uyghur Women

*"We are all struggling for our freedom, to live free, to speak freely.
We just don't want to live in fear anymore."*²⁰

Labor

According to the *Women, Gender & Development Reader*, (1997) scholars, theorists and practitioners agree that development impacts women differently than men. For the sake of simplicity, this phenomenon can be called the gendered differences of development. The Asian Development Banks (2002) reports that, "the next 20 years, economic reforms on the Western Region will put extra pressure on women. The strength of market forces and the relatively reduced capacity of government could make women more vulnerable in both the labor market and within the family" (2002, p. 245). As women are the bearers of this burden, Uyghur men are

²⁰ Darah was interviewed by the author at her home in Fairfax, Virginia. January 7, 2006.

seeking employment in the more rural areas. This is not an encouraging report considering the specific development challenges Uyghur women already face in western China.²¹

As life in the western provinces of China have proven to be difficult, with harsh, arid conditions and the great expansiveness of the region Uyghur women, in an effort to assume a better quality of life, have since joined the ranks of the employed in the region. However, with poor definitions of property rights in the rural areas, Uyghur women find they have been left out of the dialogue of rights and ownership. They must depend on their spouses, since individuals do not own land, but rather collectives (ADB, 2000). This places additional challenges on Uyghur women who do not have a stake in the land worked. In the western region, agriculture accounts for a significant percentage of women's labor. This increased poverty level "compels families to maximize outside earnings through the additional labor of women" (ADB 2002, p. 247). This dependency on the additional labor of women coupled with roles as mother and wife, contributes to the "double day"²² theory in development.

Family Planning

Reproduction and birth control have also been issues of concern with the Uyghur population. China's One-Child Policy, implemented in 1979 restricts the number of children a Han couple can have. However, concessions are given to ethnic minorities, especially those in the rural areas, whose first child is a girl. *In Dislocating China*, Gladney (2004) points out, "in a state that regularly monitors monthly menses of its women workers, engages in Malthusian birth planning programs, and strictly regulates the age at which one can marry, it is not surprising that sexuality has become highly politicized" (p. 69). It is this politicization of Uyghur women's bodies and how they manage to shift subjectivity that is of great interest. As the Chinese Western

²¹ When asked how development in Xinjiang impacted the Uyghurs, an interviewee answered, "There was mass immigration during the 1990's. If the "Development the West Policy" helped the local people to develop their art culture, economy, then that would be very good, but in fact as we get from the people out of the region, Western Development, one of the big projects is the gas pipeline and it connects to Shanghai and now they are connecting to Lanzhou. The question is, if you develop and try to help the local people, why is it that the people living around the oil and gas field, around Taklamakan Basin and the other cities, they are not benefiting. They do not have gas. They do not have electricity. So, in that sense it's not benefiting them economically, culturally, this western development policy."²¹ Interviewed by the author on January 4, 2006.

²² The dual responsibility women have inside and outside of the home.

Development is purporting growth and development in the region, Uyghur women speak specifically about the impact these policies have on their lives and the reasons they chose to leave. Dora, 43 years old and a lawyer, describes how the family planning policy impacted her life. When asked why she left and with whom, her eyes take on a far away look. A look of pain and sadness:

I left for the birth control policy. I myself had forced abortion twice. My husband [and I], we had two daughters. I had forced abortion twice thinking that [it] could be a son, but we left to Turkey to have another child which was our hope...those are the reasons we left for Turkey. The reason why we chose Turkey is [it's] considered a second homeland for Uyghurs, because we all share the same history, very similar culture, same religion, and also Turkey was democratic...we just don't want to live in fear anymore...

Tourism

In order to promote the region's purported economic opportunities Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities have looked towards Xinjiang as an oasis that will provide not only economic benefits, but also entertainment. Increased domestic tourism in the region has presented a multitude of issues. Throughout Xinjiang, the purported beauty of Uyghur women and their talent in dance is an expectation when one visits Xinjiang or encounters Uyghurs. Gladney (2004) discusses the role tourism plays in the perception of Uyghur identity and the methodology used to package, sell and authenticate it to foreigners (p.225). Tourists are told "real" Uyghurs are located in Kashgar. This contributes to the complex constructed identities of the Uyghurs and how they are perceived (Gladney, 2004, p.225). China's policy efforts and their treatment of Uyghur minorities, result in a sense of "voyeurism of the other is permissible when they are regarded as less familiar, less civilized, than one's own" (Gladney, 2004, p. 78).

In Xinjiang, many tourists, both from abroad and Chinese from various provinces, frequent the more popular cities. The Uyghur women in particular are renowned for their dancing and draw tourists from all over the country. Those interviewed disclosed that although they are not professional dancers, they too were requested to dance for either the Han or Chinese from other provinces. This phenomenon of voyeurism is one aspect of what Gladney calls the "objectivizing gaze" (2004, p. 83). Uyghur women have temporarily have taken on the gaze of the "exoticized". However this role, albeit uncomfortable, is temporary in nature and does not

accurately reflect the exchange these Uyghur women exhibit through this subtle negotiation of power. It is Uyghur women's agency in forming strategic alliances and using dance to challenge the unjust distribution of power between the observer and the observed connotes a complicated shift in Uyghur women's theorizing, not only about their current social standing but also critically analyzing whether Chinese development policies have improved the quality of their lives.

In *The Politics and Poetics of Dance*, Reed (1998) explains, that the "exoticization takes many forms, and the representation of the exotic "other", especially women, has been an important feature of both dance performances and visual representations of dance since at least the 18th century" (p. 509). This was apparent when I interviewed Darah, a news broadcaster and a host for a children's television program. I asked her whether or not she was paid to perform or if she had ever performed for non-Uyghurs. She then explained that on an outing with a group of 40 people of both Chinese and Uyghur ethnicity that her Chinese supervisor asked her to dance. She explained,

"Our boss is Chinese. He says 'Uyghur people can dance, can sing...if you don't believe me see our girls dance like this'. 'He called them over to see our group.' 'Yeah, the people...Uyghur people can dance...Uyghur people can sing...they [are] very interesting' ..."He introduced us this kind of way"... 'Let us see you dance' ...I was angry".

"Did you dance?" I asked, "Did you have a choice?"

"Yes, I danced, because the whole group was pushing me very hard and then my boss, [his] ...face...[was] very angry.. So you have to dance and then I don't have [a] choice...I, I dance, but just little it was very shame...you know.., but then I get angry and I dance, .you know,... not for him, but for me.

It is this request to dance by the Han that has changed a cultural discourse that was once reserved and produced for "us", the Uyghurs, and is now being consumed by "them", meaning the Han. Through interviews, literature and participant observation, I challenge the assumption that Uyghur women are victims without agency, but rather, these women are creating means of empowerment, actively, not passively. At first glance they are being gazed upon, however in their theorizing, they change their theoretical perspective of "noticing" the perceived injustices; they are in fact shifting the gaze upon the voyeur in a form of bodily and spatial tête-à-tête. These women are engaging in dance as a form of empowerment. While elaborating on the

premise of “storytelling” and “body narratives” there are also elements of empowerment being conveyed within the stories of the dance.

Finale

*“We just need an opportunity. That’s our message.”*²³

The responses received from the Uyghur women in the diaspora proved to be an invaluable indication of the current socio-political situation and the disconnect Uyghur women feel towards the current development policies. After an in-depth analysis of the data, it became apparent that Uyghurs are not necessarily calling for complete independence from China, but rather for recognition of their identity and the right to be an autonomous region. Gladney (2004) argues that as Uyghurs construct their identities, their interest is to disprove the concept of the “monolithic Chinese national identity” (p. 230). For most, they are simply seeking to reclaim their cultural identity. Having interviewed Uyghur women in the diaspora and analyzed the socioeconomic status of Uyghur women in Xinjiang province, I hypothesize that Uyghur women are taking a *proactive approach* to development. I cite examples from this research that support the claim of creating self-empowerment through dance, as this is a means of governing their own bodies and challenging the unjust distribution of power. Additionally, I reconfirm my claim that supporting Uyghur culture and dance is not, and should not be considered incompatible with China’s desire to maintain ethnic unity and understanding.

In an attempt to understand how Uyghur women reassert their identity and promote their culture, I asked, “*What do you want people to know about Uyghur culture?*” Fatar then explained that she performed at an annual concert at the National Mall last year in Washington, DC and was given the smallest stage. Meanwhile the Han Chinese troupe received the largest stage since they were considered to be professionals. She did not complain. She danced. And as she recalled, “I danced as if there were one thousand people there”. Although the crowd was not as large as she had hoped, she descended from the stage and danced throughout the aisles. She

²³ Fatar was interviewed by the author on January 4, 2006.

danced all day and did the same thing the following day until people started paying attention. The crowd grew larger and management provided them with a larger stage. On the third day, the Uyghurs received the largest stage. People were now interested. She noted, “it was not me attracting the people, it was our culture attracting the people, so my point is...we need a stage to perform. We need an opportunity to show people who we are so that they can learn about us. We just need an opportunity...that’s our message, we just need a stage”.

Through this rich sojourn of dance and reflection, it was my intention to illustrate the means by which Uyghur women are negotiating positions, challenging the distribution of power and creatively maintaining their identity. They are using dance as a way to communicate to the larger society that local development does not require local acculturation.²⁴ Rather, by increasing a genuine sense of community, Uyghur women will be employed to construct a culturally-based platform for their own development that allows them to engage in the dialogue. In *Dancing on the Bar*, Law suggests that women use dance to negotiate and demonstrate strategies of empowerment (1997). By creating alternative meanings within the dance, and negotiating spaces and narratives within their own perspectives, Uyghur women are resisting the rubric of “weakness or powerlessness”. They are incorporating their own messages and personal form of empowerment within the dance while also mitigating the terms in which they will partake in development (Law, 1997, p. 121). Law notes that in order to truly understand the complexity of the situation, it is necessary to look at the relationships between resistance, empowerment, and subjectivity and to subscribe to the notion that “the performance itself tells only part of the story”, and I argue, it is Uyghur women’s performance and agency that leads in the dance for development.

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²⁴ Duncan Earle, author’s MA Paper workshop on March 17, 2006.

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