

# Discussion on the View that Dance Provides the Perfect Medium for the Establishment of a Minority Identity and the Expression of Non-Hegemonic Values

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**Abstract.** Dance, as a performance artform, is practiced for reasons through various ways. It is made up of intentionally 'selected sequences of human movement' with embodied value in terms of aesthetics and symbolism (Fraleigh, 1987:49). There is an increased discourse that dance is a political tool as well as embodied politics, Prickett (2007: 237-290), the author who delved into the relation between dance, protest and identities, has made the contribution of that suggestion. In her works, Prickett depicted how the body had become the medium through which dance was performed as an instrument of political protest, and how dance pageants had been the vehicle to fight for social and economic equality (Christofidou, 2004:111-114). This essay starts the discussion about minority, identity, hegemony and cultural hegemony. Then the Chinese ethnic minority group and ethnic minority folk dance are briefly overviewed. Next, the relation between Chinese ethnic minority dance, ethnic minority group and politics.

**Keywords:** minority; Chinese folk dance; politics.

## 1. Minority, Identity, Hegemony and Cultural Hegemony

The term minority is defined in various ways. Louis Wirth (1945:347) had made its definition as the group of people who, due to physical or cultural reasons, are separated from others and received 'differential and unequal treatment' in the society, thus regarding themselves as the victims of discrimination. It is worth pointing out that the minority status does not just mean the number of the group, rather, it is more referred to the benefits and privileges that the group is provided (Vitullo & Sheen, 2011:5). Identity is based on multiple attributes including race, color, beliefs and culture. It is 'the conception, quality, belief and expression' that differentiate an individual or group from others (Leary & Tangney, 2003:324). There are several factors that influence how one identifies himself or herself including his or her political belief and participation, group identity and interest (Vitullo & Sheen, 2011:5).

Hegemony is a concept developed by Gramsci, an Italian politician, indicating the ideological dominance. It is referred to the power held by one group over others (Dorsher, 2001). As for cultural hegemony, it is meant the domination or rule gained by ideological or cultural means, denoting the capability of the ruling group to use power directing norms and values for the others enabling them to be the dominant view of the whole society, and eventually to influence the others' thoughts and behavior (Cole, 2015).

## 2. Chinese Ethnic Minority Group and Ethnic Minority Folk Dance

Every Chinese ethnic minority group has its own folk dances, and in fact, besides the ethnic costume, ethnic minority dance has become a symbol of the uniqueness of each ethnic minority group reflecting the characteristics of the different ethnic minority's histories, cultures and religions, and is regarded as one of the most valuable forms of art expression among the ethnic minority people.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has made endeavor to help the ethnic minority groups retain their cultures and regain the lost including art recovery and preserving the ethnic minority dance. Through constant efforts over years, the ethnic

minority dance in China has gradually made a comeback, and today, it is also acknowledged as the preservation of world cultural heritage.

### **3. The Chinese Ethnic Minority Dance and the Ethnic Minority Group**

#### **3.1 How dance has been used to establish the minority identity?**

Similar to other dancing styles, the Chinese ethnic minority dance, as an art form, has been created and transformed over years as the result of countless dancers' hard works.

It is believed that the first nation-wide popular ethnic minority dancers were Kangba'erhan and Jia Zuoguang, who performed the dances of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia respectively in national propaganda to celebrate the National Day in 1950. Meanwhile, hundreds of ethnic minority performers took part in a one-month minority music and dance tour show for the same purpose, and it was at that time that the ordinary Chinese had the chance to see the ethnic minority dance. Kanba'erhan used to be trained in Moscow while Jia Zuoguang, studied German modern dance and attended an international show in Budapest in 1949 as the representative of China. Followed with them, a number of ethnic minority dancers have also created their own legends, such as Oumijiacan with Tibetan Reba dance, Siqintariha with her cup and goblet dance and Yang Liping with Dai peacock dance. All those minority dancers had influenced the development of the ethnic minority dance with their distinct personal styles resulting in the shape and flourish of the ethnic minority dance in China. Though not every ethnic minority dancers' names are remembered by the public, their legacies have still remained and will inspire their followers to make new contribution in future.

Studies have shown that the origin of the ethnic minority dance was the ritual enactments used to pray for a good harvest or hunt, its formation and development have been shaped by various factors including the ethnic minority's history, culture and religion, and thus the ethnic minority dance reflects the uniqueness of different ethnic minority groups, and preserving the ethnic minority dance helps establish the ethnic minority identity.

#### **3.2 The deployment of dance in terms of maintaining cultural uniqueness of ethnic minority, promoting national integration and propaganda**

##### **3.2.1 Maintaining cultural uniqueness of ethnic minority**

The ethnic minority dance has been greatly developed since the late 1940s especially after the foundation of the People Republic of China in 1949. Back to 1947, Dai Ailian, the mother of Chinese modern dance, who received ballet and modern dance training in London, travelled to ethnic minority regions including north Sichuan and Xikang, to collect and record the ethnic minority dance, and based on that she created several Tibetan, Miao, Yi and Uygur dances. Jia Zuoguang, one of the earliest national ethnic minority dance stars as mentioned above, refreshed Inner Mongolia dances with modern dance techniques, and Jin Ming, another famous dancer and choreographer, reinvented peacock dance after years of study in traditional Dai dances. Through this kind of works, many traditional ethnic minority dances have been collected, codified and recreated. Meanwhile, the background and stories behind the ethnic minority dance have been explored, which has contributed to the historical and cultural heritage of ethnic minority. Moreover, lot of new dancers especially the ethnic minority dancers have been recruited to inherit and develop the ethnic minority dance, and that has greatly improved education level among the ethnic minority regions, given the fact that very few ethnic minority people had been literate before 1949.

##### **3.2.2. Promoting national integration**

In China, the ethnic minority dance has become a symbol of the united multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation. Tracing back to 1950, Ms. Dai Ailian, the founder of Chinese modern dance, had choreographed the ethnic dance combination for the National Day celebration show. And since then, the ethnic dance combination has become an integral part for all national performances, because it has been seen as a symbol of national integration, and by producing various lively and colorful ethnic

minority dances, the image of China, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and united nation, has been showed to public.

### **3.2.3. The propaganda tool**

For many years, through the deployment of the ethnic minority dance, the government has worked on establishing the national integration as well as reinforcing the notion that there has been no ethnic disputes and all nationals live in the harmony. And of course, that is different from the realities which have been observed, as China has been confronted with ethnic problems including discrimination and inequality, racism and ethnic stereotypes. Many topics, such as religion, ethnic autonomy and democratic rights are prohibited. The Han Chinese, the majority of the Chinese, have little chance to see the real life of the ethnic minority groups, and that has caused an increased misunderstanding among different ethnic groups.

### **3.3 Why dance has been thought to provide the perfect medium?**

From the above discussion, it is observed that dance provides the perfect medium for the establishment of the minority identity, and the reasons can be attributed to:

Firstly, dance is less challenging than words. Since most people in particular the youth hate to be lectured by theories, doctrines and ideologies, dance, as a body movement, is thought to be rather soft and tender and has less chance to be treated as brain washing or the indoctrination.

Secondly, it is easier for audiences to capture the message delivered by the dancers, even though they do not speak same language. Dance is a non-verbal performance art form and thus solve the language barrier. In fact, early in the year of 1930s, the American workers had started to realize the power of dance in politics. According to Geduld (2008: 9), the Workers Cultural Federation had used non-verbal cultural disciplines such as art, photography and dance to recruit and educate more workers.

Thirdly, dance can be double coded, as different groups may interpret the same dance in different ways, for example, most Han Chinese are impressed by the song I Want To Go To Tibet because of its beautiful rhythm and the group dancing, whilst the Tibetan political activists may feel annoyed. The song was created under the background that the Qinhai-Tibet Railway was inaugurated in 2006, since then some Tibetan always have had the concern that the railway would strengthen the Chinese government's control over Tibet and bring more tourists to Tibet, as a result, Lhasa, the holly place of Buddhism, would be polluted by the mass population and the commercial development of tourism in the near future (SaveTibet, 2006).

### **3.4 Another voice**

As a matter of fact, China has a very complicated relationship with its ethnic minority groups, which is different from its repeated propaganda. In recent years, the ethnic problems such as violence, unrest and even terrorism attacks have been frequently emerged in many areas including Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang Province, and therefore the Chinese central government has felt the needs to tighten the control towards those regions through various approaches, so dance has been used as a propaganda tool to reinforce the notion of an united multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation. In 2013, the central government announced its plan to shoot propaganda films so as to promote all of its 55 ethnic minority groups such as the Hui, Manchu, Mongols, Uyghurs and Tibetans. In spite that the ethnic minority groups have been narrated as happy people like singing and dancing in the national medium, in the reality, different voices can be heard nearly everywhere. Tsering Woesser, a poet from Tibet, has commented that Tibet has lost its voice and there has been no freedom for artists to express their true opinions since 1950, the year the Chinese communist government took control of Tibet. She has told a BBC reporter that the ideological control has been so tight that the public have been forced to keep silence most of the time (Montefiore, 2013). In fact, the government would rather Tibet was depicted as simple as a touristic paradise, as featured by the popular song I Want To Go To Tibet. In the music video, the image of the Qinhai-Tibet railway was played alongside groups dancing, and

the singer praised the beautiful scene of Lhasa with her impressive voice. Ironically enough, the song was published in 2009 against the background of a series of self-immolations in Tibet (Wilcox, 2015).

#### **4. Dance and Cultural Hegemony in China**

In China, art and culture have always been used to represent or deliver dominant ideology particularly since the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. Dance, as a non-verbal, subtle but also influential medium, has never been neglected, contrarily, its utilization and development have always reflected the government's will to promote its communist ideology among the people. Similarly, the minority groups have also used dance to express the non-hegemonic value.

In China, after the communist party took power in 1949, except the regulated group dancing, many kinds of dances such as waltz, rumba and tango had been prohibited, because they were thought as bourgeois, unhealthy and would weaken revolutionary spirits. People who danced prohibited dances or violated the above rules would be punished, and as the matter of facts, many famous dancers had been forced to leave the stages during the Chairman Mao's period. Until the late 1970s, China performed the 'Reform and Open Policy', a lot of things have started to change including the attitude towards the dance diversity.

Started from the mid-1980s, the breakdancing had been popular among Chinese youth, and caused various disputes. Liberals treated the breakdancing as a kind of movement, whilst the conservatives believed that it would lead the youth to immorality, because they still insisted the old idea that dance should reflect revolutionary spirits, and using dances to express personal emotion, as the break dancers did, was not revolutionary and represented the vicious lives of Western people.

However, many youth who embraced the breakdancing had thought in different ways. Actually, lots of them took it as a medium to express their feelings, some even commented that by practicing breakdancing they had been more confident than before and started to find themselves. Similarly, some breakdancing fans in Beijing claimed that breakdancing was actually about a freedom to express their emotions, as there was no rules to define performing the breakdancing, so everyone had been free to dance as they wanted. Actually, many young Chinese mostly regarded breakdancing as a hobby, through which they could express how they felt about themselves as well as the outside world.

Not only the Chinese youth but also adults and even famous stars in the 1980s had felt pressure when performing breakdancing, waltz, tango and other dances, because those dances had still been treated as bourgeois embodied with western values, and the government officers had different reaction at different stages towards the dance fever. In 1984, totally 4 public dance halls opened to public, and only foreigners, international students, oversea Chinese and their friends were allowed to enter into the dance halls. And with the 'Reform and Open Policy' has been carried out, in 1986, the Chinese government had finally acknowledged that public dance halls are legitimate.

#### **5. Dance and Politics**

Dance, as the non-verbal art form, has shown a growing tendency to address social and political issues, and the argument has remained regarding the relationship between dance and politics. Should people call for 'dancing about dance' (O'Mahony, 2006) or accept and even encourage dancers to gain attention and support for their beliefs and ideas by dancing? People have shown different attitudes.

Merce Cunningham, the famous American dancer and choreographer believed that politics should be removed from dance and he even wanted to get rid of human emotion with dance. Similarly, Martha Graham, the founder of the modern dance had expressed the same opinion. Graham used to comment that propaganda is the subject that she would not allow to discuss in her studio (O'Mahony, 2006). Ironically, Martha Graham and her company had organized and held extensive performances in Asia during 1950s and 1970s, and all those performance, as recorded, were supported by the American government. In fact, according to the related reports, the American government had

recognized that Graham's work as a valuable asset for the culture exchange, and stated that Martha's performances had well served the US government's foreign policy objectives and enhanced international cooperation (Geldud, 2010: 22). moreover, the US government officers believed that Graham Company should be sent out, because Graham's work was especially useful and skillfully demonstrated American ideology through the performances (ibid: 17).

By contrast, some people insisted that dance is a political weapon, as Chairman Mao Tse-tung had pointed out that all culture, literature and art have definite class attributes and therefore represent definite political interests (Mao, 1942). Nicholas (1999: 3-8) has also directly pointed out in his papers that dance had been an important component in terms of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War period. The Soviet Union's ballet troupe, for an instance, had strongly promoted the positive image about the communist nation and its ideology (Ibid: 10).

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, this essay works on discussing the relation among dance, ethnic minority identity and cultural hegemony. By using different examples in China to explore the relation among dance, Chinese ethnic minority groups and cultural hegemony, in particular, how dance has been used to support the non-hegemonic value or non-hegemonic value is narrated to support the view that dance provides the perfect medium for the establishment of a minority identity and the expression of non-hegemonic values.

From the case discussions, it is observed how dance have been utilized to serve the political purpose. It is believed that dance and politic will exist alongside each other, as for any political figures or groups, they always have the tendency to spread their ideas or ideologies, and dance is a perfect medium for them to use to express their opinions, and on the other hand, for most dancers and choreographers, they want to keep thinking when dancing, and thus as long as they think, they will inevitably use dance to make their political points.

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