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Musings on the Ruptures:
Examining the Circulations of Chinese Modern Dance in the U.S.

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Duanzi Cheng

March 2011

Thesis Committee:
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The Thesis of Duanzi Cheng is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents and my professors, who sincerely supported me
with love and never left my side.

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Chapter I: Introduction

1) The Ruptures Embedding the Beijing Olympic Opening

8pm, 8/8/08, Beijing. Another “China” myth ripped open as a giant scroll slowly unfurled in front of the world’s curious eye. On the backdrop of a LED¹ hand scroll, black-costumed dancers with hands dipped in ink rolled and squirmed leaving circular trails on a block of white paper², a visual style reminiscent of not only Jackson Pollock’s “action painting,” but also Chinese ink wash art, cursive writing, and sleeve/ opera dancing, multiple layers of cultural “sources.” Floating over the scroll surface was an array of “cultural symbols” being retrieved back into history, a living tradition enabled partially by the pictorial/ spectatorial mobility of the scroll format and partially by the state-of-the-art technology³. As images of ceramics, porcelain vessels, and tea leaves beamed on the scroll, in juxtaposition, performers’ “ancient” parades through sea and continental “Silk Roads” reenacted a narrative about the whence and the whither of these cultural products. Chinese opera also gained fuller dimension (than in most mainstream media) by demonstrating local specificities of kunqu and

¹ Abbreviation for A light-emitting diode. LEDs are widely used as indicator lights on electronic devices.

² A visual signature of Shen Wei’s in his globally acclaimed *Connect Transfer* (2004), this staging is minus bodily contact and with an addition of Chinese classical movement idioms.

³ This is not to deny the price to pay to achieve all these effects is equally spectacular.

Peking opera⁴ in separate sections. Meanwhile, in the bleachers, audience members of all colors were cooling themselves the Chinese way—waving paper fans handed out to them at the entrance.

Before this, the only clue one had had about how the Olympic opening ceremony would be like was, perhaps, it was going to be one “with Chinese characteristics⁵.” We were left to wonder -- would this mean a spectacle of traditions, or of something jarringly modern? Or, rather, one of East-West synthesis? Or all of these?

As it turned out, the entire show veered away from fitting into a neatly defined spatial-temporal-cultural category. The performances brimmed over and beyond conventional classification of media, of modern and traditional, Eastern and Western, representational and presentational genres. The notion of “authentic” Chinese-ness was sometimes given a (postmodern) twist. The Peking opera scene alone surprised me (and the critical voice inside of me) a bit by giving no straight display of “authentic,” “outlandishly” robed characters; rather, those displayed in their 2004 staging⁶ now reappeared as miniaturized string-puppets moved by “stagehands” on a makeshift stage which was being transported by a fast-paced crowd of clowns (a.k.a.

⁴ Two among the many local styles of “Chinese opera.”

⁵ “Olympics/an Olympic opening ceremony with Chinese characteristics” is a popular slogan, as well as one of China’s promises to the world, about what the 29th Olympics would be like. It has been widely circulated before the 2008 Olympics. It borrows from/ reengages the official term for the economy of the PRC---“socialism with Chinese characteristics” ---created during China’s economic reform starting 1978. The government envisions a form of socialist market economy that differs from market economy in Western countries. Its uniqueness is said to lie in its redefinition of Marxist concepts to make socialism compatible with these new economic policies.

⁶ Yimou Zhang’s 8-minute staging at the Athens Olympic Closing Ceremony.

chou⁷). At one point, everyone stopped and broke into hysterical laughter as if to wake up to the absurdity of the drama they just put on---a comment of sorts. As Shen Wei, a lead creative consultant of the show, says, a most amazing thing about the opening ceremony... was how little "fortune cookie" Chinese culture there was. "...Wasn't it great that there was no dragon/lion dance and no red lanterns?"⁸

The spectators fanning themselves, too, was a scene I had never encountered before while in the U.S. Could consuming the fan as part of a palpable (foreign) culture reach beyond tokenism--how the connoisseur is willing to stop at a most superficial image of a foreign culture? On the one hand, fanning allows the otherwise immobile spectator a haptic experience which could extend to empathetic interaction between the seeing (subject) and seen (object) bodies. Given the parallelism between the fan being handled and the performing Chinese body being observed—as a “Chinese” symbol and a use-object at the same time---this tactile experience could (in theory) promote understanding of the Other on a deeper level. The cultural outsider could become aware of the power/ verve of the fan through embodying the position of the Chinese fanning/ fan-dancing body, rather than remaining a disengaged, objectifying spectator of Chinese-ness as mere cultural “marker” or anthropological “text.” On the other hand, though, did the audience actually see beyond the surface (image/ decoration/ object/ commodity) to reach some cultural depth or to read some contemporary aesthetics/ messages as packed in antique garb? Or did they simply

⁷ The role of Chou in Peking opera.

⁸ See John Pomfret, “The Olympics Opening Ceremony.” Aug 11, 2008.

<http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/pomfretschina/2008/08/the_opening_ceremony.html>.

dismiss it as another sample of the touch-and-go kind of China? Did they care to read differently?

Of course, the Olympic stage was not empty before the Opening ceremonies. The Chinese government's continuous persecution of Falun Gong practitioners, the Chinese embassy's revoking of visa to the Darfur activist, gold medalist Joey Cheek, and the expelling of foreigners and nonlocals from Beijing at the advent of the Games all added glitches and ironies to the spirits of "harmony" (和 ▪) and "tolerance" (包容) the host government had been advocating in words. It stood out to me as to many non-Chinese how totally Confucian⁹ the whole show felt¹⁰. This, in turn, leads to more questions: was Confucian philosophy being co-opted to justify the excesses of the CCP and the military conquests today? Or could it be the wish of the artists to revive and evoke some essence of China's philosophical traditions long eclipsed behind the iron hand? That is, was it a subversive act of kinds? How would the audience read it? Would the endeavors towards non-tokenist, de-officializing representations of China go for naught because of ingrained impression about China's political aggressions? Could the Western viewer dispatch this show as simply another Communist fanfare, without change¹¹? Should it matter that Chinese American (and

⁹ Confucianism (儒家) is an ancient Chinese ethical/ philosophical system focused on human morality. The *Analects* are a record of the words and acts of Confucius and his disciples, which taught the basic Confucian values including propriety (礼), righteousness, ...all centered about the central thought of Confucius—humanity.

¹⁰ As 800 some performers representing Confucius's 3000 disciples recited from the *Analects*: "All men are brothers within the four seas," right next to them near 900 movable type blocks echoed by forming three variations of the character "he" (和, harmony), which later morphed into a Great Wall pattern with blooming peach blossoms, a symbol of openness.

¹¹ See Susan Langer's theory of "progress without Change" analyzed in Yujen Lu's *Wrestling with the Angels*. pp138.

non-Chinese) artists were involved (although how much say they had is unclear) in this production? Should it matter also, that no native modern dance companies had played a part in this “official” event? I wonder if the average audience would care to understand the entangled subjectivities behind this seemingly single-minded “China Night.”

These musings on subjectivity relate back to my ongoing research project which looks at the intercultural ruptures in perceiving Chinese dance and the Chinese dancing body. From my troublesome yet unique in-between place---my role as a dancer-scholar crisscrossing between two different culturalisms--post-capitalist America and post-communist China-- I want to reflect on some dance-related issues the 2008 opening ceremonies raised in a detached way and meanwhile put things in perspective. In a similar way that I was both an insider (physically in Beijing) and an outsider (nothing but a TV spectator) of this Olympics, I try to account for the ethnic Chinese dancing body as subject (experience and perspective of mine and dance practitioners in/from China) as well as object (as advertised by official media and perceived by U.S. mainstream audience). These 2008 opening ceremonies in Beijing, to the summer Olympics, raise some of the central issues I plan to address in my thesis on the circulations of Chinese modern dance within the U.S. I hope to look at both the agency of the Chinese modern dancing body in all of its complexities--something that connects this to the complex discussion of the scrolls and the Chinese opera, above--and the agency of the audience--something that connects it to the discussion of

the fans, above.

2) Project Topic

This thesis addresses the main topic of my research project: (inter-)cultural ruptures in perceiving Chinese modern dance. In chapter II, I lay out some general questions and topics encompassing the topic and bring them into socio-historical-cultural contexts. These include how the history of circulating Chinese dance and representing Chinese-ness on American stages have affected the reception of Chinese modern dance today, how the mainstream rhetoric about the inception of modern dance has hampered Chinese (Americans) from accounting for an alternative modern aesthetics, and how U.S. Orientalist constructions about Chinese opera/China's ethnicity and Asian American exploitations of such have implicated the reception of Chinese modern dance on the U.S. stage. For the latter question, I cite the Appex¹² piece *Fan Variations* (1999) to crystallize my point. I demonstrate how, by exploiting the Chinese opera and by performing their "racial split" from it, to borrow theater scholar Daphne Lei's term (Daphne Lei 17-18), Asian American nationalist identity politics has served Orientalist discourses well and has made "Chinese modern dance" a mission impossible even before it enters the stage. In chapter III, I further illustrate my points about intercultural ruptures in the perception of Chinese modern dance by providing readings of particular Chinese modern works as circulated in the

¹² Abbreviation for "Asia Pacific Performance Exchange."

U.S. culture, including companies that do tour in the U.S. as well as dance companies with Chinese choreographers based in the U.S. I first focus on the critical/ audience reception of the (Beijing-based) LDXT company performances I saw in Purchase, New York (10/2007) alongside my readings of three pieces---*The Cold Dagger* (2007), *Pilgrimage* (2007), and *The Pseudo Eagle* (2006); I then discuss the *Second Visit to the Empress* (2005) by NY-based Chinese choreographer Shen Wei, looking at the structures of the gaze and the position of the audience by comparing my reading with those of several mainstream reviewers. In the essay's concluding section, I formulate the two central issues and approaches my project focuses on--the Chinese modern dancing body as agent as well as the mobilization of its "immobile audience." I theorize how an exclusively kinesthetic mode (or muted speech) helps negotiate political visibility in China for most Chinese dancing moderns. To extend, I then cite the case of the Forsythe Protégé, Tibetan choreographer Sang Jijia whose work rehabilitates the dancer's voice on stage and to some extent theorizes the Chinese dancing body as agent. By means of the endeavors envisioned above, I hope to credit the agency of the Chinese modern dancing body and to open up a forum for discussing the possibility of alternative modernity or subversive authenticity¹³ for Chinese modern dances circulated in the U.S.

¹³ Anglo-American cultural value has long been considered the default standard for what counts as "modern," non-Western cultures being the opposite of "modern" and usually euphemized as "authentic." Post-colonialists have challenged this hegemonic order by asserting a different path of modernization and an alternative form of modernity. The slogan "Chinese characteristics," though a rhetoric of China's centrality, does coincide with the agenda of several peripheral subjectivities--- modern or popular artists who explore an individualized (as opposed to Western and institutional) modern expression and ethnic artists who valorize a resilient, subversive authenticity vis-a-vis official representations and Western imaginations of them---as objects or raw images.

Chapter II

1) **Constructing Chinese Dance/ the Chinese Dancing Body in the U.S.**

To talk about circulations of Chinese modern dance in the U.S., we need to first address the construction of Chinese dance/ Chinese-ness within the U.S. cultural logics of hierarchy, which necessarily involves the relationships between several bodies—the white Western body, the Asian American body, and the ethnic Chinese body, which (as subject) has remained the least theorized. Here are some of my observations regarding this triangulated history of representing/ constructing Chinese-ness/ Chinese dance.

The ethnic Chinese dancing body is figured as marginal, even invisible on the U.S./ international stage except for its tokenized presence---as marker of authentic operatic China or communist China or both; or else, like in the *Nutcracker*, a fetish or lack. A monolithic rather than multiple “Chinese bodies” is imagined and theorized regardless of the different positionalities bodies occupy. Ethno-racial constructions of Chinese bodies inside the Chinese border (as viewed from outside) appear reductionist and decontextualized; what kind of Chinese performance counts as representative ethnic voice follows standards that usually account for how people in the West see China—like the lotus-blossom or the red-guard image that, flat as it is, feeds the West’s desire to see an subservient, devious, all in all inferior China.

I suggest, as have others¹⁴, that white fantasies (and pleasures) about China are achieved through the vehicle of Asian dancing bodies. Here I want to evoke the convention of *yellowface* and mainstream musicals with stereotypical Asian roles or Chinese-y dance numbers. The flames of anti-Chinese hysteria that had prompted *yellowface* in the first place have seemingly ebbed since the Exclusion Act of 1924, when the Chinese were legally barred from further entry. However, *yellowface* as a stock convention continues to circulate and its effects linger on especially in dance without sufficient challenge. Dance scholar Yutian Wong recognizes the *Nutcracker* “Tea” as unmistakably *yellowface* (Yutian Wong 2002, 70) and dance scholar Jennifer Fisher points out the “uplifted digit” choreo-cartoon as ethnically denigrating¹⁵. The imaginative versioning of the second-act Tea dance, for all its volatility, discloses both the anachronism and the tenacity of racist clichés about Chinese dance/ Chinese-ness. Now I cite Hammerstein’s musical number “Fan Tan Fannie” (from 1961 film *Flower Drum Song*) as an example of white fantasy about an alleged marker (fan) of pan-East Asian femininity performed by an Asian-looking cast. Marked by the fan as “Chinese dance,” the number is more like a pastiche of pseudo-Japanese aural patterns, Hollywood bubble dance images and gestures, Orientalized Chinese footwork, a redesigned coolie hat and a mini-cheongsam --two other examples of white invented Chinese-ness.

¹⁴ See Christina Klein on *The King and I* and *Flower Drum Song* in Cold War Orientalism (2003). Priya Srinivasan and Yutian Wong also made this kind of arguments.

¹⁵ Jennifer Fisher, Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) pp.100.

This does not exclude Asian Americans regurgitating stereotypical images through “self-representation” and hence their involvement in circulating Orientalist projects about China. Asian American scholar Shengmei Ma puts sharp focus on Asian Americans whose ethnicity is “no longer an impediment to success, ...[but] the key to success in a West fond of tokenized minorities” (Ma 147) and traces how contemporary minority artists reproduce Chinoiserie in the name of “authenticity.” China is reduced to a flat image or “fretwork” (148) through collaborations between Western fantasy and Eastern sanction. In the Asian American choreographic work *Fan Variations*, the ethnic Chinese dancing body is equated to an object-woman, a token of authentic/ Communist China, a movement “source” emptied of subjectivity and selfhood. I will return to this piece later.

Lastly, not to ignore, a key link in the circulations of Chinese dancing is the “home” practice, by the ethnic Chinese body per se: how the supposedly “authentic” tradition (source) could be reshaped by Caucasian makeovers in the age of globalized exchange and image transmission, and how eagerly artists on the economic/ political margins adopt those representations of themselves in order to emerge into the spotlight on a global stage.

2) Factors that Affect U.S. Mainstream Perceptions of Chinese Modern Dance

In this section, I try to string seemingly incongruous issues to crystallize the circulations of patterns of viewing Chinese things in the U.S. and how the mainstream

construction/ perception of the one--Chinese opera, traditional dance, or China's ethnicity-- affects and shapes that of another--Chinese modern dance. Before that, though, I want to clarify a bit why (Chinese) modern dance is the focus I choose, how modern dance relates to issues mentioned above and the larger discussion of the Orientalized ethnic dancing body, and how modern dance is positioned in China in a way that makes it a fruitful lens through which to approach these questions. I will also address why Chinese opera is so relevant to these questions. Above all, the mission of modern dance as a lens to query and counter mainstream practices makes it a marginalized genre in China and in association with minority discourses. China's special cultural, political contexts cause Chinese moderns' politics to develop in a seemingly apolitical form as pure, silent aesthetics or as spontaneous, chaotic pursuits in the sense of having no set definition/ system. Yet it is exactly this state of verging on yet never attaining system/ uniformity/ central status that keeps modern dance a most vibrant, fruitful lens to explore and "speak" out individual dancer's perspective/ opinion which are denied them in the practice of traditional, more institutionalized dance forms. On the other hand, Western audience's narrow exposure to/ understanding of China's ethnic consciousness, political context, and corresponding strategies of dance practitioners cause a blind spot that keep them from seeing/ accounting for the Chinese modern dancing body as subject and from understanding an alternative modernity and identity politics to their own. Third, as for the Chinese opera, white constructions and Asian (American) exploitations of it as an ultimate

signifier of unchanging, stable Chinese-ness has rendered all Chinese dance/ culture and the Chinese race the absolute opposite of anything “modern, dynamic, and changing, which is deemed the monopoly of “American-ness.” Therefore, accounting for the Chinese modern dancing body as individual subject helps theorize an alternative modernity for China and examine a new order of Orientalism in the simultaneous condescension and patronage of the Chinese opera and other tokenized art forms. Conversely, also, the global support of operatic Chinese traditions increases the opportunity for Chinese modern dance that reengages these tokenized forms and poses challenges for Chinese modern dance to gain international recognition for their modern-ness, in terms of aesthetic merits, conceptual depth, and political effectiveness.

I feel the need to first talk about the relation between a couple of concepts—“modern” and “traditional”—in Chinese contexts. “Modern” dance and “traditional/folk” dance are never stable, separate categories in China (or indeed anywhere); rather, their relation is characterized by boundary-crossing. Modern dance in China has evolved in a pattern of more generational progression than revolution, more connection than separation from tradition, unlike the radical innovativeness writ so large on the history of its American counterpart. This is partly predestined by a dual mission “modern dance” has shouldered since the day it was incorporated in the curriculum (1980s): to keep up with the pace of China’s modernization in other walks of life while maintaining its “Chinese characteristics.” Besides, “modern dance” didn’t

actually start to take shape in China till the late eighties, and it was still a tough nut to crack until the late nineties. A modern dance company in China is therefore almost exclusively made up of traditional dance professionals (folk, Chinese classical, ballet, and some with trainings in Chinese opera or other traditional arts). For this reason, it has become my personal lens to look at Chinese modern dance as in relation to “traditional” dance.

To the mainstream U.S. viewer, China’s “tradition” is writ so large that “Chinese modern dance” represents an oxymoron and as a genre it is from its birth at odds with popular Orientalist constructions of the East (Asia). As Wong writes, “Orientalized Asian bodies are seen, or rather unseen, as ghosts from the past, a race weighed down and bound by a stifling overabundance of tradition, culture, and history” (Yutian Wong 2002, 7). Asian bodies anchor one end of the American racial scale as “disembodied ascetics” (7), so it is the supposedly “sedentary,” ancient, and purely aesthetic (but semantically incomprehensible) Chinese opera and not “modern” dance (which values novelty and change) that is to represent China’s dance culture. Chinese modern dancers and choreographers are almost always perceived within the race/ culture-based binarisms-China (antiquity) vs. U.S. (modernity). Western criticisms about Chinese modern dance are constantly filtered through the fact that they are “Chinese” and therefore couldn’t break through the burdens of (operatic) “tradition.”

In what follows, I further examine three factors that shape receptions of Chinese modern dance (companies) in the U.S.: links between Orientalist constructions about

Chinese opera and Asian (American) nationalist agenda, rhetoric about the inception of American modern dance that precluded the possibility of imagining an Asian (American) modern aesthetics, and lastly, ethnic mobility and minority discourses as embedded in Chinese modern dance that usually escape the U.S. mainstream audiences.

First, I discuss how non-Chinese critics' (excuse me my lumping) "alterity-as-lack" vision about Chinese opera (Rey Chow 31; Daphne Lei 10 "Chinese theater as lack") has incriminated (the reception of) Chinese (modern) dance in the U.S. I will ask why, then, does Chinese opera, as a much banalized art form, continue to win global support? Chinese opera is not a token, nor precisely a dance form, but a traditional theatrical form incorporating dance, martial art, vocal singing, acrobatics, and music, etc. Its "exaltation"/ equation to the symbol of China's dancing antiquity and to the Chinese race has to do with Chinese/ Chinese American-sanctioned white imaginings of the West's other---superficial understanding and Orientalist/ ethnocentric dispatching of the form's different theatrical conventions from Western theater (high pitch scale, slowness, female impersonation, stylization) as a lack. Rey Chow explains her skepticism of the discourse of alterity-as-lack by questioning the native (Chinese) as image. Since the theorizing of subjectivity which is dependent on a presumed lack invites compensation or restitution (a filling of the gap), the "specificities or contexts that intellectuals restore to "others" amount to little more

than offering natives a ‘phantom history’ (Chow 36) as our equals”¹⁶. With the globalization of media, Orientalist notions of Chinese opera/ Chinese-ness circulate back to its home-base to be authenticated, officially (facile, token inclusion of opera image in Beijing Olympics film clips) and by individuals who exploit the opera as China’s pre-capitalist past (dramatized homosexuality in the film *Farewell My Concubine*). The paradox is, as Daphne Lei points out, by losing its local/ ethnic specificity, Chinese opera (be it Peking, Hui, or Cantonese) could rise to “symbol of ultimate Chinese-ness---transnational and global but [exactly for its being] distinctively Chinese” (Lei 254). In an age that values speed, Chinese opera as a “made-in-China” product par excellence (sometimes produced through pan-Chinese/ three-place alliance) is flattened into image (easily recognized) and made exclusively for Western consumption. Like the fan (dance), the silk, and the sleeves, the Chinese opera is reduced to a mute, unthreatening token, emptied of any ontological value or contemporary relevance.

My imperative to relate opera to modern dance is piqued by “global consensus” of the opera as the signifier of stable “Chinese-ness” (Lei 250) in contrast with the volatile character of American modernity. The “lotus” like, antihybrid nature of Chinese opera (as advertised) as a trope of one’s “ethnic origin” effectively estranged/ other-ed, attests to Asian Americans’ hybrid experience and eligibility for American citizenship. “To perform American [modernity] is to perform Chinese [opera/

¹⁶ Elizabeth Constable’s book review (Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 74).

fan/Chinese tradition] negatively...” Lei writes, (Lei 38), describing a politics I similarly identify in Chinese American youth’s use of the (Chinese) “zombie” motif at “China Nights¹⁷.” Troping on ethnic stereotypes in white reception of Chinese opera has been utilized deftly in Asian American theater, a marginalized genre struggling to survive. As Daphne Lei points out, Asian American theater persistently performs a transnational alienation--between the yellowness of the body and the internalized whiteness/ Americanness (Lei 18). In plays like *The Dance and the Railroad*, *Red*, and *M. Butterfly*, the “opera” is equated to the (quintessential Chinese) “dance,” the signifier of unchanging (and therefore dying/fading) tradition, something to be shed in order to become modern and American.

Now I illustrate further the dance connection in Asian American practice by citing the piece *Fan Variations*, an intercultural performance debuted at Appex 1999 by choreographer/dancers YiJuan Zhang, Cheng-Chieh Yu and Minh Tran in collaboration with two U.S.-based musicians. My reading of the piece is exclusively based on theater scholar Karen Shimakawa’s article: “Loaded Images: Seeing and Being in ‘Fan Variations.’” *Fan* is an avant-garde choreography in which, according to Shimakawa, two Asian American dancers (Yu and Tran, their Chinese-related identity undeclared) deviate from, parody, interpolate, and displace a fan sequence practiced by an “authentic” Chinese opera performer from mainland China (Zhang, her nationality writ large). The piece opens with two (“Oriental”) women “smiling

¹⁷ An annual performance event on campus representing Chinese culture as seen from the perspective of second generation Chinese/ Asian Americans. It has become a convention in many U.S. campuses.

faintly, ...invitingly” from between fans, and bowing “subserviently” (from Shimakawa’s notes), evoking a “racist-monolithic reading of ‘Asians look alike’” and tread on Orientalist stereotypes of the lotus-blossom beauty image. Later, the two “Chinese” American dancers shed their stereotypical “Chinese-ness” by going “modern” and the choreography turns aground to reveal as a modern dance critique on the Chinese opera dancer’s “authentic” fan works. In this scenario modern dance is figured as “American” and as a superior cultural capital whereby Asian Americans can “displace proper Chineseness [opera-fan] from the privileged position” (Shimakawa 2004), to shed their “Chinese-ness” and to become “American” (and hence modern). This splitting however serves to rebuild the binary between an “antediluvian/unchanging ‘China’ and modern/ mobile U.S. America” in which the “glory of China was only as it existed in bygone ages,” to quote dance scholar Lu Yu-jen (Lu Yu-jen 61). In sum, by performing this “transnational alienation” (Lei’s term), Asian American nationalist identity politics has perpetuated Western Orientalist constructions of “Chinese opera” as the ultimate signifier of unchanging Chinese-ness and of Chinese dance, that precludes any possibility to imagine a “Chinese modern dance.” It has become a mission impossible even before it enters the stage.

Second, I talk about links between dance and politics and I follow Yutian Wong in addressing how U.S. mainstream’s marginalization of the Orientalized Asian dancing body has rendered Orientalism “invisible” (Yutian Wong 118) and Asian influence on American modern dance unaccounted-for. I relate mainstream reception

of Chinese modern dance touring in U.S. to what Wong points out about the absence of Asian American bodies in American post-modern dance history. And this absence, as Wong observes, in turn, has to do with early modern dancers' appropriation of Asian American practices and disciplinary implication in the denial thereof (118). As Lu Yu-jen¹⁸ argues, the "invisibility of Chinese diaspora in dance in the 50s and 60s was not accidental, but a consequence of power networks" (Lu 131). Due to the presumption about Chinese being noncreative, Chinese modern dance also often passes as ethnic dance and therefore falls out of mainstream modern dance. Chinese moderns "surfaced merely to ethnicize modern dance, not to revolutionize the establishment" (Lu 131). Dance scholars Yutian Wong and Priya Srinivasan expose the conditions of this erasure. Wong laments the double standard of critical evaluation of modern dance in this new order of Orientalism: whereas a white classic like "Summerspace" (Cunningham, 1958) is supposed to be consumed by its "pure aesthetics" however dated the costume designs and the music (Wong 2001, 113), Asian American experimental works are judged by their thematic contents alone—an "Asian American" piece that doesn't have an explicitly identifiable theme, that is, obvious critique of "racial stereotypes and archetypal Asian American childhood memories" (110), is "under suspicion" (111). Mainstream criticism discusses Asian American experimental performance either as a sociological evidence or as "nostalgic references of natural/ essential Asian body" (both of which are celebratory/ decorative in nature),

¹⁸ In her PhD dissertation "Wrestling with the Angels: Choreographing Chinese Diaspora in the United States." (New York University, 2002).

but not in terms of its artistic merits as it does the white American counterparts (Wong 113). I observe this couplet of themes resonates with what U.S. mainstream critics expect of a touring Chinese modern dance company---themes that either trope on tokenized national essence of China (Chinese opera, martial art, three-inch feet, etc.) or on China's political trauma (Great Cultural Revolution) and other banned-in-China topics (homosexuality, Tiananmen Massacre, etc.). The latter especially feeds the West's voyeuristic desire to see China "naked" (Rey Chow 29).

Recent dance studies questions the historical claim of modern and postmodern dance as a white endeavor. Priya Srinivasan's feminist excavation re-examines "the inception of modern dance in Oriental dance to reveal the labor of transnational dancing women and men from India that has been rendered invisible, thus calling the 'national' and modernist project of American dance into question" (Srinivasan 20). Her ethnography (re)constructs/ imagines a kinesthetic encounter between Ruth Denis and Nautch women that reads beyond scripted text (logocentrism) and writes the dancing Indian body back into American modern dance history. Yutian Wong addresses another kind of dual standard in U.S. multiculturalist designation of "ethnic/world dance" and "modern dance." "Multiculturalism can become a form of Orientalism," Wong writes (Wong 2001, 83), because it depends on the recycled narratives that conflate race and nationality, that is, it ties bodily signifiers to the "correct representative tradition of their authentic homeland" (83). Whereas Asian American bodies are confined to practice "an [ethnic] tradition, American

(post)-modern dance is still not considered cross-cultural or inter-cultural even as practitioners continue to seek out Eastern bodily practices to inspire and prepare them for a variety of ‘Western’ modern dance techniques,” she writes (83). In a word, unquestioned white cultural appropriations and “token inclusions” (83) of colored-bodies’ ethnic traditions in the American contemporary multicultural scene have intensified the “Orientalizing [alienation] of the Orient”¹⁹.

I want to spend some time discussing how Western institutional hegemony impedes ethnic Asian American scholars from accounting for a modern/ original “Asian American aesthetics,” and how this relates to Chinese modern dance.

Yutian Wong makes a thorough examination of how American concert dance history has “made Orientalism invisible and its acknowledgement token” (Wong 2001, 122). To sum up her arguments, this process of self-establishment coincides with one of Orientalist exclusion (of the Other) (Wong 118), which takes several steps to complete. First, while an Asian scripture like *I-Ching* is acknowledged to have inspired Cunningham’s chance choreography, the “Asian” source is typically reduced to “Asian-as-tradition” (119) as if the Asian practices are nothing already systemic and metaphysical (my addition). Second, the moment of appropriation is not specified (120), and through the “a-historicization of Asian ideas/practices and the historical de-ethnicizing of whiteness as a marker of abstract American citizen,” the incorporation of Asian aesthetics is acknowledged as “a discrete act of inspiration

¹⁹ Edward Said’s term in his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978).

rather than an accumulation of cultural appropriations triggered by the presence of Asian American culture in the United States” (118). In other words, the Asian influence is denied its corporeal nature, even if the cultural resources can be found in the U.S. This recalls the insistence that, according to Srinivasan, Ruth St. Denis presented herself as having culled the “invented oriental” movements of her *Radha* from photographs and her fascination with eastern mysticism, rather than through her exposure to Nautch dancers in Coney Island²⁰ (Srinivasan 2007 1). Third, even if Asian bodily practices are begrudgingly credited as a shaping force of contemporary American practices, “real Asian (American) bodies” remain inassimilable into the narrative of American cultural innovation (120), since Asian American investigation of Asian bodily and philosophical practices are stereotyped as either a practice of authentic identity and/ or an attempt to reconcile a conflicted bi-cultural identity (121).

This holds likewise for the situation of Chinese modern dance. The homogenizing practice of the U.S. mainstream dance critics as well as the asymmetries of power between cultural cores and margins preclude attempts to trace/ discuss about the Asian/ Chinese “origin”/ “root” through the charge of “ethnic essentialism.” On the one hand, as Yutian Wong points out, while the Asian other is muted as for the ordinary source, white American postmodern choreographers are free to pick and choose elements from Asian cultural practices and still claim themselves “original” (Yutian Wong 143). On the other, Western academy’s monolithic definition of “modern

²⁰ A peninsula, formerly an island, in southernmost Brooklyn, New York City, USA, with a beach on the Atlantic Ocean.

dance” has circulated to and well proliferated in China. Among the dance intelligentsia and practitioners of China, the question of what counts as “modern dance” is fraught with controversies, but they mostly revolve around the rhetoric of “authenticity” and “origin” ---how much departure one can make to stay in the category of “modern dance,” and how to balance between the demand for globalization (that is, fitting into the category of “modern dance” as defined by global/ Western standards) and the imperative to create an alternative modernity (that is, “modern dance” that is uniquely “Chinese”). Complications in the identity and nationality of a dance form are partially triggered by the circulations of rhetoric of modernity from the global core culture(s) and partially by the Orientalist/ nationalist notions that ethnic Chinese have imbibed and internalized. Following old canons of world dance history that identify and classify modern dance as an exclusively Western tradition²¹, Chinese have almost unanimously embraced the idea that “Chinese modern dance,” if any, is a nativized form of an absolutely Western import, without ever looking into the patterns of circulation of Asian/ Chinese elements that possibly contributed to the technical/ ideational building of American modern dance.

Third, I discuss ethnic relations/ identity politics in modern China as embedded in Chinese modern works; I also look at how the mainstream (U.S.) audience’s unawareness of such has affected/ shaped the representation and reception of Chinese dance in America. I refer to ethnic studies scholar Stevan Harrell’s book *Ways of Being*

²¹ Such claim has met with more and more challenge by U.S. dance scholars in recent years, yet critical approach to history has not been encouraged in China’s academia. Knowledge of world dance history is largely structured on old Western schools of thought.

Ethnic in Southwestern China (2001), an in-depth study of ethnic consciousness and relations in Southwest China, which reveals a mobile, crisscrossing, and complex model of ethnic relations in China rather than sheer opposition/ hierarchy between Han and non-Han (ethnic minorities). Unlike what official discourses proclaims, China has never been a country of “complete unity,” and the uniform system as the CCP government idealized in the 1950s has never come true (Harrell 310). State-designated ethnic categories (MINZU) are not rigid, but frequently come into contact with one another, with spaces of boundary-crossing (313). Han is not always the majority; rather, Han can become a visible handicap in minority areas and choose to become a minority through acculturation. Thus both core (Han)-periphery (non-Han) hierarchy and Sinicization meet with their reversals. These crossings likewise refer to the exchange and inter-borrowing in terms of cultural forms they practice, so that an opera/ fan dance master from mainland China may not be an ethnic Han, but an ethnic minority. If we bring this into discussion and if we care to account for the ethnic Chinese dancing body’s subjectivity/ agency/ identity, *Fan Variations’s* afore-mentioned politics of “de-centering Chinese centrality from a privileged position” may not be as reflexive or victorious; it seems so only from a U.S.-centric or based point of view. The “center” (Zhang or her “authentic” fan-opera dance) is already a periphery so this “de-centering” leads to doubled signification/ marginalization. Further, “fan” is not exclusively a Han practice (nor a typical opera dance) but denotes numerous folk dance styles (though mostly Han) spread out all

over China. Nor is there any essential linkage between the opera (classical) and the fan (folk). A pastiche product like “opera-fan dance” (mistaken as authentic) is analogous to lumping one Chinese “national” token (“panda”) randomly with another (“kungfu”) as if Chinese-ness can be contained in such a narrowly-defined, compounded signifier. This “reflexive” postmodern fan piece unfortunately does a similar job as did some early theatrical representations of Chinese-ness (such as “Fan tan fannie” in *Flower Drum Song*). This is exactly what Shimakawa terms “the (orientalist) pleasure achieved through the ‘appropriate’ embodiments of otherness” (Shimakawa 6)--in other words, “a potentially problematic pleasure to be had (by a U.S.-based observer) in watching Asian bodies enact fantasies of Asianness” (6). Harrell’s model helps expose these other layers of racialization implied in the piece’s simplification about China’s ethnicity. Moreover, it helps reveal the fictitiousness/ arbitrariness in Asian American avant-gardists’ designation of a counter-modern sample in order to prove themselves otherwise; it also reveals how effective such practices are in scapegoating the “Other”’s modernity and ethnic integrity.

Now I move on to ponder the relation between dance and ethnicity in modern China. How does dance function as a tool for fixity or fluidity of ethnic identity? Can ethnic minorities take part in the process of modernization while retaining their own cultural traits, or do they have to be brainwashed into the mainstream ideology beforehand? How to translate the ethnic complexities onto the modern stage, as a counteraction against the multicultural, multi-ethnic nation-state model (normally for

mainstream folk dance stage) promoted by official ethnic discourses? These are among the questions I have been struggling to answer during my research on Chinese contemporary stage dance. And in three ways Harrell's research helps clarify the complexity of these issues. First, he helps call attention to the agency of the dancing ethnic body and different forms minority discourses may take. Just as opposition from local ethnic groups (such as Nuosu) more often involves resentment and competition than outright separatism (Harrell 330), so it is simplistic to think a dancer from a state-owned dance ensemble has to passively abide by whatever the state designates as regards representation; nor is it the norm in China that one subverts verbally or in any explicit manner. Dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz observes a "doubled functionality" (Thomas DeFrantz 65) as encoded within the black performance per se which enables the performer to outwardly entertain and secretly protest and therefore talk to several audiences simultaneously (65). Without the subversive flair of hip-hop dance, can the ethnic/ Chinese dancing body celebrate and protest at the same time? I say it usually takes more subtle forms visible only to the sensitive and informed viewer and therefore speaks different messages to different audiences.

I observe some subtle politics specific to China's modern dance scene. In a similar way to how members of ethnic groups "strengthen, blur, or cross state-designated ethnic boundaries, resisting or co-opting situationally the state system of classification" (Harrell 314), "modern" dance and "ethnic/ folk/ traditional" dance (usually figured as "official" for its institutionalization) cross not only technically (as

mentioned before) but also because of the large percent of ethnic minorities (some study ethnic dances at China's dance academies or universities of Nationalities) in China's modern dance companies. Modern dance is a marginal genre in China, which is like a "diasporic space" for those mainland artists, Han and ethnic, who crave more individualized channels than institutional dancing to express their vision, and where they mingle and collaborate and take on each others' politics. On the other hand, modern dance in China is not an elite art ---potentially subversive art genres are not well encouraged or supported, so modern dance and minority discourse intersect in several ways (class, ethnicity, political affiliation, etc.). Therefore a modern dancer usually has to constantly juggle between financial pressures/ temptations and artistic pursuit to carry through. And this is exactly what lies in minority ethnic artist Cui Tao's mind in creating *Pilgrimage* (Cui Tao 2007), to which I will return later.

It follows that a Chinese modern dancing body from China is not necessarily a representative of the "centrality" or officialdom; a Chinese modern dance piece can be a rare channel to expressing and understanding (ethnic) minority discourse (without claiming so in written/spoken form). Very different from strategies of most American experimental dancing, Chinese modern dance does not "speak" politics out loud; it is even rare to see dancers open their mouths during performance. The apparent lack of "outspokenness" in most Chinese modern works (plus ever-existing Communist associations of mainland Chinese in general) could lead to the critical dismissal of Chinese modern dance as purely aesthetic/ technical and apolitical. Like Chinese opera,

"Chinese (modern) dance" represents a case of double marginalization/Orientalization---by mainstream American and by Chinese/ Asian American, for its being conflated with official mouthpiece that speaks centrality while it is actually already marginal, which is perhaps a third type of marginalization for Chinese modern dances from China. Critical comments on Chinese modern touring companies are almost always characterized by a syntactical "...but..." ("very beautiful but lacking a critical edge or/ and originality"). American mainstream's contradictory requirements of authenticity (all Chinese are Maoists) and aggression (anti-communist allusion) put Chinese modern dance in an impasse of catch-22.

Now, to re-iterate, in this section I have proposed three intercultural ruptures—in association with the Chinese opera, the inception of modern dance, and China's ethnic relations---that shape perceptions/ receptions of Chinese modern dance (companies) in the U.S. In the next section, I will be expanding the arguments I have demonstrated here by looking at particular Chinese modern dance works that have been performed across the U.S. and will analyze their reception in the press and by audiences (where possible, when I have seen them). I first cite the critical/ audience reception of the (Beijing-based) LDXT performance I saw in Purchase, NY (October 19-20, 2007) alongside my readings of two pieces on the program--*The Cold Dagger* (2007) and *Pilgrimage* (2007)—and one displaced from the original repertoire: *The Pseudo Eagle* (2006). Then I discuss the *Second Visit to the Empress* (2005) by NY-based Chinese choreographer Shen Wei. By analyzing and comparing what

messages and politics I read in these pieces and U.S. mainstream critics' and audience's perceptions of them, I crystallize the two major issues and approaches surrounding the topic of global circulation of Chinese modern dance: it is only by attending to the ethnic Chinese dancing body as subject (even if not a "speaking" subject) and by challenging the audience's habit of viewing the ethnic Other can the Chinese modern dance be appreciated for its political effectiveness and conceptual depth in the West, or the U.S. in particular.

Chapter III: Cases in Point

1) Selected LDTX Repertoire

Beijing Dance/ LDTX (Lei Dong Tian Xia, literally, thunder moves under the sky) was founded in 2005 and is the first non-governmental and independent professional dance company in China. One of the two major modern dance companies in Beijing, LDTX currently boasts an ensemble of 13 dancers.²² All of the dancers have ballet/ethnic/ classical dance background and a large percentage are ethnic minorities. LDTX is one of the four companies founded or directed by Willy Tsao, a Hong kong native who studied modern dance in the U.S.; the other three are CCDC (Hong kong-based), GMDC (Guangdong-based) and BMDC (Beijing-based and predecessor of LDTX), all of which have been touring internationally, including North America. In addition to Tsao's choreographies, LDTX has been nurturing and supporting more and more company members to stage their individual full-length works, in which they each draw from personal experiences and idiosyncratic visions. In October 2007, LDTX was invited to perform a trilogy of works in Purchase, NY, where I was in the audience. Now I read two pieces alongside my observation of audience and critics responses.

The Cold Dagger (2007) is a 70-minute work choreographed by Li Hanzhong (deputy director and veteran dancer) and Ma Bo (LDTX dancer). "A thriller about the fear of being besieged" (program note in English), the piece is abundant in metaphor

²² 15 if counting the artistic director and the deputy director.

and suspense. In Chinese culture, the cold dagger, literally an arrow shot from hiding, is associated with the notion of “wei cheng” (a fortress besieged). Being surrounded by city walls can cause more fear of hidden attacks than sense of protection. Weiji²³ then comes from this allusion as the game of the besieged city. Dancers, dressed in black and white, start sitting on a gridded checkerboard floor like pawns in weiji; also, in lotus pose, they each resembles the weiji player picking a pawn between two fingers²⁴, pausing in the air, and slowly dropping it on the chessboard. Serene on the surface, the scene (as well as the entire piece) is symbolic of sieges from both inside and outside (the wall, sometimes self-constructed). Starting in silence, they then move to a melancholic score by David Darling over the floor. They stay alert and make pugilistic gestures when approaching each other and do high kicks against an adversary, real or imagined; at a point they assemble around a dead body, mourn it even after it leaves them; at times they circle around back to the center, looking up and afar, wishful to get out of the fortress/ confines of the city wall. Indeed the gridded floor finally morphs into a flowing landscape of squares where the dancers break through the forms. The piece was created at a point of the choreographers’ self-questioning, so in my view the use of weiji and martial arts as formal choices is in tandem with the mood of silent inner struggles. To a domestic audience (like me) for whom this piece was meant originally, there is nothing deliberately Chinese about it. Besides, the performative implications are not contained in realistic representation of

²³ Also known as Go or the Chinese chess. “Wei” means surrounding or besieging.

²⁴ Also known as Jian zhi (拈指): tipping the index and middle fingers as if to carry a pawn.

the Chinese game, but the way its abstractions open up individualized interpretations to the audience, Chinese and non-Chinese alike.

The night the piece was staged in Purchase, the majority of audience liked it a lot, wowing about how sleek and beautiful the Chinese performers are when proceeding towards the theater exit. However, the only press review of it I could access was from a *New York Times* reviewer, who found it “dull” and wrote, “it seems ambivalent about quite how Chinese it wants to be, hinting at themes like Chinese chess and totalitarian domination, but quickly reverting to modern-dance abstraction” (Roslyn Sulcas October 23, 2007). It seems to her this piece is another one of those selling Chinese-ness to foreigners (too authentic) yet it doesn’t provide an (identifiable) stance or any comment about their government’s political excesses. In a word, this critic couldn’t find what she was expecting to see---native Chinese talking politics / pointing fingers at their government in the open. While the critic chides the piece for not “evoking [coherent] narrative themes” (Sulcas), I wonder if a similar double standard (from mentioned before) is here applied: whereas a Western modern classic does not have to be readable, let alone to have narrative, an ethnic Other has to evoke a radical narrative theme that is immediately identifiable to the white viewer---what Yutian Wong theorizes about “visibly identifiable incongruities between performed actions and racialised bodies” as buttressed by American “multiculturalism” (the 80s and on) (Wong 2002, 83). Now that the piece fails to pass muster in terms of political daringness/ sharpness--short of translating (corporeal) allusion of “totalitarian

domination” into textual reference of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, for instance, as does *Nine Songs* (1993)²⁵ by Lin Hwai-min, renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theater choreographer from Taiwan, then any attempt to evaluate its artistic merits is blocked. As Thomas DeFrantz points out, as hip hop enters the realm of entertainment for an “immobile audience” who has no access to its cultural/ political reference or for those accustomed to “view without any concern for its ‘performative implications’ (68), meaning is emptied out and all the intertextual complexities become emptied out through a process of decontextualization (DeFrantz 68). Here the Chinese choreographer, as well as the Chinese dancing body, is emptied of any subjectivity, but always already an object, like a pawn/ chess piece to be moved within a despotic monoculture, like the monotonous topography of the weiji board. To the critic, perhaps, “Chinese (modern or not) dance” figures as a concept of “collective self-consistency without any trace of individual specificity” (Edward Said 229).

Pilgrimage (45 minutes, 2007) is another piece on the program and choreographed by Cui Tao, an ethnic Zhuang²⁶ and then an LDTX dancer. Cui paraphrases the title as, “We are heading forward, hand-in-hand, on our journeys to pilgrimage. We remain silent—both stifled by our fear and energized by our destiny” (program note in English). *Pilgrimage* lines up acts of jarringly different themes---Tibetan pilgrims’ progress (without spectacular ethnic garb), a serene,

²⁵ the section “Homage to the Fallen” makes textual reference to victims of recent massacres in both Taiwan and China mainland.

²⁶ One of the officially recognized ethnicities of China, the Zhuang (壮) lives mostly in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwestern China.

nostalgic all-female balletic quartet, business (wo)men's goofy line dance (featuring gender crossing and jazz-tinted movement) set to a cynical score by Cui Jian, the father of Chinese rock, etc. Emblematic of human beings' life journeys, the piece opens with (Tibetan) worshippers trudging shoulder to shoulder toward a seemingly similar destination. As the dance progresses, each performer's route is altered as they interact, falter or forge forward, twirl like a prayer wheel, ultimately following their individual paths. In a latter act, enter a man and a woman in underwear²⁷ performing a sultry dance of a one-night love affair. They manipulate a long stripe of red ribbon as the vehicle/ instrument for seduction, flirtation, and love-making; their movement idioms alternate between elegant classical poses/ gestures, straight body touch, and Chinese opera-tinted, rhapsodic rock. All of a sudden, a man (played by Cui) is flung out of the wing onto the stage, bare-backed, with a similar long stripe of red ribbon tightened to his waist²⁸. He grabs the ribbon, squirming on the floor trying to break free from it, a desperate yet futile struggle. This background image forms an interesting semantic montage with the erotic melodrama in the foreground. In *Pilgrimage*, individuality and relatedness, lyricism and realism, tradition and modernity, religiosity and materialism, love, lust and morality coexist, contradict, and connect in the same dose.

Although social realism is not a favored strategy in modern dance, by means of artistic distillation and mise-en-scene, Cui's work strikes me as deeply reflexive of

²⁷ Normally an indication of nudity in Chinese dance theater.

²⁸ A large red flower made of cloth is attached to it, a symbol of traditional Chinese marriage in folk dance and traditional theater of China.

modern China---a post-Communist country simultaneously receptive and skeptical of global-mediated ideological influences---westernization, commercialization, capitalism, and sex liberation. Narratively, the work is largely (auto)biographical in the sense it speaks a common predicament for a Chinese (especially modern) dance artist---difficulties of carrying on a poorly-funded, marginal, strictly censored art in face of temptations (from the material world) and options (from the official) that could earn them a better life. Ironically, the pressures of life were as much a major inspiration for the piece as a main reason the choreographer finally decided to give up on his modern dancing career²⁹.

These meanings I saw in the piece, social realism and individual struggles, however, went unread by the American audience I was part of. This piece received no questions or feedback in the post-show talk during the company's Purchase tour. When I asked an audience member about the piece, she said it is simply difficult to "connect." My understanding of the comment is, maybe, this piece seems too familiar to the U.S. audience in theme and movement style as to become indistinguishable as Chinese. Besides, it treads on typical Western/ American classical genres (such as rock' n roll' and classical ballet). John Martin wrote in the *New York Times* in 1931 about black concert dance, "it is not in these dances which echo and imitate the manner of the dancers of another race [white] that the Negro dancers are at their best, ..." (qtd. in Manning 34). Martin was not alone among mainstream critics in

²⁹ In April 2008, Cui quit LDTX to become a teacher at the University of Nationalities, a state-owned dance institute.

questioning colored dancers performing materials associated with white dancers, although, as dance scholar Susan Manning points out, “appropriating cultures of peoples of color has been an accepted convention in American modern and leftist dances” (Manning 210).

Now I move on to clarify how global exposure/ pressure from cultural cores could affect/ shape the production of Chinese modern dance. American mainstream’s narrow exposure to Chinese dance forms and their ignorance about China’s volatile, complex ethnic/ political scene usually pose for a Chinese artistic director a challenge/ question: what kind of themes would pass muster in front of a (mainly white) American audience, or even engage them? I use the way LDTX adjusts its repertoire for their 2007 U.S. tour as an example. From the original trilogy staged in Beijing (September 2007), Mongolian-themed *The Pseudo Eagle* (2006) was removed and replaced with *All River Red* (2000); in addition, the first half³⁰ of *Pilgrimage*, which includes sections reworking on American musical classics like “Singing in the Rain” and “El Tango De Roxanne,” was not on the program. My understanding of the decision is an assumption about American audience expectation: the piece couldn’t be too ethnic-specific as to become totally unreadable; at the same time, “red” (in *All River Red*) as an ultimate signifier of (revolutionary) China should connect the audience more easily, though subtleties and deeper meanings (of this particular “red”) could escape them. As for the abridging of *Pilgrimage*, it could be blasphemous to

³⁰ The first half is titled “All Things Happen.”

perform a tap-less reinterpretation of Gene Kelly's classic number or a quasi-tango version of *Moulin Rouge* in front of an American audience. The so-called "East-West collaboration" goes one way only, while it doesn't seem to logically happen the other way round (Yutian Wong 2002, 83). On the other hand, it is beyond the parameter of Orientalist imagination about what "Chinese" dance should be; or, rather, it risks being inauthentic to both (American dance and Chinese dance).

The Pseudo Eagle (65 minutes 2006) is choreographed by Zi Wei, a native of Inner-Mongolia. As the title suggests, there is no realistic presentation of the eagle. The "eagle" as a totem of the Mongolian is not captured in image or shape, but detectable as an affect, a spirit, sometimes a ghostly breeze sweeping across the stage. The opening quartet starts with four male dancers in plain grayish clothes marching in place in unison to a tuneless electronic score. From perfect unison, one dancer varies the move by adding a head turn/ a stretching of a leg and the others follow at different accents of the score before the next variation takes place. All changes happen swiftly and are beyond capture. As dancers start to travel, the music lightens to Mongolian long tunes, when the moves become more fluid and lyrical but remain as simple as repetition of a weight shift or a change of facing. Worthy of note, also, are traces of ethnic elements--shoulder shrug, rubbing step with knee vibration, or lateral horse step—recalling not only Mongolian, but also Uygur, Tibetan, and Korean dances, an indication, perhaps, of inter-ethnic mingling on the Mongolian plateau and the permeability of ethnic land- and mindscapes. The stage remains bare, the light bluish

with variations in tone and design: when the stage brightens up leaving the backdrop dark only, the rectangular stage space resembles a courtyard of a prison; when a headlight beams on a darkened stage leaving mottled shadows in the shape of tree leaves, the dance evokes the vision of eaglets frolicking in the midst of lush prairie. Minimal as the formal aspects are, one can feel passion bubbling beneath and flowing from deep inside. The piece provides a kinesthetic and emotional release for the spectator and a vision of the Mongolian qualities as a native might see ---bold, austere, and subtle. The work's deep, unadorned aesthetic and its sincerity made it a favorite for many Chinese audiences when it premiered in Beijing in 2006. Although its minority vision/ aesthetic stands out, its movement idioms go beyond superficial shapes and gestures and ostensible markers of Mongolian culture. This could confuse an audience who has no access to China's ethnic subtleties but only exposure to institutionalized/ Hanicized movements or images of Mongolian folk dance through the channel of official media. After the premiere, a Chinese American artist who has taught and choreographed for years in colleges bemoaned to the company director, that these young Chinese dancers are lacking in education on how to make modern dance³¹. I bet Zi's formal and spatial designs are more or less noticeable to an amateur dance viewer, not to mention this U.S. expert. It was her ingrained notions of what form these familiar choreographic schemes (repetition and variation, minimalism, abstraction, etc.) should take on stage that hampered her from detecting them through

³¹ See Willy Tsao blog: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c7b0fe5010009o1.html>

alternative physicalities and logics. To her it is a nondescript and therefore hardly modern dancing.

In view of the cases above, I think what Edward Said describes about the way the Orientalist “places” the Islam/ the Orient geographically corresponds with how contemporary Chinese dance is perceived in the West. Chinese choreographers are similarly trapped in a no-win position of being a “fraudulent new version of some previous experience (Christianity, West, Christ)” (Edward Said 23), either too familiar (derivative, repetitious) or too different (alien, unreadable) (Said 23). It is simply hard to perceive Chinese modern dance as non-fetishistic, non-imitative, and diverse, or to imagine any alternative politics in China other than the theme of revolution or bloodshed. Now I empathize more with what Willy Tsao says when asked about the “Chinese element” during the post-show conversation in Purchase on October 19, 2007. He says there’s nothing like a particular “Chinese” element in Chinese modern dance, but only individuals (like in every other culture).

2) Shen Wei’s *The Second Visit to the Empress*

In the following I discuss Shen Wei³²’s work *The Second Visit to the Empress* (二 ▪ ▪ , 2005)³³, which represents a very different case from LDTX. As one of the

³² Chinese-born, New York-based dancer, choreographer, painter, filmmaker and set designer. A Chinese opera performer and a founding member of Guangdong Modern Dance Company (the first of its kind in mainland China, founded in 1991), he moved to the U.S. in 1995 and founded his own company--Shen Wei Dance Arts—in 2000. The company has toured internationally since and Shen has won global acclaim for his fresh movement and visual style.

³³ To note, my descriptive analysis of the piece is exclusively based on a promotional DVD I saw. So far I haven’t gained an opportunity to see it live.

few Chinese choreographers living and thriving in the U.S., an examination of his choreographic approach should open up a possibility in excavating the new in the “old” (an alternative modernity/ subversive authenticity) and yet reading mainstream critical reviews poses (for me) new skepticism about cross-cultural understanding on a deeper level. *The Second Visit* is a 90-minute deconstructed version of the original opera performance. Instead of a tokenized presence, Chinese opera is here refigured to reveal the mechanics/ mise-en-scene of its making---vocal, set, costume, make-up, narrative, and dancing are dispersed and distributed onto different bodies co-habiting the proscenium stage—and to present the form as new modern aesthetic. Dancers in skin-color practice clothes form a characterless counterpart of “authentic” opera characters, embodying the music/ narrative in a much more exaggerated yet substantial manner—the torso (minus arm/ hand) twists and jerks through the exclusive use of Qi, which forms an interesting comparison with the masters’ “original” (in full regalia). Here Shen develops a movement vocabulary that is unmistakably “modern.” In the opening scene, suggestive opera gestures such as chest or hand flutter (an indication of weeps or sighs) here become percussive attacky and yet fluid transferable in the body as if vibrating through an electric charge. Later, the dancers twist, turn, and oftentimes send themselves into wild spirals to, off, and across the floor letting go of the head and joints. The dance physically matches the cadence of the sung Chinese classic, but it technically recalls familiar modern styles in the West including Limon and release techniques. These parallels reveal the often ignored linkage between Chinese opera

and (Chinese) modern dance, between tradition and modernity. Before *The Second Visit*, Shen's previous works also draw on Chinese opera image and opera-inspired movements, treading on Orientalist stereotypes and yet transcending clichéd/denigrating imageries through his smart, ever-refreshing visual style and opera-inspired, yet distinctly modern conception. Shen typically powders the dancer's face with talc (vaguely evoking the opera) and uses a typical opera footwork³⁴—a small fast gait with knees slightly bent (evoking the mincing, chinoiserie footwork in many mainstream musicals)—as his company signature, yet he presents them as powerful modern aesthetic that puts opera in new, favorable light.

Shen's work has been unanimously acclaimed in the West as contemporary and cutting edge, but what lifts him above the average native artist is, according to mainstream critics of ADF, is his ability to bridge the East and the West, that is, his fresh style combined the modern dance of Merce Cunningham, Martha Clarke³⁵, and Western expressionism with elements of Chinese opera, the latter often as the source element that is to be updated through the incorporation of the enlightening approaches of the former. Although it is well acknowledged that Shen's style fits into no familiar category and that his work adds a new vision to the world of modern dance, he is figured as an exception of sorts to his, what *International Herald Tribune* critic Julie Bloom calls “insular” (Julie Bloom 2008) homeland. It may seem fussy to argue over a

³⁴ This is also common in Chinese classical and folk dance, as perhaps derived from Chinese opera.

³⁵ An American choreographer and director noted for her multidisciplinary approach to dance, theatre, and opera productions. According to Paul Horsley from *Kansas City Star* and Buck Wanner, Shen Wei danced for Martha Clarke in four works between 1996 and 1999 and that Shen's association with Clarke was an important one in his development as an artist.

diasporic work's "ethnicity/ cultural identity," yet I find such divergence in the reading of the same piece interesting and bothersome. I recognize the choreographer's painstaking effort in communicating (to the West) the fundamentals of this much abjected art—Chinese opera---in his use of textual translation of the opera lyrics. Also, he juxtaposes "original" characters with stripped down versions of them (the dancers), echoing and enlarging the physicalities/ aesthetics already underlying the characters' act of singing and gesticulating. ADF critic Byron Woods reads the whole act in a flipped way. He says, "Shen minimizes the choreography, obviously afraid that the dance might overwhelm the opera [the "largely static performances"] if it ever was unleashed" (Woods). Woods subtitles his article "A brilliant choreographer attempts to save a native art" that is fading in his home country. Whereas I read a statement from the choreographer that Chinese opera can and does change and have modern relevance, what Woods reads is a caution about how an art form "petrifies" when it "doesn't change." The fundamental message Woods senses about the work is a "conversation the artist is desperate to have [with colleagues in his home place]" but one that is "not with me, or us, as Westerners or modern dance aficionados." He can be grateful to be "allowed to eavesdrop" while he, or any western viewer, does not have a role to play in the "petrification" of the opera on this other side of the globe (my extension). Here, as elsewhere, the Western viewer constructs a pedagogical scene that acts out the hierarchy between the teacher (the West, who alone possesses knowledge) (Klein 175) and the student (the enlightened genius who is eager to use the knowledge to save his

backward native art). Similarly, Susan Broili from *The Herald Sun* says “Shen Wei's ‘Empress’ moves might not seem like a big deal here in the West. But it could be viewed as downright revolutionary in the choreographer's home country of China.” Revolutionary or not, Shen Wei is by no means the first or the only Chinese artist to explore the opera with depth/ beyond tokenist inclusion. *One Table Two Chairs* (2000) by Willy Tsao and ex-BMDC members not only employs the Beijing opera in formal style (sounds, structure, staccato exchange of comedic dialogue informing movement), but its theme draws on the enormous expressivity in the minimal setting of the opera—a table and two chairs, which set the fundamental mise-en-scene where five dancers-choreographers explore the variations/ patterns of human interaction in modern society. In this piece as well as in some other Chinese moderns’ choreographic experiments³⁶, the Chinese opera is not presented as skits with fancy costumes, nor an empty shell with fetishistic value, but a traditional art form that has profound philosophical significance and contemporary relevance.

³⁶ Another example is *The Oath: Midnight Rain* (2006) by Gao Yan Jinzi, choreographer and current artistic director of BMDC in Beijing.

Chapter IV: Conclusion and Extension

A turn-around. Could it be that Shen Wei agrees with Woods, that his “revolutionary” *Empress* enacts his illumination by Western modern spirit and thus his own alienation from a conservative homeland alongside its unchanging, desolate art forms? Am I imposing my privileged, scholarly drivel (from a position of centrality from which I thought I have totally exiled myself) on a now U.S.-based choreographer (already a U.S. citizen) of Chinese descent? After all, Shen does not seem to relish his childhood opera training nor the decade of China’s Revolution. Working with students from China’s dance academies for the Olympic production, he laments ““Chinese dancers...have no modern-dance training” and that “I’m used to the Western system of how things work.” (Julie Bloom, 2008). I acknowledge that I talk from a very different Chinese identity or way of self-identification from Shen, so my scope/ angle necessarily has limits. Mine represents a much-refracted and partial point of view oscillating between a cultivated empathy with Asian American situation, a more detached place of a dancer-scholar, and the inevitable subject position as a (remote) Chinese Other.

Knowing that what I see or say risks not covering the entire picture, yet I still feel the need to bring them out---my concerns and contentions about what’s going on during the encounters between different culturalisms. To conclude, I formulate this thesis project as comprising the following approaches and objectives. First of all, I try to account for the Chinese (modern) dancing body as a subject/ agent, that is, from the

doubly or triply marginalized perspective, which has been largely ignored and under-theorized for several reasons. The habit of lumping from both inside (official media) and outside of China (paring down of an-other's complexities into image) is engaged by others for convenience and for control (Sheng-mei Ma 102). The Chinese dancing bodies are not trained to speak out, nor to argue for themselves. Nor are they theory people, having little access to those "isms" that flow from English-speaking cultures. So they hardly have opportunities to make themselves understood in a language accessible to cultural outsiders, except the body language. As far as I know, Chinese modern dancers-choreographers don't normally like to speak a lot. Making daring works on stage, yet they are quiet at post-show discussions, or simply avoid them. Plus they think what they create gushes out of the inner feelings that transcend speech. Besides, China's policing system nurtures the mute. From the educational to the social administrative sectors, one is trained not to dissent from or express different opinions from their superiors (teacher, leader, parents, etc.). Also, because of the strict censorship, it is normally wiser to remain silent than to say something wrong. The restriction of speech has however opened up an alternative channel for self-expression, the corporeal. Corporeal flexibility through the virtuosic use of body joints and movement idioms could help achieve strategic flexibility. In *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (2004), ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong identifies similar agency and transgression in the ways certain Asian Americans engage with music (eg. jazz, hip-hop, and taiko). She parses taiko playing as a vicarious experience of speaking

out loud for the marginalized, muted groups in America: the “loud assertiveness of taiko” makes it attractive to “Sansei-third-generation Japanese Americans” who are willing to speak out loud against internment and for reparations (198); the “strength” and “loudness” “expressed through the taiko holds a particular performance appeal for Asian American women” (216) who, otherwise silenced/ invisible, find outlets to feel power and pleasure through “shouted presence” (219) and “physical exertion” (196) of the drum. In another way, postcolonial theorist Trinh Minh-ha’s term “speaking nearby” (as opposed to “speaking about”) conceptualizes a rhetorical function of “poetic language”: “A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without seizing or claiming it” (Trinh 1999, 218). Subversive/ Minority discourses can take refuge in the figures of the equivocal body language and the deferral of speech, which “defy the closure of a direct reading” (219). However, as the “dancing body theorizes” (Susan Foster’s words), the Chinese choreographers’ rich visions only speak to those sensitive and caring enough to communicate with their works choreographically.

Second, in order to account for an ethnic Chinese dancing subject and to make an alternative modernity possible, I attempt to animate the “immobile audience” from a static, detached position so as to empathize with the changing stage happenings. Above all, we need to awaken the detached viewer to their possible complicity in the ossification of Chinese dance image/ forms. Whatever changes take place from the production side, it is the cultural unwillingness to not look at the undesirable hampers

the viewer from seeing it (such as change/ development in the opera form). “Cultures change, but tokens seem not to,” to quote Daphne Lei (Lei 1). Just as in the way current global stage representations of “Chinese dance” continue to recycle 19th-century Orientalist stereotypes in spite of the visual and corporeal encounters with actual “Chinese” dance practitioners, so what U.S. mainstream critics expect in a Chinese modern dance piece are nothing very different from the 19th century audience expectations from a Chinese circus---acrobatic or martial feats, tokens of Chinese-ness, and how risky the martial stunts, but not in terms of the piece’s artistic merits or conceptual depth. Cultural theorist James Moy says, Western viewers’ simultaneous patronage and condescension towards virtuosic feats [whether in acrobatics, martial art, or in Chinese modern dance] prolong today. In the same manner that Chinese opera theater and magic were offered for consumption in American amusement parks and circuses in the 19th century, Chinese martial/ acrobatic feats are still being displayed to “yield a comfortable empire of the visual for the middle class America” (James Moy 133) today. A give-and-take relation³⁷ is often obscured when the Western audience is exposed to already tokenized, spectacularized Chinese cultural forms. The “judgmental, altruistic position of the spectator masks earlier racist stereotypes that historically contributed to the spectacle” (134).

The connections I make back to the fanning scene in the 2008 Olympic opening

³⁷ Historically it is the American audience’s demand for/ obsession with easily consumable aspects of Chinese culture (magic, acrobatics, martial stunts), but not others, that has ossified these as signatures of Chinese-ness; though it doesn’t exclude that China has been participating in this self-Orientalizing practice (auto-exoticism) by offering such export commodities for market benefits or political purposes.

ceremonies described at the beginning of the essay may become clearer now. Simply by handling the fan and physically embodying the ethnic fanning/ fan-dancing body the spectator, as a cultural outsider, does not necessarily gain understanding of the fan (dance) culture on a deeper level. In other words, an intercultural dialogue does not open automatically in the viewing process; the viewer's responsibility needs to be considered and an openness to conversation needs to be fostered between the viewer ("self") and the view ("other"). Learning to manipulate the real Chinese fan the way a real Chinese does and reminiscing of popular Hollywood bubbles with Asian-looking figures, fans, and candle-lights, the conscientious viewer might be able to read in this "other" Chinese spectacle such differences: a scarcity of overused cultural symbols, things Chinese perhaps but not overtly, no pastiche of static traditions as displayed in a museum show, but a *mise-en-scene* that mobilizes them to advocate further understanding. The viewer may feel it hard to detach the theme of the ceremony from the political scandals of official China and yet empathize that multiple subjectivities are involved in the show, including, perhaps, Asian Americans who endeavor to challenge what people in the West currently see China, native Chinese directors and choreographers who want to slip in a piece of subversive message on center stage, as well as bodies comprising the enormous parade who chant the Confucian classics out loud to honor the sage in his own right...

To extend, and to update, I want to set a last example that brings further both points above. Sang Jijia is a Beijing-based Tibetan choreographer who also has broad

overseas experience. As an ethnic minority and one that crosses national boundaries, he understands first-hand the political stringency and speech containment from inside of China, in response speech celibacy and dumbness of Chinese dancing moderns, and Euro-American audience's cultural habits of viewing the oriental other. I want to use the next case to reveal how cross-culturally fertilized choreographers from China work in relation to interpretations imposed on them, and how this could possibly pose rethinking on the audience side in the West. Known as the first Tibetan modern dancer, Sang danced with the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (the first of its kind in China) from 1993 to 1998 and won the gold prize in the male section of the Paris International Modern Dance Competition in 1996. He was awarded an Asian Cultural Council Scholarship and American Dance Festival Scholarship in 1998-99. He joined CCDC (Hongkong-based City Contemporary Dance Company) in 1999 and was chosen by the Protege Arts Program to study under William Forsythe in Germany 2002-2006. From 2007 till now, Sang has joined LDTX to become a resident artist. The economic meltdown in the U.S. which culminated in 2009 had forced many artistic foundations to suspend their sponsorship of Asian performance troupes, including those units which had invited LDTX to tour the New York and California areas 2006-2008. The summer of 2010 has somehow witnessed a recovery of Euro-American economy and with that a renaissance for LDTX's foreign projects, manifested by a packed domestic and international touring schedule. Besides an invitation to China's official stage such as the Shanghai Expo in June and performing

as one of the organizing units at the Sixth Guangdong Modern Dance Festival in July, in May, LDTX was invited to stage Sang's 2007 production *Unspeakable* in Germany and Italy; in August, a piece "Solitude in Numbers," developed from a five-minute excerpt in Sang's new full-length *Standing Before Darkness* (2010), premiered at the Vail Dance Festival (Vail, Colorado) in the U.S. I was first exposed to *Unspeakable* during the 2008 Guangdong Modern Dance Festival; as for "Solitude in Numbers," to which I had no personal access, I could only enumerate briefly based on my viewing of *Standing* during the Third Beijing Modern Dance Festival (May 2010) and some textual sources I found.

I observe common traits in both works that speak for the unspeakable. The choreographies are explicitly gendered, physically demanding, and speech/ sound-full. The audience are most challenged in their aural habits when exposed to monotone machine noises weaving in and out from beginning to end. Not only the music isn't mellow, but performers would toss out sounds or remarks symptomatic of abnormality. It is a bit shocking to see these normally sleek, quiet dancers for the first time speak, laugh, shout high-pitched, go goofy or crazy on stage, which also takes on strong temperaments of each individual dancer in their real life. Interruption of speech is associated with apparent physical violence self-inflicted or by others. In *Unspeakable*, the stage is white, occupied by two geometrical installations that vaguely resemble a wall and a deck. There are scenes when dancers appear in heterosexual couples, the man manipulating the woman's body parts or interrupting her from uttering something.

The pas de deux are barely lyrical, but strike the viewer as power-laden. There's a moment when a woman, numb looking, leans against a man, her limbs being twisted, crossed, bent by him in a slow, calm, yet sadistic manner, as if paralyzed into a doll, while they proceed across the stage. The "doll," already debilitated, keeps slipping off his hold and collapsing to the floor. While all this happens, there's a lone woman sitting by the wall facing them, providing a spectator within, though mute(d). The next dramatic scene then unfolds with the lone spectator monologuing on a past occurrence allegedly in front of a jury, her tone hesitant and her words fragmentary, while a male sitting downstage in a chair repeating what she says as if to reinforce or to parody. The content she recalls are normally compounds of actions and names of dancers, such as "(I saw) Zi Wei crash Liu Chang to the floor, ...and then" while two dancers choose to mark out this single action, or not. At a certain point, another couple enters the space in the middle and perform these actions intermittently. Now and then, the man sitting in the chair shades from faithful repetition of the spectator's testimony into questioning her, "Are you sure?" or retorting on her, "No, it's not pushing; it's pulling." Once, he points back at the man leaning by the wall, hinting at a second witness, "No, he proves differently." This layering narrative structure provides a comment of sorts, or a process of belying what we call the "objective truth" or human memory. Sporadically, the man who has been crashed on the floor breaks into giggles, a quintessential touch of humor and irony in my view, as if to bring to light the absurdity of law or of the testifying action per se, in the scene and in real world. The

stark physical violence between individuals, pop-outs of unreasonable episodes, as well as the layering dramatic structure give a general affect of absurdity in modern society, as inspired by French philosopher Albert Camus's Myth of Sisyphus³⁸, " ... in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man suddenly feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity."

Standing Before Darkness (2010) explores the theme of loneliness. The audience is first exposed to a bare stage, with a man and a woman improvising slowly in silence for about twenty minutes. As the program formally starts, thirteen dancers sit in chairs making contractive moves in unison, before one falls out. There's a moment when a lone woman walks towards downstage with exertion, reminiscent of the doll-like woman in *Unspeakable*. She tries hard to say something, but words won't come out from the tip of her tongue as if she were in an inescapable dreamscape. As she gets choked with words, her knee and hip joints start to soften and her slim legs get weighed down by her upper body, as well as, perhaps, the heavy theme she tries to express. She becomes crippled and keeps collapsing. In the section from which "Solitude in Numbers" is culled, hysteria becomes epidemic. Six people sit in chairs. Suddenly one leaves the chair to approach another in chair, and they'll push, slide, wrap around each other, and fall, and this contagious uneasiness extends to the next

³⁸ These words are said to be important to Sang Jijia's conception of *Unspeakable*, though not to all that he wants to express in the work. See article: "Performing the Unspeakable." Liu, Fang, ed. <<http://www.cctv.com/english/special/C19312/20070906/110800.shtml>>

chain of actions, such as two dancers alternately making crippled steps. The affect is chilling and inhuman. In the next moment, one woman will come out of the chair and cry “Believe me! Believe me!...” As she repeats on that, her pitch gets higher and her voice more desperate. She staggers around as if seeking empathy and recognition, while another woman pulls on her arm trying to stop her hysteria, but is then agitated herself, now taking over the hysteric role, “I believe you, I believe you, ...” so she breaks out and falls. Dramatic episodes like this bring to mind the “court” scene in *Unspeakable* Sang made three years ago, touching on the epidemic of unbelief and isolation in this absurd modern world. Modern man is entangled daily and driven crazy by a vicious circle of distrust and the eternal anxiety to prove, therefore despite the close-quarter living and worldwide web that make this globe a virtual village, “authentic relationships are hard to find” (Sang qt. in Cassie Pence), and so we could feel more lonely when in the geographical vicinity of our fellows. Here physical violence is closely related to violence of speech, whether it is the right or the ability to speak. Moments of stillness, muteness, non-action, and speech repression strike me as more violent than the physical manipulation of the body, though the latter appears more visually excruciating. “It’s actually not that fierce as it looks, not that hurting. The rehearsal is only tiring,” comments a female dancer. I recall having taken a workshop with Sang on duet movement development, when we were instructed to hold on the partner’s forearm and spiral it--rather than irresponsibly twist it--whereby we were to discover new space to let our partner rotate or pass, and thus to expand on

our interactive possibilities. It is through spiraling, which works in tandem with the human muscular structure, that the potential danger/violence is “desolved” (a frequently used word by Sang during the workshop), though it looks dangerous. The entire process of finding continuous movement possibilities feels wholesome and gratifying. However, when it comes to the solitude resulting from deprivation of speech and verbal communication, Sang knows quite well. As an ethnic Tibetan, he was selected from Gansu Province to study folk dance in Beijing when thirteen years old, when he spoke no Chinese. When talking about “Solitude in Numbers,” Sang says, “I am concerned with loneliness and the challenge to engage in genuine dialogue with others, ... It is sad. Everyday we seem to talk a huge amount, but few of us are truly willing to understand others, and few of us would like to open our hearts for an equal dialogue. Sometimes we just speak nonsense” (qtd. in Cassie Pence).

As always, there is no escaping the irony if the choreographer is a Tibetan, not to mention Sang’s triple identity of being a Tibetan, a Chinese citizen, and a former Forsythe dancer/student. “... [D]ance ... provides me the opportunity to explore the possibilities in human, both physical and mental.” Sang would prefer the general word “human” to specify his cultural identity; nor does he aim to “inspire [particular] cultural shift or change” in his work, ... “Hopefully that, in itself, will inspire” (qtd. Cassie Pence). Still, he cannot possibly avoid explaining his artistic attitude towards his ethnic identity. At post-show talks and during interviews, he is frequently queried, by Chinese or not, about the (missing) “Tibetan identity/ elements” in his creative

works. Yet unlike most Chinese choreographers, Sang is the one to make loud, unhesitant verbal statements in public. "My thinking and aesthetics are fundamentally Tibetan, but I don't use Tibetan elements as symbols in my work." Once an audience member asks "Why do all your female dancers wear skirts?" Sang simply had to say, "Because I like to see women in skirts." Big applause and cheers. Aware that his heterosexual representation could tread the wire of the genetically essentialist idea of gender in the West, Sang seems to appeal that a Chinese choreographer, like his Euro-American counterparts, deserves a stamp of personal and artistic idiosyncrasy. In a word, Sang tries to speak the unspeakable by way of both choreography and verbal rhetoric. This way, he theorizes an alternative modernity to what the mainstream U.S. audience could expect. I argue, turning to the physical, the abstract, as well as highlighting the choreographer as "individual" (without further ethnic specification), serves as both a tactic for self-protection under stringent censorship and a response to stereotypical race-based binarisms from the mainstream audience in China and the West, that is, in Sang's case, a Tibetan choreographer should either produce "authentic" Tibetan dances or make an issue of Tibetan affairs in his choreography.

On the other hand, Sang's connection with Forsythe facilitates his work to be measured in terms of artistic merits and conceptual depth. Unlike the native Inner Mongolian choreographer Zi Wei's ethnic-specific vision, Sang's physical style and deconstructive choreography lend some familiarity to Forsythe and therefore some readability to the general Western audience. In May 2010, *Unspeakable* was invited as

Sang's representative work to stage in Germany; In August, "Solitude in Numbers" was created by invitation from the Vail International Dance Festival (U.S.). It seems to be another example of, aside from Shen Wei, how the lone hero from his isolated country, having been fertilized with the enlightening spirit of the West, attempts to save his culture. The difference is, Sang has a plus identity, Tibetan. The Vail Festival Director Damian Woetzel describes the troupe's style as "brave." Acclaiming that this is a "brilliant choreographer and dancer who now works around the world," he comments on the fact alone that the artist in residence is from Tibet, "It's a testament of the arts to transcend boundaries and to inspire peace... Sang Jijia's career is a statement on the power of arts to make boundaries irrelevant" (qtd. Cassie Pence page.2). Although the label of Tibet and the imprint of the Western master are still writ large, these have somehow helped make this otherwise obscured Chinese choreographer an agent to attend to and let his voice more or less through.

In earlier sections, I examined selected LDTX repertoire that resort to the kinesthetic as a major expressive mode and analyzed how they each makes meaning through embodied, silent articulation. Within this current political system, Chinese moderns' turning to muted speech proves to be a productive, innovative tactic not only for survival, but also as a mode of resistance. I draw from Trinh Minh-ha's argument on "speaking nearby" and, in particular, Vincent Farenga's theory about the origin of rhetoric, that is, when, under tyranny, the spoken element in language is suspended, this crisis for democratic ideology generates an alternative writing that is

proto-linguistic. In other words, tyrannical interruption of speech begets the “democratic intervention of choreographic and proto-rhetorical writing” (Farenga 5). The virtuosic body, specifically trained under a tyrannical system to serve as propagating machine, now “re-appropriates itself by representing themselves to themselves and thus recaptures their lost self-presence through mimesis” (Farenga 5). However, this exclusively kinesthetic strategy for survival, resistance, and negotiating political visibility of Chinese moderns, as an alternative body politic to stark liberalism or expressionism, could escape the Western audience given the ingrained ruptures in perceiving Chinese dance. Then, in the concluding section, I cited the case of Tibetan choreographer Sang Jijia, whose work pushes virtuosic expressivity to the extreme and, more important, rehabilitates the dancer’s voice, meanwhile foregrounding the repression of speech in the narrative per se. By the act of speaking the unspeakable, Sang to some degree succeeds in theorizing the Chinese dancing body and their dilemmas, and thus provides a channel to parsing the Chinese dancing body as agent. Of course, there’s no denying Sang’s Tibetan identity and his Euro-American association help draw attention from the Western viewer to ponder the artistic and conceptual depth of his works. Dancing can theorize, though it doesn’t always sell.

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