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Title

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Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2010-03-30

DOI

10.5070/T821006994

Peer reviewed

Dancing in the Diaspora: Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism and the Staging of Chineseness by San Francisco's Chinese Folk Dance Association

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In this essay I analyze the history of a San Francisco Bay Area cultural institution over a period of more than four decades, and, applying to it the concept of “cultural long-distance nationalism,” I attempt to tease apart the complexity of cultural practice in diaspora. The organization in question is the Chinese Folk Dance Association (CFDA), founded in 1959, a pro-People’s Republic of China (PRC) troupe of amateur dancers and musicians playing Chinese instruments.¹ As someone who was peripherally involved with the group in the mid-1970s and early 1980s and was a friend or acquaintance of a few members of the group, I became curious about the changes in its activities, its performance programs, its roles in the Bay Area community, and its self-perceived relationship to the homeland over time. I have examined the CFDA’s performance programs, photographs, and press coverage since the 1970s (earlier archival material was not available to me), as well as interviewed two of its key figures and spoken on many occasions with my main contact—the long-time executive director of the group and a friend from graduate school. What I have found is that the changes undergone by the group reveal the multiplicity of factors that go into the staging of Chineseness in diaspora and the challenges inherent in such a process. The challenges are especially acute given how rapidly the nation-state to which a specific cultural presentation is tied—the People’s Republic of China—has itself been undergoing rapid and radical transformations. Below are some of my findings and analyses.

I begin my essay with a thumbnail history of the CFDA in its complex sociohistorical context: global geopolitical fluctuations, especially US–China relations; changing Chinese American immigration patterns and demographics; and the material and discursive dimensions of globalization. The second section is a theoretical exploration of the concept of cultural long-distance nationalism and an application of it to the CFDA’s practices and self-narrations. Next, I engage in close readings of selected instances of the CFDA’s staging of Chineseness, in an attempt to tease apart factors that shape such staging. “The Volk, the Nation-state, and the Diasporic Imagination” analyzes in greater detail the CFDA’s genocentric relationship to its cultural “source,” while “When Imagined Intimacy Turns into Close Encounters” outlines political, economic, technological, and cultural forces in recent decades that impact the CFDA’s original *raison d’être*. In the conclusion, I raise questions about the general prospects for the survival of cultural long-distance nationalism in a globalized world, and about certain issues peculiar to the CFDA’s case, such as the meaning of multiethnicity/multiculturalism in the two national frames—Chinese and American—occupied by the CFDA, and the continued relevance of localness/locatedness in the face of Greater China’s increasing appeal in the Chinese diaspora.

A Thumbnail History of the Chinese Folk Dance Association

First, I will provide a thumbnail account of the CFDA’s changes over the forty-plus years of its existence. For this I draw heavily on the official history written for the program notes of the group’s 2004 tour of China, on the aforementioned conversations, and on my own sporadic direct interactions with or observations of the group’s activities since the early 1970s, which have given no cause to contradict the group’s self-periodization. Since my interest is in the CFDA members’ staging of Chineseness in their shows, which is in turn based on their sense of diasporic subjectivity, I did not include any attempt to construct an “objective” history, such as by interviewing the members who left the group over the years to begin their own dance ventures.² It might also have been useful to investigate the precursor organization to the CFDA, a task for which, unfortunately, I lack the requisite methodological training and resources.³

The official version of the CFDA’s history notes four stages in its development: (1) 1959–1970, (2) 1970–1980, (3) 1980–1990, and (4) 1990 to the present; my interviews reaffirmed and elaborated upon this account. The CFDA was founded as a nonprofit community organization at the height of the cold war, as an extension of an earlier pro-Chinese Communist group founded in the 1940s but later disbanded under pressure from the FBI, called the *Huaqiao minzhu qingnian tuan* (“Overseas Chinese Democratic Chinese Youth Group”), or *Minqing* for short, also known in Cantonese as *Mun Ching*, in English as the Chinese American Youth Club. The late historian Him Mark Lai, who was involved with the group in his youth as “one of the

few American-born Chinese members,” describes it as “a progressive organization that supported the new China”: “During the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, the club decided to move away from progressive politics to cultural activities. It introduced the Chinese community to music and songs, folk dances, and vernacular dramas connected to the new China. We also encouraged members to learn technical skills and the sciences and organized a tutorial program for immigrant high school students.”⁴

At various times the members of *Minqing* came under surveillance by the FBI, received threats of deportation, or were persecuted and pressured by the Guomindang or Nationalists, America’s client state at the time in its struggle against Communism. Apparently, a turn to ostensibly apolitical cultural activities was necessary for the group’s survival. In its retrospective, the CFDA describes itself as being made up of “young people who longed for and loved Chinese culture.” Because “dance movements are an international language,” the group chose to use dance to “promote the fine culture of the motherland and to elevate the image and status of Chinese.”⁵ The group was located in San Francisco Chinatown, attracting mostly working-class people, nonprofessional middle-class people, and small local business owners and their children. During the first stage coinciding with the height of the cold war, with direct communications with “Red China” forbidden and no local Chinese dance teachers to be had, the CFDA members were self-taught. Their first dance, *Caicha pudie*, was learned from a book accidentally found in a Chinatown bookstore.⁶ Progress was slow and funds were short. Activities were limited to Chinatown.



華人歌舞團的初期主要成員，其中有本團的三位創辦人雷草〔後左一〕，李生〔後左二〕，溫大川〔後右一〕。

Figure 1.
Early members of the CFDA,
including three founders
(first, second, and fourth from
the left in the back row).
Program, 2004 tour of several
cities in Guangdong, China.

The second stage had as its highlight Nixon’s historic visit to China in 1972. Two years before that, the CFDA’s show was filmed for broadcast by a local TV channel, marking the first time that Chinese ethnic dance was featured extensively on American television. After Nixon’s visit, growing curiosity about the PRC, improving US–China relations, and budding multiculturalism in American society put the group’s performances in high demand. In 1978, it even traveled as far as Los Angeles to take part in the “China Night” celebrations of Chinese New Year organized by UCLA’s Chinese Cultural Association. Conflict with pro-Nationalist Chinese immigrants did not come to an end. In one incident in San Jose in 1973, Nationalist sympathizers disrupted a performance of the song “Singing of the Motherland” by unfurling a Nationalist flag and charging the stage. Nevertheless, the group thrived and went on to bigger shows in mainstream performance venues such as the Veterans Auditorium (now the Herbst Theater) and the San Francisco Opera House. It even received funding from the California Arts Council. The group was in close contact with the first touring performing arts troupes from the PRC—emissaries from the “true origin” of this culture—and sometimes performed alongside the professionals in a gesture of mutual friendship, as, for example, during the Shanghai Dance Troupe’s visit in 1977.



Figure 2. Program, 1978 performances at “China Night,” UCLA Chinese Cultural Association. Note the “homemade” look of the program.

Figure 3.
Program cover,
1977 performance by the visiting
Shanghai Dance Troupe



During the third stage, as the PRC began to open up, the CFDA took part in many cultural exchanges, volunteering its services to the large Chinese dance troupes that visited the US. The influences of professional dance began to be felt as some PRC dancers gave the CFDA costumes, music cassettes, and in some cases instruction, and many previously trained dancers began to join the group as either teachers or students. The presence of American-born Chinese children trained by the CFDA was noticeable. Increased participation in the larger Bay Area multicultural art scene was also in evidence during this period. For example, in 1985, the CFDA formed an alliance with other Asian Americans (Indian, Filipino, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, and others) and performed at the 1988 Third Asian Traditional Dance Festival. In 1987, the group performed one of the six dances chosen to welcome Pope John Paul II to San Francisco. In 1988, the CFDA was featured in the University of Judaism's Festival of the Performing Arts, partially funded by the California Arts Council. In 1989, the CFDA received top scores with its "Red Ribbon Dance" at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

The 1990s marked what I would call the decline of the CFDA, although its official history certainly does not use such a bleak term but, instead, sees the curtailment of its activities as an indication of the fulfillment of its original purpose and the beginning of a new period of growth. With membership dwindling and successors growing scarce, the CFDA considers itself to have "completed the glorious mission assigned it by history,"⁷ identifying a number of factors such as the spread of information technology and mass media (which rendered the group's once near-monopolistic teaching function obsolete), and the growth of direct cultural exchanges between China and the US (which dispensed with the CFDA's intermediary role). A major restructuring opened up the group to "outsiders," starting classes for children outside Chinatown, in Oakland in the East Bay and Sunnyvale in the heart of Silicon Valley; hiring professional dance teachers from China; and targeting affluent middle-class families. In 1999, the group put on a fortieth

anniversary show at the San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts, where the founders received commendations from a state senator. In 2004, the CFDA went on its first Chinese tour—a fifteen-day visit to Shenzhen, Zhaoxing, and Zhongshan.

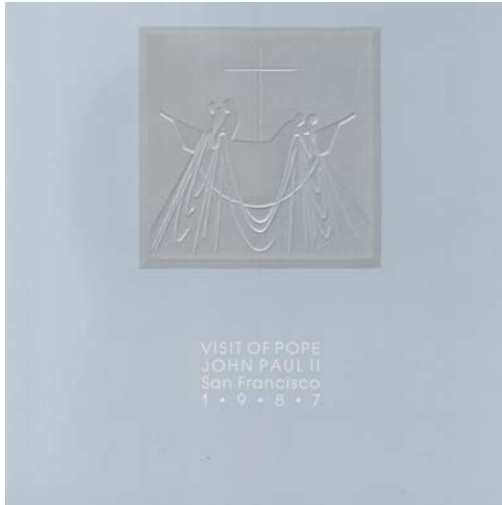


Figure 4. Program cover, community performance to honor Pope John Paul II's 1987 visit to San Francisco. The CFDA participated in the religious event as a secular community group.

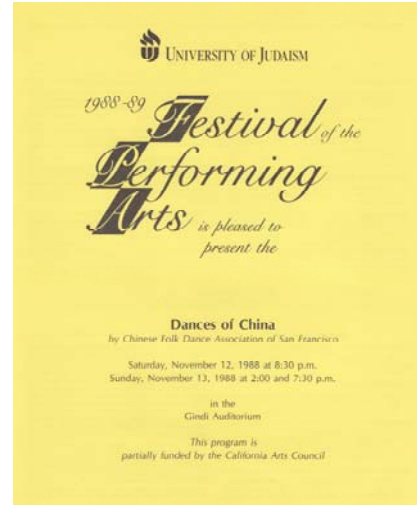


Figure 5. Program cover, University of Judaism's 1988–1989 Festival of the Performing Arts. The CFDA received state funding that supported cultural diversity in California.



Figure 6. Program cover and inside front cover, 1983 International Folk Dance Festival. The CFDA took part in the multicultural arts event.

Even from this very condensed account, it is clear that the CFDA is a multipurpose group that reflects the multiple dimensions of art in diaspora. It has offered, at various times, community-building social activities for immigrants and their children, reconnection with homeland culture for the first generation, art instruction that could provide a potential identity anchor for second and subsequent generations, a venue for performance, a base for making pan-ethnic alliances with other Asians, participation in mainstream art scenes, and a conduit for cultural exchange from the PRC. From homemade costumes to purchased costumes; from a Chinatown basement to the dance studios of suburbia; from self-teaching or local teachers to professionally trained, sometimes nationally ranked dance teachers who immigrated from China; from Chinatown and Chinese audiences to the general art-consuming public; from self-funding to government grants and back to self-funding—the trajectory of the CFDA maps the transformations of the Chinese American community in the Bay Area.

Following the normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and China and the resumption of large-scale immigration from the mainland, the cultural center of gravity has shifted from San Francisco Chinatown with its ethnic ghetto features to the affluent suburban communities on the Peninsula and in the South Bay, where middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs reside. The shift reflects the decreasing importance of Guangdong-origin immigrants, once dominant in the Chinese American population, and the rise of middle-class professionals from all parts of China. The group's headquarters once functioned as a community center, where Chinatown children and youth could be dropped off for dance or music classes while adults could hang around and help or engage in socialization. Now the South Bay dance classes take place at specified times at rented facilities, with no designated headquarters in the suburbs. Gone was the family atmosphere forged in beleaguered struggles against a hostile environment. Where classes once held a community-building function closely tied to identity issues for the young people involved, now they are for enrichment purposes. Parents are interested in Chinese dance instruction for their children, but only as one of many enrichment activities or *caiyi*. Chinese dance competes with *kung fu* or *wushu*, ballet, tennis, swimming, and a host of tutoring classes for the future “model minority” children's time and energy. Chinese dance is being taught now not only by a once-grassroots group like the CFDA, but in schools founded by former professionals who immigrated from the PRC and from Taiwan.

While the fortunes of the CFDA revealingly index demographic changes in the Bay Area Chinese American population, it is even more fascinating to trace how they have fluctuated in response to global geopolitical factors, chief among them the relationship between the US and the PRC as it moved from cold war isolation and hostility to rapprochement to post-Deng economic collaboration/competition. What intrigues one most is the fact that the link between the CFDA's success and the PRC's relationship to the US is hardly linear, proportionate, or predictable. The second-

stage popularity of the group might seem obvious given the thaw in Sino-US relationships, and might lead one to posit that the less persecuted or isolated the group was in the US, and the greater the opportunities for direct connections to the PRC, the more it would thrive. Yet the opposite has been true. To understand the CFDA's rise and decline, one has to examine the nature of its diasporic cultural project to stage Chineseness in the US. I see this project as a form of "cultural long-distance nationalism," which is characterized by genocentrism. Thus, despite the CFDA's simultaneous self-location in diasporic and local Asian American contexts, and despite its occasional forays into US multiculturalism, its staging of Chineseness necessarily settles into formal inflexibility. The result is a freezing of staged Chineseness into a stylized version of the "folk," with all that implies about the vexing relationships between the people and the nation-state.

Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism

I derive the term "cultural long-distance nationalism" from Benedict Anderson's concept of "long-distance nationalism," but obviously highlighting the cultural dimension of the emigre's relationship with the homeland.⁸ Nina Glick Schiller traces the concept to an observation by Benedict Anderson in 1993 regarding captivity narratives that was later elaborated.⁹ I located the term's first occurrence a year earlier, in Anderson's 1992 conference paper, "Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics," in which he identifies a form of nationalism among migrants who, after settling outside their homelands, practice a kind of "dream-politics" via long-distance participation such as funding and otherwise attempting to influence homeland politics. Characterizing a Canadian Sikh supporter of Khalistan extremism, Anderson writes bitinglly, "His political participation is directed towards an imagined *heimat* in which he does not intend to live, where he pays no taxes, where he cannot be arrested, where he will not be brought before the courts—and where he does not vote: in effect, a politics without responsibility or accountability."¹⁰ Anderson acknowledges that subscribers to long-distance nationalism are not always fanatical or committed to violence, but they share with the extremists the same "politics without accountability": "Not, unlike Kossuth and Mazzini, true exiles awaiting the circumstances of their triumphal return to the *heimat*, but emigres who have no serious intention of going back to a home, which, as time passes, more and more serves as a phantom bedrock for an embattled metropolitan ethnic identity" (20). Examples of this phenomenon include "Filipinos, Khmer, and Vietnamese in California, Algerians and Moroccans in the Midi, Ukrainians in Ontario, Cubans in Miami, Albanians in Ravenna, and so forth" (20).

According to Schiller, the concept of long-distance nationalism is hardly new. It used to be known under other names, such as "home country nationalism," but became prominent in social science in the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe, and as a result of dramatic technological

changes in communication. Unlike Anderson, Schiller does not regard long-distance nationalism as inherently pernicious, self-serving, or complicit in exploitation by unscrupulous homeland politicians. She does not see the lack of material accountability as one of its defining characteristics. Schiller identifies four types of long-distance nationalist relationships to the homeland, not all of which are oppositional—anticolonialism (e.g., Gandhi and Sun Yat-sen while they were in exile), separatism (e.g., the breakup of the former Yugoslavia), regime change (e.g., anti-Castro Cubans in Miami), and participation (e.g., dual citizenship, joining legal political parties in the homeland)—and notes that in all these cases “people come to a position of long-distance nationalism from disparate experience,” including the experience of racism and stereotyping in the host country.¹¹ “As in the case of any form of nationalism,” Schiller writes, “identification with a homeland is polysemous, carrying simultaneously multiple and conflicting meanings” (579).

The concept of long-distance nationalism has been highly productive: in recent years, it has been applied by scholars to phenomena as diverse as Tamil refugees in Norway,¹² Bangladeshi immigrants in England,¹³ the Haitian transborder citizenry in the US,¹⁴ and the self-identifications and mutual perceptions of Slovenes and Croatians in Australia.¹⁵ However, even in Schiller’s more capacious and less judgmental conceptualization of long-distance nationalism, the emphasis is always on political and, to a lesser extent, economic issues, such as citizenship, taxation, or remittances. It remains a historical or social science concept. In proposing the term “cultural long-distance nationalism” in this essay, I would like to take advantage of the self-explanatory succinctness of the original: its suggestions of genocentric orientation, the subject’s physical removal from the homeland, and his/her lack of embeddedness in the nation-state of origin. I have chosen not to transpose the component terms into the more idiomatic-sounding “long-distance cultural nationalism,” both to preserve my indebtedness to Anderson’s term and to differentiate my usage from the collocation “cultural nationalism,” which, in the context of Asian American literary criticism, has very specific and historicized connotations (of which more later). By “cultural long-distance nationalism,” I refer to practices of culture in the diaspora that, as much as possible given altered circumstances, derive their sense of legitimacy, their standard of authenticity, and often their content from the perceived source of culture—the nation-state from which the practitioners are now physically removed.

To an Asian Americanist like myself, it would be immediately apparent that cultural long-distance nationalism can be seen as the obverse of the Asian American cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s. In its most radical form, as articulated and popularized by Frank Chin and his cohort in the *Aiiiiiiii!* group, the preservation of the so-called ancestral culture should be anathema to the true Asian American artist.¹⁶ Limiting the discussion to Chinese Americans (on whom the *Aiiiiiiii!* group devotes a great deal of attention and often endows with paradigmatic force), we can say that to maintain and re-present the cultural traditions of China is to play the

“ornamental oriental”¹⁷ and succumb to the racist stereotype of the perpetual foreigner perpetuated by white Americans. The only laudable art for Chinese in America is that which opens itself up to the cultural influences of the land of residence—and indeed anywhere but the ancestral land—so that anything that a Chinese American does is by definition Chinese American, whether it be (in Frank Chin’s formulation) riding the rails as a brakeman, playing flamenco guitar, or cooking French food.¹⁸

It is certainly entirely possible, as Lok Siu has argued, that “cultural citizenship operates in a diasporic context in which people actively identify, participate, and engage in more than one cultural-political system.”¹⁹ Siu notes that there is a “triangulation” of “diasporic communities, the homeland state, and the nation-state of residence” that “determines ideas of belonging and practices of transnational community formation” (8). In other words, for analytical purposes we can posit cultural nationalism and cultural long-distance nationalism as a dichotomy, but, in reality, “overlapping and multiple identifications” are possible (14). The CFDA can be said to have exhibited such “overlapping and multiple identifications” on more than one occasion. However, it is also accurate to say that, despite the permanent US residency of many, if not most, of its participants (here I include both citizens and permanent residents or “green card” holders; some student visa holders also participated), despite the group’s participation in local Bay Area cultural events including pan-ethnic Asian American ones, and despite its temporal and geographic overlap with the Asian American movement, the orientation of the group is distinctly genocentric: not entirely rejecting cultural nationalism, but primarily deriving a sense of identity and purpose from an emotional relationship (and a material relationship, when circumstances permitted) to Chinese culture.

The CFDA’s stated commitment is to the generation-to-generation passing down of what it considers to be part of the priceless legacy of Chinese culture, leaving little or no room for the kind of on-the-ground cultural transformation and creation claimed by Asian American cultural nationalists. Conversely, the kind of staging of Chineseness in the CFDA’s performances throughout the years would have been considered a dangerously essentialist cultural practice that plays into the worst stereotypes of white America and revives the specter of blood-based biologicistic discourse.

The program of its most recent large-scale event, the 2004 tour of cities in Guangdong, is tellingly entitled *xinhua xiangquan* (loosely translated as “the passing on of the torch”). Toward audiences on the Chinese mainland, the program writer emphasizes the participation of American-born Chinese children and youth: “Today, when you look up to see English-speaking young Chinese performing purely Chinese folk dances, you must understand our quest even more. We are Chinese; thus we must understand, cherish, preserve, and promote our own culture—show the world our unique culture. No matter where we are, no matter what our nationality, the blood flowing in our veins is forever the blood of the Chinese people. We are proud

of being Chinese” (my translation). Behind the young American-born performers, the program writer proclaims, lies a special spirit (*jingshen*): “to learn Chinese dance insistently, perseveringly, because Chinese dance leads them to Chinese culture, and Chinese culture is what overseas Chinese pass on from generation to generation, an inalienable part of themselves—even if they were born on the other side of the ocean, far from this land [China].”²⁰ This is certainly far from the spirit of Asian American cultural nationalism.



Figure 7.
Program cover,
2004 tour of several cities in
Guangdong, China

Staging Chineseness in the Diaspora

So how has the CFDA been staging Chineseness?

Several patterns are readily apparent when one surveys the CFDA’s archive of printed programs and photographs throughout the four-plus decades of its existence. First is the remarkable stability of its repertoire. Secondly, this repertoire is characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on a certain construction of Chinese peoplehood that is clearly class-inflected. Thirdly, the repertoire is multiethnic, drawing from the ethnic minorities in China, but always implicitly under the frame of a unified nation-state, the People’s Republic of China. The implications of these characteristics are quite complex and thought-provoking.



Figure 8. Program cover and list, 1974 performance

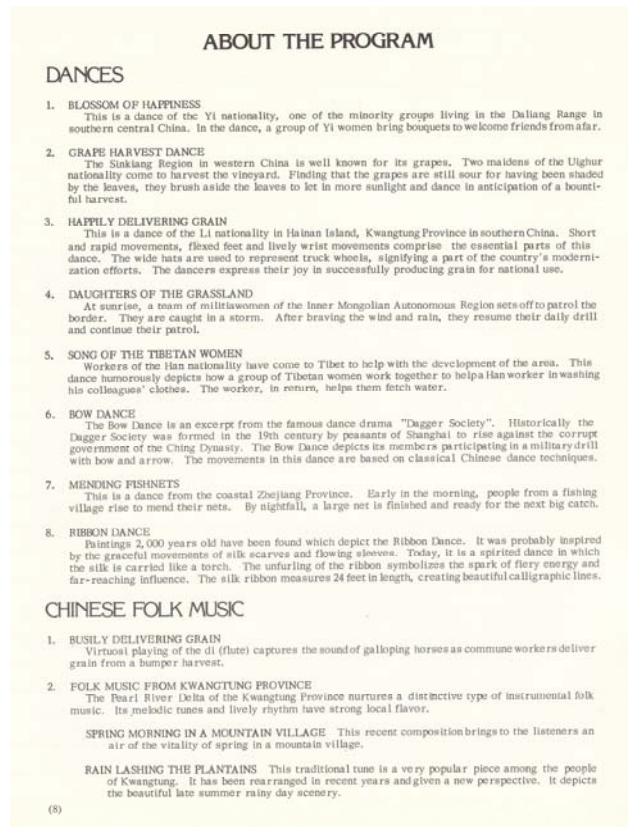
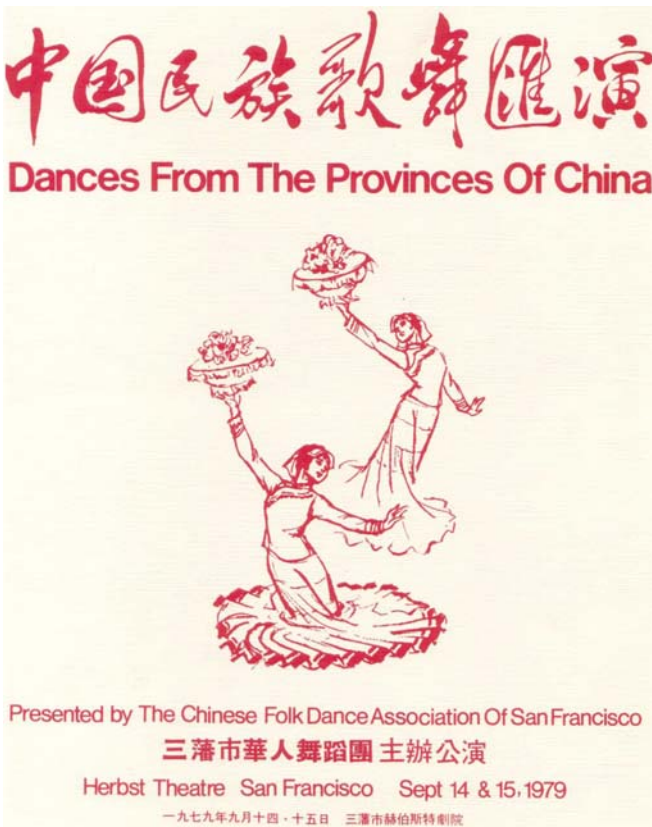


Figure 9. Program cover and list, 1979 performance


Figure 10.
Photographs from the
above program,
1979 performance

3. CELEBRATING A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST WITH GONGS AND DRUMS
This piece is performed by a percussion ensemble with traditional instrumental accompaniment. It expresses the happiness and vigor of the peasant during harvest time. This brilliant and joyous melody is based on the traditional folk drum and gong music of the Zhejiang Province.

VOCAL

1. LIKE FISH AND WATER
The expression "like fish and water" is used by the Chinese people to describe the harmonious and cooperative relationships between the people and the army. This dramatized choral piece illustrates the people's respect and affection toward the soldiers. A group of young women of the Yi nationality bring their home grown fruits and vegetables to visit the soldiers who are helping to develop the area.

2. THE ROVING WAVES OF LAKE HUNGHU
This is a popular folk song originated in the Hubei Province. The Hunghu region is one of the most fertile agricultural land fishing areas in the province. The song praises the beauty and richness of Hunghu.



"海上花"
"Daughters Of The
Grassland"
×
"缝渔网"
"Mending Fishnets"
"缝渔网"

(9)

DANCING '95
PHOENIX
Spirit of Chinese Dance 續紛

MAY 21, 1995
MERCY HIGH SCHOOL
SAN FRANCISCO

JUNE 4, 1995
MONTA VISTA HIGH SCHOOL
CUPERTINO
(June 4 Program co-sponsored by Academy of Tai Chi & Wu Shu)

This Program is partially funded by California Arts Council, San Francisco Grants for the Arts, Lawrence Choy Lowe Memorial Fund.

San Francisco Performance

1. Sparkling	繽紛	CFDA Ensemble	全體舞員
2. Little Bugs	點蟲蟲	CFDA Children	兒童組
3. Rainy Days	落大雨	CFDA Children	兒童組
4. School First	讀書節	CFDA Children	兒童組
5. Rhythm of Washing Sticks	棒槌謠	CFDA Children	兒童組
6. Green Green by the River	青青小河流	SV Children's Class	大班
7. Straw Hat Dance	草笠舞	CFDA Teenagers	少年組
8. Winnowing	簸谷	CFDA Dancers	舞劇組
9. Bronze Drum Dance	銅鼓舞	CFDA Dancers	舞劇組

Intermission

10. Instrumental Galloping Horses	揚鞭驅馬逐糧忙		
Village Morning in Spring	山鄉春早	CFDA Musicians	音樂組
11. Drums of Chi'u Dynasty	楚大鼓舞	CFDA Teenagers	少年組
12. Bow Dance	弓箭舞	CFDA Children	兒童組
13. Tibetan Hata	西藏舞—哈達	CFDA Teenagers	少年組

Following two programmes will be performed by our invited guests: **Rosie Lo's students.**

14. Valse Minkus - La bayadere		Amy Giang, Tiffany Chin, Teresa Chan, Vivian Fong, Karen Lee, Regina Luk, Carlan Tam, Xn Wen, Melanie Wu, Tracy Gee	
15. Sugar Plum Fairy Tchaikovsky - Nutcracker		Tiffany Chin	
16. Yiu Por Festival	遊墟節的早晨	CFDA Dancers	舞劇組
17. Korean Fan Dance	長白山之春	CFDA Dancers	舞劇組
18. Mongolian Suite	歡樂	CFDA Dancers	舞劇組

8

Figure 11. Program cover and list, 1995 performance. Note that performances took place in both San Francisco and Cupertino. Note also the non-Chinese ballet solo from *The Nutcracker*.



Figure 12. Program cover and inside back cover, 2006 performance. Note the full-color photographs and the girls in ballet leotards.

As we can see, from the beginning to the first decade of the twenty-first century, in staging Chineseness the CFDA has favored dances depicting rural, pastoral, or sylvan life.²¹ Some dance and music pieces typical of this pattern are “Cotton Harvest Dance,” “Celebrating a Bountiful Harvest with Gongs and Drums,” “Song of the Prairie,” “Delivering Coal in the Snow,” “Hunter’s Dance” (June 17, 1977, program); “Grape Harvest Dance,” “Happily Delivering Grain,” “Daughters of the Grassland,” “Mending Fishnets” (September 14 and 15, 1979, program); and, of course, the dance most closely identified with the Communists, *niuyangge* or *yangge* (e.g., June 17, 1977, program; October 3, 1992, program). This is a highly selective repertoire, based on a Marxist theoretical perspective on art as originating in collective labor and the socialist elevation of the common laboring people as opposed to those who own the means of production. Until quite recently, there has been a studied avoidance of classical high culture: although the ribbon dance may have originated as a dance for the aristocracy and could have been performed in the flowing robes of the palace ladies, the CFDA members have always performed it in tunics and pants, as a folk dance. Also notable was the inclusion of ethnic minorities such as the Yi, the Mongolian, the Tibetan, the Korean, and the Uighur (or Uyghur), almost overshadowing the Han majority, which reflects the official PRC line affirming the multiethnicity of China, *in pluribus unum*.²²

For the CFDA, its amateur status, the nonprofessional standards of the dancers and musicians, the (at-one-time) homemade costumes and props, and the perpetually tight funding have been badges of honor in that they connote an organic unity with the common people, in contradistinction to the practitioners of an elitist Chinese culture serving the ruling class or the *literati*. In fact, the founders were self-taught and proud of it. One might well ask, to what extent is the CFDA's folk-style repertoire simply a function of resource availability, financial, technical, or otherwise, rather than an expression of a certain ideology about Chineseness? This is a nontrivial question for those working in the trenches of diasporic cultural performance.

If I may digress a little, I recall from my own experiences in the US some vivid examples of how the staging of Chinese culture entailed specific choices, and how the choices were shaped by material factors. Some forty years ago, when one of my older sisters was about to leave Hong Kong for higher studies at Utah State University, my mother had her take lessons in the Chinese ribbon dance, in case she was called upon to perform in student variety shows—and this was a young woman who in her “real life,” with the exception of her school uniform *qipao* and Chinese New Year *mianao*, hardly ever wore Chinese clothing, instead listened to Elvis Presley and Puccini, and worshiped Renaissance and Impressionist masters. Clearly, even those considered to be born Chinese need to learn to be Chinese and are called upon to perform Chineseness once they leave the borders of a predominantly Chinese community. As individuals, the performers of Chinese culture may not always be aware of the larger factors shaping their choice of features to present in their land of sojourn or residence. But a range of enabling or disabling conditions plays a significant role in determining what gets presented in public as representative of “Chinese culture.” The ribbon dance, for example, was useful because it was at once reasonably easy to learn and spectacular to behold, and, involving minimal props, was a very portable dance form. In contrast, when I was a student in the Midwest in the late 1960s, one of my wealthy fellow Chinese students had connections in Taiwan and was able to import an array of Qing Dynasty costumes. So a palace “fashion show,” heavy on silks and brocades and fancy headdresses, was what the Chinese Students Association mounted for their annual “China Night,” albeit not without some raised eyebrows. And that is what the audience in Bloomington, Indiana, saw as representative of Chinese culture. Given that there is a certain amount of haphazardness in any cultural project constrained by resources, one might fairly ask to what extent the CFDA made the repertory choices it did primarily to accommodate its limitations.

While pragmatic concerns may shape the repertory preferences of the CFDA, it cannot entirely be explained away by material factors. It is true that when the CFDA's Chinese instrumental performances featured ensembles rather than soloists, and festive, exuberant pieces over contemplative or poignant ones, it was as much to soft-pedal the nonprofessional musicianship as to highlight pleasures of communal life. It is also true that many of the peasant-style and ethnic-minority dances chosen

by the CFDA involve fairly simple choreography: undemanding arm movements and steps; manageable props like hats or scarves; linear, circular, or other simple group formations; no athletic postures or leaps. (Only those dancers in possession of greater physical talent and more advanced techniques do solos.) But the same stylistic description might be applied to many palace-style dances of the Han, the ethnic majority associated with the ruling classes and the *literati* tradition. Palace-style dances, such as the palace lantern dance or feather fan dance, tend to be slow, stately, and ceremonial, and to that extent should not be beyond the technical proficiency of the CFDA. After all, certain ethnic-minority dances with their characteristic movements could be said to make greater demands on the dancers' skills, e.g., the shoulder-rolling of Mongolian dances, the lateral neck movements of Xinjiang dances. All things being equal, then, palace-style dances could just as well have been chosen to stage Chineseness as peasant-style ones.

The selectivity involved in the CFDA's staging of Chineseness can be brought into high relief if we compare it with that made by pro-Nationalist performers during the 1970s, when the CFDA took part in "China Nights" mounted by Stanford University students on campus.²³ At the time, the Nationalist regime in Taiwan was portraying itself as the true heir to traditional Chinese culture, noble torch-bearers of the spirit of Confucianism, in contrast to the iconoclastic, unlettered Communist peasant-bandits on the mainland. A decorous and refined form of classical high culture was to be promoted overseas as a bulwark against the depredations of the Cultural Revolution. The early to mid-1970s was a period of political turmoil and change in China (the Cultural Revolution), in Taiwan (rising *dangwai* and pro-independence opposition), in the US (the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Civil Rights Movement), between nation-states (the PRC's entry into the United Nations, rapprochement between the PRC and the US), in the local Chinese American community (the Asian American Movement), and among overseas Chinese students (the *Baodiao* movement). In such a setting, the annual China Night on the Stanford campus registered a range of geopolitical forces and became a site of contestation for competing visions of Chinese culture. Through the Republic of China's embassy and informal cultural networks, pro-Nationalist students sponsored such programs as *guzeng* (Chinese zither) pieces performed by soloists in *qipao*, Chinese art songs, and the Taiwan aboriginal dance *Shandiwu*. On the other side, pro-PRC students sponsored the CFDA, choral selections from the *Yellow River Cantata*, and student-composed skits, performed to the beat of the *muyu*, on the choices facing the *liuxuesheng*. The final programs, a composite that resulted from lengthy and contentious negotiations, then became the public face of Chineseness presented to local Chinese and American mainstream audiences at Stanford.²⁴

It can be seen from this example that, within the material limits of the diasporic condition, both sides were highly selective when trying to identify "essences" of Chinese culture for staging. In my recollection, even in that period of polarization, certain specific programs were considered by both sides as

noncontroversial, such as *Caicha pudie*, a *pipa* solo, and a lion dance. These and some other pieces, such as *Miaonu nongbei*, that I recall from other US campuses seem to have attained a certain kind of pan-Sinic popularity. In the case of ethnic-minority dances, the lack of controversy might well have been due to a desire for exotic color and rhythm by a diasporic population, which was most likely largely Han. Despite individual exceptions, collectively, it is clear that invocation of a putatively transhistorical, i.e., “timeless,” Chinese cultural tradition is itself permeated by history, is heavily classed, and cannot be readily dissociated from nation-state politics.²⁵ Even where there seems to be a consensus among warring factions about what constitutes Chinese culture, the consensus is there on sufferance, as it were, secured only by tacit agreement; its seemingly “natural” status of privilege is always open to renegotiation. For example, while the aboriginal dance from Taiwan, *Shandiwu*, was deemed “naturally” acceptable for China Night in my time, it would have entirely different meanings if performed in diaspora today, given the broader homeland context of pro-independence politics and assertions of aboriginal rights in Taiwan. The class identifications of the participants in China Nights are also quite intriguing. Khatharya Um, who has studied Cambodian art forms in diaspora from classical dance to hip-hop, notes that class orientation is not always obvious and predictable: in the Cambodian American community, though the primary practitioners and audiences of dance are from the peasant class, the repertory they favor is associated with the nobility and royalty.²⁶ In the case of the Stanford China Night shows, class can be mapped fairly easily onto the official ideologies of the two nation-states in question: “folk culture” promoted by the pro-PRC crowd, “high culture” by the pro-ROC crowd. However, given that the Stanford students, regardless of origin, were in an elite institution and being trained for elite careers, the favoring of the dances of peasants, fishermen, and Mongolian horsewomen must give one pause.

In my view, for the CFDA’s stalwarts and the Stanford students allied with them, it seems that the attraction of the peasant-style repertoire must largely be due to the sense of “imagined intimacy” with the Chinese *Volk* that it could evoke, with its promise of a foundationalist authenticity capable of neutralizing the angst and uncertainty of displacement, at least partially or temporarily. The term “imagined intimacy” is borrowed from Adria L. Imada’s thought-provoking study of the Hawaiian hula on tour in the American empire,²⁷ but with more familial than sexual connotations. Imada uses the term “imagined intimacy” primarily to refer to how touring hula shows, especially live floor shows, allowed Americans to imagine the Hawaiian islands as an intimate, feminized, submissive space ready for exploitation. I apply the term to how Chinese in the diaspora attempt to telescope the distance between them and the land of origin through the staging of Chineseness.²⁸ The term “the *Volk*” is borrowed from eighteenth-century German philosopher and critic Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). Along with more recent studies of folk culture, the notion of the *Volk* can help illuminate the CFDA’s staging of Chineseness

in diaspora, although, of course, in none of the cases are the parallels implied to be exact.

The Volk, the Nation-State, and the Diasporic Imagination

Herder was a proponent of what has come to be called “romantic nationalism.” His concept of the *Volk*, a precursor to the modern idea of “the people,” is not entirely self-consistent, but it is precisely this complexity that renders it useful for examining the CFDA’s staging of Chineseness. Herder has described the *Volk* as “‘wild’ and ‘lacking social organization’ . . . closer to nature,” and folk music and poetry as “the language of the soul or the heart” encapsulating “the cultural core before society complicated it.”²⁹ The *Volk* has been characterized by one scholar as “a special group, less cultured, unaltered in certain respects by the influence of civilization,”³⁰ never subjected to the “deteriorating and degrading effects of higher civilization” (14). It is a group “characterized by primitivism in various forms,” “in which crudeness, the natural as opposed to the cultured and polished, are eulogized” (10). As such, therefore, the *Volk* can be considered organic and natural to the nation, which is more than a juridical entity but has its own special genius. It has been pointed out, however, that in Herder’s formulations, the relationship between culture and nation is ambiguous. Herder sometimes uses *Volk* to refer to “the governed as separate from the governing” (4); at other times the term is “used as synonymous with the nation” (5): “*Volk* is equivalent to nation; nation carrying the idea of a group bound together by blood or language or government, or by all three. As such, a *Volk* is a collective personality, has a marked individuality, and is characterized by a national spirit” (14).³¹

With certain modifications to assimilate Marxism and Maoism, the concept of the *Volk* could serve Communist regimes well, and folk culture of various kinds—from paper cuts to acrobatics, from *shange* (“mountain songs”) to *yanggewu*—was embraced by the PRC regime. In Susannah Lockwood Smith’s study of folk music revival in the Soviet Union under Stalin, Gor’kii (Gorky) is quoted as affirming folklore, which is said to be “closely connected with people’s real life and working conditions” and to “[express] the deep hopes and aspirations of the masses—two important considerations in a ‘people’s state.’”³² From the artists’ point of view, when accusations of formalism could ruin lives, turning to folk sources, as Gor’kii once advised, offered a certain amount of safety (406).

Equally, one can easily see the appeal of the *Volk* in diaspora, since organicism is foundationalist: it is believed to be capable of insuring authenticity and anchoring the vicissitudes of the diasporic subject. An implicit belief in a Chinese *Volk* can be said to inform the CFDA’s staging of Chineseness; it would certainly account for the preponderance of shepherdesses and fishermen in its repertoire and the valorization of amateurism. The peasant-style dances involve a romanticization of a simpler, communal way of life, in closer connection with nature or the soil, in which work is

not a chore but a noble, joyous, and praiseworthy activity. As the list of dances and musical pieces reveals, the word *xi*, meaning “joyous” or “happy,” appears repeatedly in the titles. Here, again, a corollary of the *Volk* concept dovetails readily with the Communist regime’s propagandistic needs to portray all Chinese workers as happy. The urban and industrial elements of PRC society, in reality a growing force, were conspicuously absent.

Taken to refer to the governed, the *Volk* would apply to the CFDA if the Nationalist elite were considered the governing class. However, with the establishment of the New China, in theory the governed was now the governing, so the synecdochic mapping of a segment of the population onto the entire nation (which is in turn equated with the nation-state) was deemed natural. It was in this spirit that the CFDA represented Chinese culture to curious American audiences in the 1970s. Making a direct linkage between culture and nation-state, and implicitly believing in the coincidence of the *Volk* with the governing class, the CFDA saw their mission as promoting a positive image of the PRC to the general American public. According to one of the founders I interviewed, Jackson Chan, the group was the most sought after and active after Nixon’s visit to China in 1972. Because of its privileged access to a version of Chinese culture considered taboo and mysterious during the long cold war, the CFDA became an authoritative presenter of this culture when the so-called Bamboo Curtain between the PRC and the US began to come down.

Because many of the central members of the CFDA were harassed and surveilled by the FBI, the “Redness” of the performances in this period was toned down considerably. For example, the PRC originals of certain dances and songs were modified by changing the titles or the song lyrics. The production would be adapted to suit amateur conditions: instead of People’s Liberation Army cavalry being “shot” from an off-stage springboard to perform difficult acrobatics, the CFDA’s version featured horsemen leaping onto the stage. The cultural products most emblematic of the Cultural Revolution, the revolutionary ballets, were actually not presented, for ideological reasons (to soften the image of radicalism) and, I suspect, technical reasons as well. Still, the CFDA looked to the source for both the spirit and the letter of its art. From today’s vantage point, one could see that the CFDA was making a very bold statement when it was against the grain to do so: Chinese culture was synonymous with the version officially sponsored by the nation-state of the PRC, all the way down to the militia women and the model commune Dazhai. Here was cultural long-distance nationalism in full genocentric force: the patriotic diasporic Chinese subject’s responsibility was to serve as a conduit for this culture to the best of his/her ability. Absent technical constraints (such as the lack of trained ballet dancers or stage machinery), the CFDA members would have been happy to be exact replicas of their counterparts on the mainland. Their work was purely a labor of love, untainted by commercialism.

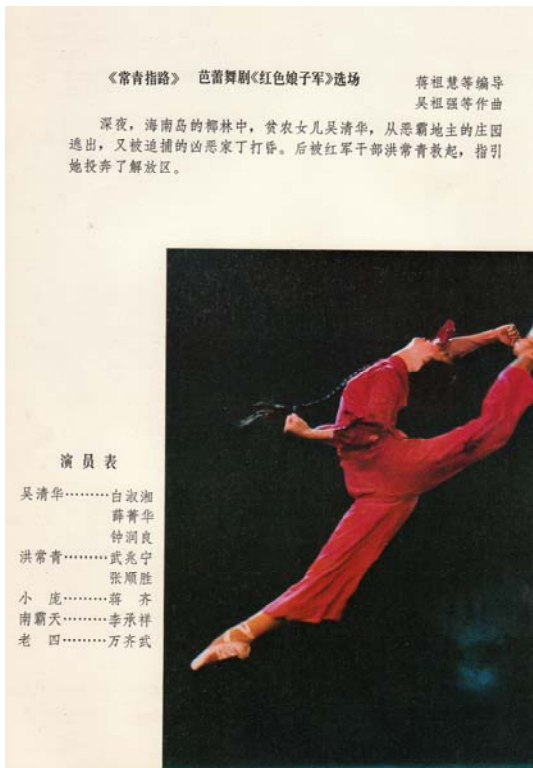


Figure 13.
Solo from the revolutionary ballet
Red Detachment of Women,
from the program of the
1978 San Francisco performance of
the PRC Performing Arts Troupe

When Imagined Intimacy Turns into Close Encounters

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, a paradox emerged regarding the positioning of the CFDA vis-a-vis the PRC. One might have thought that, as the US began to view China with greater openness, the CFDA might now have the breathing space to be less inhibited and more explicit about asserting its political leanings. Yet the truth is, if one examined the group's activities in this period, one would find not an intensifying but a *fading* of political coloring. The reasons are manifold. China was transforming itself drastically during this period, shedding much of its socialism after the fall of the Gang of Four and growing ever more capitalistic under Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies. The earth-bound culture of the folk, full of a stylized *tu qi*, began to lose ground to commodified mass media, cosmopolitan consumerism, and cultural imports from the West. Once *tu* had been in and *yang* had been out; now it was the reverse. In addition, an increasing number of professional dancers began immigrating to the US, intent on using their skills to forge new careers as performers or teachers. The CFDA no longer held a special status as a conduit, interpreter, or broker of PRC Chinese culture: the originals were here now, in the flesh. This actually led to a crisis: in 1978, some members felt that it was time to do likewise and turn the group's operations into money-making professional classes on dance and *wushu*. Some left to pursue just such a commercial course. The remaining members insisted on keeping an amateur community group format but did have to find other roles and venues in order to survive. Interestingly, its new discursive environment was now the

depoliticized multiculturalism of 1980s America, sometimes known derisively as “song and dance multiculturalism.” For example, as noted above, the group took part in a ceremony to welcome Pope John Paul II in 1987 that showcased the cultural diversity of the Bay Area. This participation contradicted what we know about the political dimension of the CFDA’s cultural long-distance nationalism: after all, the PRC does not recognize the Holy See and has its own Catholic organization.

The June 4, 1989, massacre in Tiananmen Square brought to the fore the latent contradictions in the concept of the *Volk* to which I alluded earlier. Though the members whom I interviewed did not put it in such terms, my analysis is that the incident destroyed any illusions that anyone in the CFDA might have held about the organic unity between the governing and the governed. The fault-lines within PRC society were now glaring. It was incontrovertible now that something was seriously wrong with the notion that the nation-state machinery was an inherently benign protector of all citizens and that the Chinese cultural nation was a seamless whole capable of being represented by a handful of dances and songs. A second “secession” took place when some members who wanted to take a high-profile stance protesting the massacre left to start their own dance troupe. Again quite paradoxically, one might say ironically, the ten-odd remaining members, those whose patriotism toward the PRC would not allow them to criticize the regime, overcame the trauma by departing from the concept of the *Volk* that had sustained them for so many years. Strengthening its ranks through recruiting new members, the group went ahead with a planned audition at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, an annual event that has, over the years, become more and more elaborate and less and less “folksy.” The CFDA’s “Red Ribbon Dance” not only passed the audition but won first place among over ninety groups with a high score of 99.83, reviving the spirits of the “old guard” members. In other words, they now derived affirmation not from the group’s exclusive mediating role vis-a-vis the PRC, but from a local American validating body certifying its *professional* standards: the very thing it used to brush aside as irrelevant to the spirit of the *Volk*.

A comparison between the program selections and printed notes of the CFDA over the years would reveal this trend. In a June 17, 1977, show entitled “Dances from the Provinces of China,” not only did the dances embody the *Volk* elements I alluded to above, but the program notes explained both their formal and thematic/political significance, specifically, the role played by culture in supporting the nation-state’s economic development policies. Thus “Happily Delivering Grain” is described as follows:

This is a dance of the Li minority in Hainan Island, Kwangtung Province in Southern China. Short and rapid movements, flexed feet and lively wrist movements comprise the essential parts of this dance. The wide hats are used to represent truck wheels, signifying a part of the country’s modernization

efforts. The dancers express their joy in successfully producing grain for national use.

“Delivering Coal in the Snow” is explained as follows:

“Delivering coal in the snow” is a traditional Chinese saying which symbolizes “a helping hand in times of great need.” In this dance, the women of the Yi minority deliver fuel to the hard-working, self-sacrificing road workers and help the workers with their laundry and mend their clothes. Typical dance movements emphasize the full skirts and long capes which the Yi people wear. The dance portrays the sincere affection which the local people feel for the visiting workers who are paving a road through the mountain wilderness.³³

One might contrast these program notes with those of a performance after 1989. For an April 27, 1990, show, the program was entitled “A Tradition with a Flare [sic]” and featured several love-related dances. In other words, the emphasis was now on individual interpersonal relationships rather than relationships between socioeconomically and politically defined groups:

“The Cowherd and the Village Maid”: A young village girl meets a handsome cowherd on her way to finding a local eatery.

“Morning of Yui Por festival”: The people of the Yi minorities live in widely scattered villages in dense forests. Yui Por festival is when girls and boys have the chance to meet each other and exchange gifts. Three such girls each having a different personality are portrayed in this dance.

“Love Scene”: This is a soft and soothing dance from the Kasak people in the Xin Jiang province. The dance presents the thoughts and longings of a couple separated in body, but together in spirit.³⁴

Or consider these program notes from the October 3, 1992, show entitled “The New Generation: A Continuation,” where the formal characteristics of a dance as well as ethnic customs are emphasized; ideology has given way to ethnography:

“Mongolian Suite – Excerpt ‘Wine Cups and Spoons’”: A Mongolian feast is not complete without music and dancing to highlight the atmosphere. Emptied wine cups, soup spoons, and chopsticks are initially used as rhythm keepers. As the

feast's joyous atmosphere intensifies, the utensils are used to express elation and free spirit through exuberant dancing.

“Happiness”: The Dong Bei style of dancing with handkerchieves [more commonly, handkerchiefs] is selected to show the girls' happiness and joy upon hearing the coming celebration of a friend's “good news.” The girls tease each other and celebrate through the dance.³⁵

Finally, a 2003 performance was entitled “From the Palace Courts to the Villages”—which would have been quite unimaginable for the CFDA in the 1970s. The Chinese introduction explains that dance began with the common people's production and religious activities, then entered the palaces to become a form of entertainment and showcasing of prosperity and power. In turn, palace dance “elevated the dance standards of folk dance and diversified its content.”³⁶ The program was divided into three sections: “Classical Dances and Influences from the Palace Courts,” “Folk Influences from the Han Villages and the Ethnic Minority Tribes,” and “Contemporary Dances Influenced by the Classical and/or Folk Dance Styles.”

As the 1990s moved into the twenty-first century, the CFDA, long plagued by tensions between “Red” and “Expert,”³⁷ folk and elite, amateur and professional, realized that its prime was all but over.³⁸ (Again, this is my reading rather than my interviewees'.) In the context of globalization, the kind of self-consciously Chinese cultural performances promoted in or by the PRC increasingly tends to the packaged, the commercialized, the carefully composed, the elaborately staged, indeed, the self-Orientalized. In the era of extravaganzas for both domestic Chinese and overseas consumption, such as the Shaolin martial monks' traveling show *Wheel of Life* (described by one Amazon.com reviewer as a “Chinese *Riverdance*”), Zhang Yimou's 1998 staging of *Turandot* in the Forbidden City, or any of an unending parade of provincial and national song-and-dance and acrobatic troupes exported to the US, the homemade look and modest visual gratification of the CFDA's performances are becoming increasingly marginal, if not quaintly outdated. Two photographs of *Wheel of Life* and *Yunnan Impression*, available online,³⁹ typify the kind of multimedia feast for the senses—shows of “high production value,” in showbiz parlance—based on Hobsbawmian “invented traditions,”⁴⁰ which are now Chinese culture's face to the world as well as to her own increasingly affluent, entertainment-hungry, and distinctly un-chthonic population.

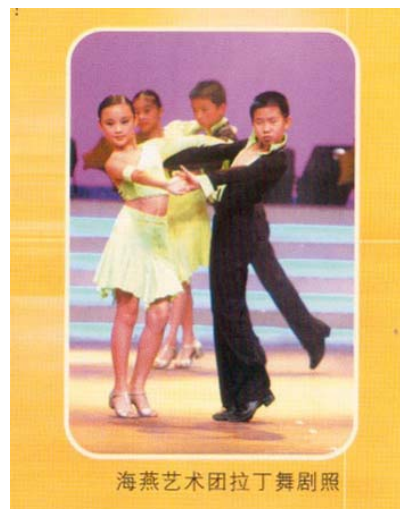
A 2004 tour to Shenzhen, Zhaoqing, and Zhongshan (the latter the “home village” of many Bay Area Chinese immigrants, including at least one of the founders of the CFDA), represented the culmination of the CFDA's PRC-oriented activities, a crowning achievement, an affirmation from the “origin” of the culture, but also a swan song: the group's dances were considered old-fashioned in Southern China by

then. A local dance group on the program featured prepubescent Latin dancers, the girls in midriff-baring glittery dresses and high heels, the boys in tight black jackets with deep-plunging collars. As noted in the CFDA’s self-authored history, written on the occasion of the 2004 China tour, “By now, the CFDA has completed the glorious mission given it by history. The situation has changed.”⁴¹ It defines its future mission as educating American-born Chinese and new immigrant youth in Chinese culture, so that it can be “transmitted from generation to generation.” It is content to be one of many such groups in the Bay Area.



Figure 14. Program, 2004 Guangdong tour

Figure 15.
Young local performers of Latin dance on the CFDA’s 2004 Guangdong tour



Conclusion

The above analysis of the CFDA reveals the complexities involved in practicing cultural long-distance nationalism—defining a sense of Chineseness when the nation-state to which one feels allegiance is itself culturally unstable, undergoing dizzying transformations, and therefore incapable of serving as the ultimate grounding for one’s sense of diasporic identity and community. As Roza Tsagarousianou notes, citing Stuart Hall, “the link between these [diasporic] communities and their ‘homeland’ or the possibility of a return to the past are much more precarious than usually thought. . . . For the place called home will have transformed beyond recognition.”⁴² Given this, what is the nature of cultural long-distance nationalism? Can it survive in a globalized world? Avtar Brah has written of two definitions of home—a “mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” on the one hand, and on the other a “lived experience of a locality”⁴³—the former being the object of cultural long-distance nationalism, the latter, the substrate for the kind of locally created culture promoted by the Asian American cultural nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s. Some theorists (e.g., Radhakrishnan⁴⁴) have argued that the “diasporic” identity oriented toward the land of origin will eventually turn into an “ethnic” identity—if not in the life of the migrant, then in his/her children’s lives. This is one sense in which cultural long-distance nationalism can be said to be, by definition, transitional, Hansen’s Law notwithstanding.⁴⁵ The sense in which the stalwarts of the CFDA entrust the transmission of Chinese culture to the future generations of US-born Chinese Americans will be different from the way they themselves have understood and tried to practice it—expectations will have to be adjusted to acknowledge local conditions, including the younger generations’ incontrovertible political subjecthood in what the ancestors call their adopted land.

The CFDA’s long and ever-evolving relationship with a China invested with primordial faith, to which it has looked as the source of its staging of Chineseness in the US, raises a number of intriguing theoretical questions. First, the viability of cultural long-distance nationalism appears to be in direct proportion to the length of the distance from the putative source. In a sense, cultural long-distance nationalism exists only in a *space of uncertainty*, bookended on one side by the political and cultural certainty of the homeland’s subjects (who change with the times in their capacity as “natural” national subjects), and on the other by at least the political certainty, if not always the cultural certainty, of the migrants’ descendants born into minority status. In between is the space of genocentric first-generation immigrants, a space premised on the very unattainability of the genuine article in the hostland; it does allow cultural modifications, but only if they are construed as nothing more than making-do. Nevertheless, now that technologies of globalized communication have enabled the ready diasporic dissemination of cultural products from the homeland, the space of uncertainty requisite for cultural long-distance nationalism may be shrinking quickly and irrevocably, and the aspired-to and yearned-for direct

closeness to the source might actually kill one's local cultural efforts at preservation and reproduction. Nowadays, cultural imports from China can be almost instantaneously available, via technology or traveling performers, can always claim authenticity, and do not require the type of mediation at which the CFDA once excelled. Is the homegrown kind of folk dance preserved by the CFDA more "authentic" than the spectacular type that has become the norm for public consumption in China? Can it claim greater "authenticity" by virtue of some kind of *Volkgeist* connection from a presumably more innocent, less market-driven, period of the People's Republic? Or is it, by definition, always going to be less "authentic" because of its diasporic location?⁴⁶

Rachel C. Fleming, in her study of the revitalization of traditional Irish music, puts forth Mary Traschel's provocative concept that authenticity may reside not in specific *attributes* of the music, but in "historical process" itself, in "the process of passing on, performing, and reinterpreting the music."⁴⁷ This provocative concept rightly takes into account the indisputable *fact* of continual modifications of "tradition" throughout history. When applied to the CFDA case, it raises an additional question not addressed by Fleming: given the immense disparity in material power to "pass on," "perform," and "reinterpret" cultural traditions between highly capitalized nation-state-backed institutions and the limited resources of a diasporic community, would not the "historical process" of the former end up overwhelming that of the latter, leading to a monopolization of the definition of "authenticity"? Regina Bendix usefully suggests that "the crucial questions to be answered are not 'what is authenticity' but 'who needs authenticity and why?'"⁴⁸ Clearly, the CFDA and the culture industry in China need authenticity for vastly different purposes.

The question of the "authenticity" of folk culture in a rapidly technologized world infused with new media is not peculiar to the Chinese in China or in diaspora, and seemingly irrevocable deterioration is often deplored by those who do not subscribe to Traschel's and Bendix's historicist views. Folklore scholars Kenneth W. Clarke and Mary W. Clarke write of rural folk dances from frontier days:

In this era of specialization and spectatorship a growing number of young citizens have their only observation of folk dance through television. They see troupes of costumed professionals perform highly skilled circle dances as interpreted by professional choreographers—whose function is not to preserve authentic dance, but rather to present a spectacle. Unfortunately, even the urban folk dance groups, who had tended to preserve at least the broad outlines of the dance, have been affected by the fancy footwork of the unrealistic interpretations of the professionals. Since one definition of folklore is that which is learned by imitation, we may be observing a new kind of folklore: an imitation of an imitation!⁴⁹

While this trend of spectacularization of folk dance may be universal, there may be certain questions raised by the CFDA's case that might be peculiar to those of Chinese ethnicity.

If a Chinese diasporic group is a minority in the US but Han, and therefore the majority in China, its stance toward the staging of Chineseness might be fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, as pointed out earlier in this essay, the CFDA took part in US multiculturalism as a minority, rather than diasporic, community group by forming liaisons with other Asian American arts groups, obtaining government funding that promoted diversity, and performing at multiethnic, multicultural events. Thus one might regard it as at least implicitly practicing a form of cultural nationalism; one might further infer that the CFDA would be sensitive to the dignity and autonomy of ethnic minority cultures in a multiethnic, multicultural nation. On the other hand, while practicing cultural long-distance nationalism, the CFDA's use of ethnic-minority cultures in China might be subject to the same criticism that has been leveled against American liberal multiculturalism, namely, that it is "song and dance multiculturalism," acceptable only when minority cultures are exoticized and leave majority cultural hegemony intact.⁵⁰ Dru C. Gladney argues that the notion of China as a "multi-ethnic, multi-national state" is "critical to China's representation of itself to itself, and to the international sphere."⁵¹ To this end, ethnic minorities have often been primitivized, exoticized, eroticized, and commodified.⁵² While Gladney's focus in *Dislocating China* is on China since "reform and opening up," much of his analysis rings true of earlier decades of the nation's existence as well.⁵³ The following photograph from the October 1, 2009, National Day parade in Beijing (in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China) shows the continuing deployment of ethnic-minority cultures in nationalistic discourse.⁵⁴



Figure 16.
Undated
photograph,
labeled a National
Day celebration,
showing ethnic
minorities in
costume.
Judging from
the slogan,
the photograph
is from 1958
or thereabouts.



Figure 19. A float showing representatives of China's ethnic minorities in costume, at the 2009 National Day parade in Tiananmen Square. Source: *World Journal*, October 1, 2009, A17.

Last but not least, the genocentrism of the CFDA places under interrogation the concept of “Greater China,” which has gained widespread support both outside and inside the PRC. Outside the PRC, the concept is attractive to Chinese who are weary of political divisions and increasingly distanced from the originary strife that led to separate nation-states. The idea of a transpolitical Greater China would make possible a sort of verbally enabled, de facto unity in which the (relatively) free circulation of Chinese-owned capital can take place. Diasporic Chinese can partake of the rise of China without committing to any particular political agenda—a development clearly of great benefit to the PRC regime, which would do well to let the sleeping dogs of ideological allegiance lie. (Witness the immense usefulness of a related term, *liangan sandi*, literally “two coasts and three places,” a brilliant linguistic sleight of hand referring to the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as if it were a single entity. There is a new term now, *lianga sidi*, which adds Macao, but *sandi* is still more common.) For Chinese subjects inside the PRC, with just a few strokes of a pen (or computer keyboard), Greater China brings into the fold of the national imaginary millions of physically scattered Chinese-ancestry subjects, augmenting the Chinese

people's sense of belated greatness, confirming a triumphalist narration of national history, and enlarging the imagined cultural reach of China to all corners of the globe.

Several versions of the Greater China idea are well known to scholars in the US and elsewhere, among them Wei-ming Tu's neo-Confucianist concept of "Cultural China,"⁵⁵ Aihwa Ong's concept of "flexible citizenship,"⁵⁶ and the transhistoric, transgeographic "glorious China" in the popular media critiqued by Shu-mei Shih in "The Trope of 'Mainland China'" (countered by her in a heterogeneous concept of the Sinophone in *Visuality and Identity*).⁵⁷ The various versions share the notion that a purely cultural Chinese diasporic identity is possible, one divorced from political economy and transcending nation-states. Such a conceptualization of the Chinese diaspora has had its share of skeptics and critics.⁵⁸ Beyond the weighty issue of the political consequences of the Greater China idea for millions of vulnerably positioned Chinese-ancestry subjects in a number of nation-states, the case of the CFDA has made it amply clear that culture can never be completely decoupled from political economy. Whatever centripetal "core" of Chinese culture construed as unifying members of the Chinese diaspora is itself subject to constant redefinitions, depending on economic developments in various nation-states and the global flow of capital. While at this point Confucianism seems to get the nod as the "core" from *liangan sandi* and large parts of the Chinese diaspora, it must not be forgotten that this is a Confucianism that has been re-presented as encompassing, indeed facilitating, China's modernization, so that the Latin-dancing adolescents would be less a violation or dilution of Chineseness than a demonstration of its youthful energy and global vision. As China continues to undergo rapid economic transformations, scholars will no doubt continue to have to grapple with the relationship between the *concept* of Chineseness and its attributed *contents*, and with the relevance of *localness/locatedness* in diaspora.

Notes

I am grateful beyond words to Jackson Chan (Wen Dachuan) for unconditionally allowing me to consult, cite, and reproduce items from the archives of the Chinese Folk Dance Association in any way I saw fit; to him and Paul Wong for allowing me to interview them on the history of the group; and, last but far from least, to Fred Wu for his good offices in enabling my access, and for his many conversations with me over the years on the CFDA. Without their generosity this essay could never have been written. Lyko Day's expert research assistance has been instrumental in supporting, contextualizing, and enriching my analysis of the CFDA archival material. Sunny Xiang's timely additional research further grounded my essay. The audiences at the following gatherings responded encouragingly and productively to the conference version of this essay: the Institute of European and American Studies,

Academia Sinica, Taipei, 2007; the conference on America's Asia, Asia's America, Texas Tech University, 2007; and the International Workshop on Diasporas: Cultural Transfer, University of Hong Kong, 2008. I thank the hosts for giving me the opportunity to share the work in progress, and the audiences for their remarks. I benefited greatly from discussions with Yu-chen Lin, who studied and presented on the internationally successful Irish dance show *Riverdance*; from Rey Chow's insightful suggestions on the theoretical implications of my analysis, including fascist overtones of the *Volk*; from Khatharya Um's thought-provoking comparative comments on dance in the Cambodian diaspora; and from Stephen H. Sohn's helpful feedback on this essay's structure and content. I am most grateful to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, whose initial encouragement and invitation made this submission possible; to Eric L. Martinsen for his generous editorial support and infinite patience; and to the anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* for their stimulating questions and comments. Warmest thanks to my daughter Serena and my husband Tsang for their technical assistance with the illustrations.

¹ I use the term "amateur" here comparatively, in contradistinction to "professional," and as an objective description of the ways in which the members practiced their art. In other words, the term is not meant to be a dismissal of the considerable achievements the CFDA attained within this framework (and against great odds), nor does it cast aspersions on the members' dedication and efforts.

² For the limited purposes of this study, and given the fact that fluctuating membership is characteristic of all organizations, in my analysis I am not making a strict distinction between the core group that has retained the CFDA's name and the larger entity in the past.

³ Readers interested in this background are referred to Him Mark Lai, "A Historical Survey of the Chinese Left in America," in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, ed. Emma Gee et al. (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California, 1976), especially 72–75.

⁴ Judy Yung and Him Mark Lai, "Him Mark Lai: Reclaiming Chinese American History," *Public Historian* 25, no. 1 (2003): 57.

⁵ *Huaren gewutuan xinhua xianghua xiangzhuan: huiguo wenhua jiaoliu canguan fangwentuan-2004* (San Francisco: Chinese Folk Dance Association, 2004), n.p.

⁶ An anonymous reviewer of this essay for the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* expressed doubts that the founders were entirely self-taught at the beginning. However, given what I have seen of the CFDA's performances, the choreography favored by the group was characterized by simple geometric formations, predictable group movements (unison, linear sequence, or symmetry), and physically undemanding body postures. The tune of *Caicha pudie* was very well known, so matching written dance instructions to it might not have been too difficult. Thus it is entirely possible that the founders were true novices to traditional Chinese dance.

The reviewer also raised an interesting question about whether there were similar cultural efforts to retain the Chinese language in the San Francisco Chinese American community around this time. A brief account of Chinese language schools up to the 1980s can be found in my “Language Situation of Chinese Americans,” in *Language Diversity: Problem or Resource? A Social and Educational Perspective on Language Minorities in the United States*, ed. Sandra Lee McKay and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (Cambridge, MA: Newbury House, 1988), 212–16. My understanding is that during the Exclusion period, Chinese language schools served a practical function by providing alternative skills for Chinatown-raised children who faced bleak prospects in mainstream American society for economic, political, and cultural integration. However, during the cold war, once return to the Chinese mainland for either economic or patriotic reasons was foreclosed, Chinese language schools declined. Of course, in recent years, they have come back in full force as a result of the geopolitical and demographic changes outlined in this essay.

⁷ *Huaren gewutuan xinhua xianghua xiangzhuan*, n.p.

⁸ Benedict Anderson, “Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics” (paper presented at the Conference on Nation, National Identity, and Nationalism, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, September 10–12, 1992).

⁹ Nina Glick Schiller, “Long-Distance Nationalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (New York: Springer, 2005), 571.

¹⁰ Anderson, “Long-Distance Nationalism,” 19.

¹¹ Schiller, “Long-Distance Nationalism,” 577.

¹² Fuglerud Øivind, *Life on the Outside: Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

¹³ Aminul Hoque, “Long-Distance Nationalism: A Study of the Bagir Ghati Community Living in East London,” *eSharp* 5 (2005): 1–19, http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41168_en.pdf.

¹⁴ Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Zlatko Skrbiš, *Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999).

¹⁶ Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974).

¹⁷ Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 59.

¹⁸ See, for example, Frank Chin, *Donald Duk* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1991), 52. Of course Asian American cultural nationalist discourse has never existed in a completely pure form; right from the beginning there were traces of preservationism and essentialism. In

retrospect, Chin's nervousness about being associated with things Chinese smacks of the *zhancao xugen* mentality, typical of the cold war era, identified by Ling-Chi Wang in his typology of Chinese American identities. See Ling-Chi L. Wang, "Roots and the Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States," in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed. Wei-ming Tu (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 85–211.

¹⁹ Lok Siu, "Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Chineseness and Belonging in Central America and Panama," *Social Text* 19, no. 4 (2001): 8.

²⁰ *Huaren gewutuan xinhua xianghua xiangzhuan*, n.p., my translation.

²¹ A military presence is also strikingly evident in earlier programs, with dances depicting anti-Japanese guerilla fighters, militia, border patrols, and the People's Liberation Army on friendly terms with the local population. This theme has steadily faded since the 1970s. The relationship between the *Volk* and the state's nation-building agenda and military machine is a fascinating topic that I do not have the space to explore in this essay.

²² This is another vast topic that can only be touched on in the conclusion of this essay. For a brief historical review of Chinese state ideology and policy concerning ethnic minorities, see Anne Csete, "China's Ethnicities: State Ideology and Policy in Historical Perspective," in *Global Multiculturalism: Comparative Perspectives on Ethnicity, Race, and Nation*, ed. Grant H. Cornwell and Eve Walsh Stoddard (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 287–307.

²³ Theodore Gonzalves's study of Pilipino/Filipino "Cultural Nights" in should provide a fascinating contrast with their Chinese counterparts. See Theodore S. Gonzalves, *The Day the Dancers Stayed: Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009). Another study of the staging of ethnicity published after I began this study, and confirming my interest and approach, is Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

²⁴ The Stanford China Night case raises the question of to what extent Chinese students in the US, presumed to be temporary sojourners by virtue of their student visas, could be considered part of the Chinese diaspora. The complexities of the relationship between study abroad and the formation of Chinese identities and communities are explored in Chih-ming Wang, "Transpacific Articulations: Study Abroad and the Making of Asia/America" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006).

²⁵ Shu-mei Shih's analysis of Taiwan media depictions of a "timeless, cultural China" shows the complex negotiations involved in presenting pan-Sinic elements in a context of intense nativist resistance to the mainland. See Shu-mei Shih, "The Trope of 'Mainland China' in Taiwan's Media," *position* 3, no. 1 (1995): 149–83.

²⁶ Khatharya Um, phone conversation with author. For a contrasting case to the Chinese regarding the many valences of art in diaspora, see Khatharya Um, "Refractions of Home: Exile, Memory, and Diasporic Longing," in *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity and Change*, ed. Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter (New York: Routledge, 2006), 86–100.

²⁷ Adria L. Imada, “Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 111–49.

²⁸ My China-Hawaii analogy finds an unexpected echo in a piece of cultural history uncovered by Dru Gladney: the Polynesian Cultural Center on Oahu, Hawaii, was repeatedly visited by the Chinese ambassador, who praised its operations, and served as the model for the Chinese Folk Culture Villages in Shenzhen. See Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 31–39.

²⁹ Quoted in Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 54.

³⁰ Georgiana R. Simpson, *Herder’s Concept of “das Volk”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1921), 7.

³¹ Herder’s place in a fascist intellectual lineage leading up to Nazism and beyond is discussed in Peter Davies and Derek Lynch, *The Routledge Companion to Fascism and the Far Right* (London: Routledge, 2002), 115; also see Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Wolin notes that “in the search for authentic progenitors of the pan-German worldview, a veritable industry arose around the thought of J. G. Herder” (114). Note 46 picks up another thread in the Volk–fascism connection.

³² Susannah Lockwood Smith, “From Peasants to Professionals: The Socialist-Realist Transformation of a Russian Folk Choir,” *Kritika* 3, no. 3 (2002): 404.

³³ *Dances from the Provinces of China: Program Supplement* (San Francisco: Chinese Folk Dance Association, 1977), n.p.

³⁴ *A Tradition with a Flare [sic]* (San Francisco: Chinese Folk Dance Association, 1990), n.p.

³⁵ *The New Generation: A Continuation* (San Francisco: Chinese Folk Dance Association, 1992), n.p.

³⁶ *From the Palace Courts to the Villages* (San Francisco: Chinese Folk Dance Association, 2003), n.p., my translation.

³⁷ “Red” and “Expert” are terms, in common use during the Cultural Revolution, to refer to a tension between “correct” political consciousness/behavior and proficiency in a particular occupation. While not mutually exclusive in theory, in practice “Expert” often became an accusation of political disloyalty and backwardness and a basis for persecution.

³⁸ Rachel Fleming suggests in her study of the revitalization of traditional Irish music that there is a tension between those who learned this music as a “performance art” and those who learned it as a “social activity.” Rachel G. Fleming, “Resisting Cultural Standardization: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Revitalization of Traditional Music in Ireland,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 41, no. 2/3 (2004): 246. This may well apply to dance as well.

³⁹ The photographs of *Wheel of Life* and *Yunnan Impression* can be found, respectively, at “Production News,” ALIA, <http://www.alia.com.au/productions/flight.jpg>; and “Sounds of Yunnan,” Confucius Institute Online, September 27, 2009, <http://quyi.chinese.cn/en/image/attachement/jpg/site3/20090910/0023ae9af67f0c12fb635e.jpg>.

⁴⁰ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴¹ *Huaren gewutuan xinhua xianghua xiangzhuan*, n.p.

⁴² Roza Tsagarousianou, “Rethinking the Concept of Diaspora: Mobility, Connectivity and Communication in a Globalised World,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 1.1 (2004): 56.

⁴³ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 192, quoted in Tsagarousianou, “Rethinking the Concept of Diaspora,” 57.

⁴⁴ See Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ “What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember” is an idea put forth by historian Marcus Lee Hansen in the 1930s. Marcus Lee Hansen, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” (lecture, Augustana Historical Society, Rock Island, IL, 1938).

⁴⁶ Will direct cultural imports crowd out not only cultural long-distance nationalism but eventually encroach upon the discursive space cleared by cultural nationalism? To ask this question is to suggest that even Asian American discourse, which appears well established today, may itself be unstable. I can only gesture toward this question here.

⁴⁷ Fleming, “Resisting Cultural Standardization,” 251, emphasis original.

⁴⁸ Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 21, quoted in Natasha Casey, “Riverdance: The Importance of Being Irish American,” *New Hibernia Review* 6, no. 4 (2002): 19.

⁴⁹ Kenneth W. Clarke and Mary W. Clarke, *Introducing Folklore* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 76.

⁵⁰ See Barry Sautman, “Racial Nationalism and China’s External Behavior,” *Working Papers in the Social Sciences* 33 (1997): 1–51, <http://repository.ust.hk/dspace/bitstream/1783.1/1153/1/sosc33.pdf>. Sautman notes a tension between the official multiethnicity of China and its Han-chauvinist “racial nationalism” (10–12).

⁵¹ Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 57.

⁵² Gladney notes with sarcasm, “One cannot be exposed to China without being confronted by its ‘colorful’ minorities. They sing, they dance; they twirl, they whirl. Most of all, they smile, showing their happiness to be part of the motherland” (Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 54).

⁵³ An anonymous reviewer of this essay pointed out the virtually obligatory presence of ethnic minorities at national festivals and celebrations, “such as the one commemorating the end of WWII that was held in Kunming (the range of ethnic groups in Yunnan province all came in traditional costume, and sang traditional songs—while carrying placards advertising the spa or hotel that just opened in their respective communities.” For a thought-provoking analysis of uses of minority cultures in diaspora, see also Kwai-Cheung Lo, “Reconfiguring the Chinese Diaspora through the Ethnic Minorities” (paper presented at the International Workshop on Diasporas: Cultural Transfer, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, December 11–13, 2008).

⁵⁴ I thank Rey Chow for pointing out the potentially fascist aesthetic informing such nationalistic spectacles in which monumental unity becomes an all-consuming end. See, for example, Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *New York Review of Books* 22, no. 1, February 6, 1975, on formal features of fascist aesthetics such as a taste for “the monumental” or “the rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns,” which is a rehearsal of the “very unity of the polity.” See also David C. Durst, *Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics, and Culture in Germany, 1918–1933* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 184–86.

⁵⁵ See Wei-ming Tu, “Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center,” in Tu, *Living Tree*, 1–34.

⁵⁶ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵⁷ Shih, “The Trope of ‘Mainland China’”; and Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁵⁸ See, for example, Gungwu Wang, “A Single Chinese Diaspora?” in *Joining the Modern World: Inside and Outside China* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2000), 37–70; Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Allen Chun, “Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity,” *boundary 2* 23, no. 2 (1996): 111–38.