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Claiming Ritual: Female Lion Dancing in Boston's Chinatown

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Casey Avaunt

June 2018

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

Dr. Jose Reynoso

Dr. Mariam Lam

Dr. Christina Schwenkel

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The Dissertation of Casey Avaunt is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Dedicated to Bonnie Lambert and Robert Avaunt

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Claiming Ritual: Female Lion Dancing in Boston's Chinatown

by

Casey Avaunt

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2018
Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

This doctoral thesis investigates female practices of the lion dance in Boston's Chinatown, focusing primarily on the all-women's company Gund Kwok. For most of lion dancing's millennia-old history, women have been barred from joining the dance. They have been excluded due to notions that menstruation contaminates the ritual purity of the practice and the belief that women do not possess the physical stamina and strength needed to perform these rigorous dances. In recent years, however, women have been practicing and performing lion dances to break down gender barriers and take ownership of this form. Though literature on female lion dancing in Boston is sparse, it usually stresses the empowerment that women achieve through lion dance practice. In this study, I notice empowerment when it arises, but I also consider the tensions between Asian American female bodies and multiple political, social, and economic frameworks. I argue that lion dancing offers a pathway for women to achieve power while still demonstrating how racialized female dancing bodies become implicated in various ideological and discursive systems.

My project begins in Boston's Chinatown, where I turn to histories of young women who performed lion dances within fundraising spectacles during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Though participating in these masculine dances was incongruous for women of that era, I suggest that Chinese American women were adhering to ideologies of Chinese nationalism, which emphasized narratives of heroic, non-gender conforming women. Later, I use ethnographic methodologies to research contemporary female lion dancers from Gund Kwok. I explore how training in the lion dance activates a potential to work against gendered and racialized bodily subjectivities. Specifically, I analyze how the techniques of lion dance offer a means of resistance to the ways in which Asian American women's bodies have been framed in patriarchal and racist systems. I then map out the different types of performances that Gund Kwok engages in throughout the year and tease out the effects these performances have on the ritual itself, the performers, and the greater Boston community. In doing so, I analyze how Gund Kwok both performs within systems of power while also locating agency within these frameworks. Finally, I highlight the role of the *sisterhood* in Gund Kwok, suggesting that this type of community formation, while contested, provides important functions for the group.

Grounded in a Critical Dance Studies approach, this study examines the role of the body in facilitating and challenging modalities of power. I closely examine how female lion dance technique and performance intersect with theoretical conversations in a number of disciplines, including Asian American Studies and Gender Studies. In doing

so, I aim to bring scholarly attention to this popular diasporic dance form—providing analysis of the contradictions, struggles, and resistance embedded in its enactment.

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Introduction

My partner Amy and I stood behind a doorway, out of audience sightlines. She ducked under the lion costume and gripped my waist. She would play the tail of the lion. My hands trembling, I reached into the lion head to place it onto my shoulders. The introductory drum sequence soon began, compelling us to pass through the door and lurch into the crowds. Through the lion's mouth, I could see that the normally lackluster interior of the dining area was enlivened by tables blanketed in red plastic tablecloths and dangling golden Chinese script wishing luck and prosperity. The auditorium was packed with Chinese American families ready to celebrate the holiday and to see the festive spirit come to fruition through a lion dance. Some of the children would smile; others would shed tears of terror.

Neither of us had ever performed the lion dance before, a popular Chinese¹ ritual in which a large, bright colored lion costume completely obscures the dancers. I was an undergraduate student at Colorado College and a member of the Asian Touring Dance Troupe²— so-called “touring” because we performed off-campus once a year, in a large banquet hall four miles away in downtown Colorado Springs for Chinese New Year. I had spent the two weeks prior learning to how to perform as the lion head. My friend Ryo, who was two years ahead of me in school and had some experience in the form, spent hours in the dance studio teaching me to listen to the drumbeat, to bend my knees

¹ Though the dance has been largely associated with Chinese culture, other countries have their own versions of the dance including Vietnam (where it is known as the unicorn dance), Korea, and Japan.

² The Asian Touring Dance Troupe was established by Professor Yunyu Wang, who is from Taiwan. The troupe included students from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

more in order to acquire an animal-esque crouch, and to get lower, lower! After the first rehearsal with Ryo, I was so sore that I was unable to climb stairs, but the practice helped. While I was still an amateur lion dancer by the performance I was only mildly sore instead of debilitated.

I performed the lion three more times in college for the Chinese New Year, but I did not think deeply about its history or ritual underpinnings—perhaps because most of my performances were modern dance—for years. During my Master’s program in dance choreography at Taipei National University of the Arts, I occasionally saw the lion dance again, but always on the periphery of the modernized cityscape. These dances seemed to emerge outside of smoky temples as a relic of a more traditional past, a remnant of outdated local superstitions. The colors, movements, and sounds caught my attention—the depth of the drums, the complexity of the costuming, the athleticism of the bodies beneath the cloth, the confetti thrown before the lion circling like snow. But there was something else—a ritual power, a bold, explosive energy—that shook the ground and seemingly reshuffled the surrounding air molecules in a way that I found mesmerizing. When I mentioned my interest in these dances to my Taiwanese friends, they looked at me strangely. Sure, lion dances were fun to watch but perhaps a little mundane, nothing to write home about.

During my doctoral studies in the United States I began to look at lion dances through an increasingly theoretical lens. Lion dances have been in existence for over a

thousand years³ and scholars believe they originated in China. Historically only men performed lion dances, but women have begun to perform them in Asia and the Asian diaspora.⁴ The form developed out of virile martial arts traditions and the lion costumes themselves represent brawny male warrior gods from ancient history. Women have been excluded for a number of reasons, from the belief that women's bodies render rituals ineffective to the notion that women are not strong enough to lift neither the heavy lion head nor their partners.

At the start of my research, a lion dance company based in Boston's Chinatown is the only entirely female lion dance company I could find in the United States. The group, called Gund Kwok,⁵ was founded in 1998 by reverend and social activist Cheng Imm Tan. It limits membership to those who identify as Asian and female. Gund Kwok practices weekly in the China Trade Center and performs regularly throughout the year. References to the company in media and in academic texts emphasize the physical strength of the dancers and the empowerment they achieve by breaking down gender barriers in this form. A Fox news feature story on the company, for instance, showcases their rigorous rehearsal process, the reporter emphatically commenting on the women's

³ Many scholars believe lion dances to be around two thousand years old. See William C. Hu, *Chinese Lion Dance Explained* (Ars Ceramica with Chinese Performing Arts Foundation, 1995); and Heleanor B. Feltham, "Everybody Was Kung-fu Fighting: The Lion Dance and Chinese National Identity in the 19th and 20th Centuries." In *Asian Material Culture*, edited by Marianne Hulsbosch, Elizabeth Bedford, and Martha Chaiklin (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

⁴ Most lion dance teachers I interviewed said women began practicing lion dances in the United States only within the past couple of decades, though female participation remains rare.

⁵ According to an interview of Tan in the *Boston Voyager*, the name Gund Kwok "is from an ancient Chinese saying that 'The scarf does not give in the bushy eyebrows,' meaning women are just as good as men (Gunk Kwok is the scarf that only women used to wear under their clothing)." Found at "Meet Chang Imm Tan of Gund Kwok Asian Women's Lion and Dragon Dance Troupe," July 10, 2017, <http://bostonvoyager.com/interview/meet-gund-kwok-asian-womens-lion-dragon-dance-troupe-chinatown/>.

impressive technical skills.⁶ A *Boston Daily Globe* article titled “Asian women flex muscle with Lion Dance” stresses how the company is “committed to a vision of Asian women’s empowerment.”⁷ In a *Multimedia Encyclopedia of Today’s Women*, Stange, Oyster, and Sloan report that through the company the founder “encourages her fellow sisters to break through traditional stereotypes [to] live a ‘bigger life,’ a life free from cultural restraints, [to] embrace challenges and excel via hard work.”⁸ All of the information that I found on the company employed a liberatory tone and drew from language that stressed the empowerment achieved through performing lion dances as women.

But is female lion dance practice such a straightforward means to achieve power and agency? Are female dancers who perform it free from constraints at the national, political, economic level? Is the patriarchal tradition intact as Gund Kwok approaches its twentieth anniversary? As Dance Studies scholar Priya Srinivasan argues in her book *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, young South Asian American female dancers gain power through performing traditional culture, but continue to deal with “master discourses of citizenship.”⁹ These narratives stem from the pressures to perform and maintain cultural identity on behalf of their South Asian communities on the one hand, and an inevitable participation in multicultural ideology on the other, which

⁶ “Gund Kwok on Boston’s Fox 25 News 2/3/06,” YouTube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrdX7kioJ8w>.

⁷ Lauren Johnson, “Asian Women Flex Muscle with Lion Dance.” *Boston Sunday Globe*. April 30, 2006.

⁸ Mary Zeiss Stange, Carol K. Oyster, and Jane E. Sloan, *Encyclopedia of Women in Today’s World 1* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2011).

⁹ Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 142.

“seeks to divide minority communities, even as it celebrate[s] their ‘national’ ethnic forms as the ‘other’ of mainstream practices.”¹⁰ In other words, while performing cultural dances is a means to access cultural pride and a sense of community-based loyalty for the young dancers, they still contend with ideological constraints such as multiculturalism.

A 2017 *New York Times* article about the lion dance¹¹ suggests the limitations female lion dancers today face, stating that even as the ranks of females who perform the dance grow, there are only three active women lion dancers among about sixty in the New York Chinese Freemason’s Club. Female instructor Prima Lai told the reporter that the club has lingering “anti-female traditions” such as the rule that menstruating women cannot touch the head.¹² As she explained, “the lion head is supposed to bring you good luck and if you're bleeding it’s bad luck.”¹³ Lai also attributed the paucity of women to the hardcore training at the club but noted, “nobody wants to be that person to say, let’s forget what our ancestors told us.”¹⁴

My own research with Gund Kwok has also revealed that gendered stereotypes continue to exist for women in participating in lion dance training programs. Gund Kwok is doing the vital work of transgressing gender binaries by performing stereotypically masculine dances, as its publicity materials suggest. Yet, as this dissertation will document, female lion dancers and their bodily cultural labor have been drawn into social

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Alina Simone, “In New York’s Lunar New Year Parade, Women Are Breaking Barriers as Lion Dancers,” Jan. 27, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-01-27/new-yorks-lunar-new-year-parade-women-are-breaking-lion-dancers>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and political narratives that overdetermine Asian American female bodily subjectivities. The lion dancing women of Gund Kwok are as strong as Fox News and the *Boston Globe* suggested. Yet even in an all-female company the obstacles to full equality that Lai described continue, if in different form. Asian American cultural production struggles with complexities such that becoming empowered¹⁵ through lion dance requires more than bulking up muscle.

With these issues in mind, this dissertation will explore how female lion dancers participate in their social and political environments, gaining individual and communal agency in many cases, while also negotiating various social systems and other complex modalities of power. In doing so, I aim to expand the view of female lion dances as entirely resistive and fully empowering, arguing instead that, in addition to a pathway to achieve power, female lion dance practice and performance demonstrates how racial and patriarchal paradigms and ideological forces of traditional belief systems, nationalism, and multiculturalism coopt female racialized bodies. In other words, I look beneath the claims of pure resistance to theorize the tensions between body, race, gender, and power in the U.S.-Chinese diaspora to depict a more balanced view of female lion dancing that weighs both the agency gained through lion dance practice and the larger frameworks within which female lion dancers operate.

¹⁵ I view the word *empower* with skepticism, especially in regard to underrepresented communities. A study by Barbara Cruikshank examined how the War on Poverty policies of the 1960s used the concept to encourage the poor to be self-sufficient, a way to ignore structural conditions and the obligations they placed on those in power. See, Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

As a white female researcher, I have not personally lived through the Asian American experiences that I address in this study. Though I try to write about the intersections of race and gender with sensitivity and a commitment to understanding, I recognize I cannot empathize fully with the bodily experiences of my informants. My investment is a deep appreciation of Chinese cultural forms, built in six years of living in Taiwan and an interest in relationships between culture and moving bodies, and how these bodies are shaped and visualized within different geographical locations and social environments. Most of the time I was the sole white dancer in a company I joined in Taiwan, and through this experience, I came to understand how my white skin most often worked as a marker of privilege. I also noticed how audiences “read” the racial markers attached to bodies of my Taiwanese colleagues both in Taiwan and in Western countries during tours, and the faulty assumptions, or shifts in tone that were predicated on race. As a result, I became curious how dance works as an interlocutor between societies and bodies, articulating cultural, racial, and gendered identities while helping to define our individual and collective subjectivities. I also became intrigued by how the dancing body opens the potential for agency to allow us to negotiate those complexities. Perhaps through analyzing female performances of the lion dance—however ensconced it is in traditional conceptions of masculinity—my work will cast light on the dynamic issues that Asian American women encounter in their efforts to reshape this form of cultural production in the U.S.-Chinese diaspora.

This study is a historical and ethnographic investigation of female lion dancing in Boston. Chapter 1 begins with a history of female lion dancing in the 1930s and an

examination of the ideological frameworks that lion dancing women encountered at that time. This historical period is significant since it is the only example of a group of female lion dancers in Boston before Gund Kwok's appearance in the 1990s. Chapter 2 focuses on how lion dance training creates specific dancing bodies that offer ways of negotiating, or re-framing Asian American female bodily subjectivities. Chapter 3 centers on an ethnographic examination of Gund Kwok to analyze how the company serves the Boston Chinatown community through ritual practice, and how group members negotiate various ideological concerns such as multiculturalism and cultural visibility. Chapter 4 complicates the notion of a sisterhood created through membership in Gund Kwok to investigate the role of community in the company.

I limit the temporal and spatial frame of the study for three main reasons: (1) While women perform the lion dance as a part of other companies in Boston, female participation remains relatively rare in Boston and throughout the United States; Gund Kwok is the only all-women's lion dance group with a significant profile in the country (and may well be the only such company). (2) Chinese American scholarship of this type has focused on the west coast, typically Chinatown in San Francisco. (3) Boston is an important hub for New England's regional economy, culture, and history, and its tourist economy depends heavily on a historical narrative that highlights a brand of liberal politics focused on diversity and multiculturalism.¹⁶ My familiarity with this unique social and political environment allows me to examine the less-researched Boston

¹⁶ Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xiv.

Chinatown and address the ways in which lion dance performances and practitioners weave themselves into the fabric of this particular community.

A small but strong collection of scholarly texts currently exists on lion dancing. Historian William Hu provides a substantial historical overview of lion dances in his *Chinese Lion Dance Explained*.¹⁷ He broadly catalogues the practices of the lion dance in both China and the Chinese diaspora, offering a much-needed English language documentation of lion dance techniques, histories and ritual practices. Performance studies scholar Madeline Slovenz-Low wrote her 1994 dissertation on lion dance groups in New York City, providing an in-depth ethnographic account that provides a rich description of the various male groups performing lion dancing in the city.¹⁸ Ethnomusicologist Colin McGuire has more recently conducted extensive ethnographic research with Toronto's Hong Luck Kung Fu Club to investigate relationships between the lion dance and musical percussion. His dissertation *Music of the Martial Arts: Rhythm, Movement, and Meaning in a Chinese Canadian Kung Fu Club* theorizes how the physical training for lion dances embody a Chinese, martial habitus and how lion dances engage with the combative, warrior-like percussion that accompanies them.¹⁹

A couple of other scholars have explored lion dance practices in relation to cultural context and materiality. Heleanor Feltham situates lion dances as a manifestation of material culture to look at the lion dance as a material symbol for Chinese cultural

¹⁷ Hu, "Chinese Lion Dance Explained."

¹⁸ Madeline Slovenz-Low, "Lions in the Streets: A Performance Ethnography of Cantonese Lion Dancing in New York City's Chinatown" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1994).

¹⁹ Colin Patrick McGuire, "Music of the Martial Arts: Rhythm, Movement, and Meaning in a Chinese Canadian Kung Fu Club" (Ph.D. dissertation, York University, 2014).

beliefs and values. She also examines how lion dances became a signifier of overseas Chinese identity in the late 1800s and 1900s, collecting different symbols and myths as the form “travelled with sojourners across the globe.”²⁰ In her chapter, “The Sin Oh Dan Street Lion Dance Competition: A Temporary Space for Cross-Cultural Understanding,” interdisciplinary scholar Jayde Roberts discusses how lion dance competitions performed in Myanmar cultivate temporary communal spaces, accepting of cultural diversity, while also providing an opportunity for the dancers to express Chineseness in a government that normally represses cultural difference. As a result, young men performing these dances visibilize Chinese culture while opening the potential for cross-cultural relationships.²¹

My intervention is to center women who practice lion dances and to bring a Dance Studies approach to this conversation. In this process, I aim to challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of lion dances as a purely male endeavor to depict an emerging coalition of women who are claiming this ritual for themselves and their community. I also seek to challenge the colonialist assumption that positions the West as producers of “high art” and innovative artistry and traditional forms based in non-Western cultures as stuck in an unchanging past. Though lion dances are some of the most popular performances of the Chinese diaspora, they are often perceived by the general public as playful tokens of Chinese culture—a light splash of entertainment that spruces up cultural

²⁰ Feltham, “Everybody Was Kung-fu Fighting.”

²¹ Jayde Lin Roberts, “The Sin Oh Dan Street Lion Dance Competition: A Temporary Space for Cross-Cultural Understanding.” In *Transcultural Cities: Borders and Placemaking*, edited by Jeffrey Hou (New York: Routledge, 2013).

events. I treat them as more than playful tokens, seeking to lay bare the ways in which lion dances shift and stretch, producing new meanings within their temporal and spatial environments to offer an alternative narrative of lion dancing that takes into account the form as a political and social practice.

This project also seeks to contribute to scholarship that examines the intersections of race and gender and challenges prevalent stereotypes of Asian American women. Structural factors including laws of exclusion, racist policies, and representations in popular culture have worked in tandem to reinforce a series of images and stereotypes that depict Asian American women as passive, compliant, and apolitical. From the fantasies created through Orientalism's prism²² to notions of war brides as prostitutes and depictions of Asian women in film, Asian American female stereotypes range from the hypersexualized images of Suzie Wong, passive lotus flower types, and dominating dragon ladies. As Rosalind Chou notes, in relation to white, middle class femininity, Asian American women have been constructed through a number of controlling images propagated by dominant culture to misconstrue Asian women as "sexually exotic, docile bodies."²³ Sonia Shah describes the ways in which the model minority rhetoric of the past century and a corresponding "upwardly mobile" stereotype, coupled with assumptions of Asian passivity, has led "liberals, conservatives, and their own community members" to

²² Edward Said's *Orientalism* revealed how the West has depicted the East as "other," feminine, and exotic. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

²³ Rosalind S. Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 2.

pressure Asian American women to perform docility.²⁴ Asian American women have also had to grapple with unequal gender relations and systems of power within traditional patriarchal systems re-capitulated in the Chinese diaspora. Sociologist Min Zhou, for instance, describes a system of inequality in which Chinese women, especially recent immigrants, take low-wage jobs and perform all housework. Asian American political groups have historically marginalized women as well. Likewise, scholar David Eng has criticized how the Asian American Yellow Power movement, in seeking to address the feminization of Asians, has excluded women from activist projects and racial advocacy groups.²⁵ Female lion dancers in Boston, I argue, resist stereotypes of passivity and political complacency through lion dance practice, demonstrating their active agency in the sociopolitical milieu of Boston Chinatown.

In the following sections, I will briefly contextualize women's lion dance history in Boston's Chinatown. Next, I will sketch out a history of women's participation in lion dancing in Boston over the past century in relation to Chinese immigration history. Then, I will outline the theoretical underpinnings for this dissertation and provide a synopsis of the methodological framework. Finally, I will provide a summary of the chapters that follow. While I initially speak of Chinese American histories to contextualize female lion dance practice in the 1930s, I later use the term Asian American to reflect Gund Kwok's inclusion of women from all Asian ethnicities.

²⁴ Sonia Shah, *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire* (Boston: South End Press, 1997) xvii.

²⁵ David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 21.

0.1 Contextualizing Female Lion Dance in Boston's Chinatown

Chinese immigrants settled with increasing permanency in Boston during the mid-1800s, arriving for the most part as merchants, factory workers, and students.²⁶ While the initial settlement in Boston included only a few restaurants and shops along Harrison Avenue, a small enclave was established in the Oxford Street area by 1890.²⁷ Sullivan and Hatch estimate that by 1890, 250 Chinese people had settled in Boston, 200 of which had established themselves in Chinatown.²⁸ During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Chinatown remained a bachelor society due to multiple factors. For one, many of the men felt that their lives in the United States were temporary and so they worked as laborers while sending remittances back to China. The population of Chinese women remained very small. As historian Judy Yung writes, “patriarchal cultural values, financial considerations, and anti-Chinese legislation prevented most Chinese women from becoming a part of the early stream of immigrants to America.”²⁹ Many women were expected to remain in China to maintain the family unit’s household while their husbands worked to earn money abroad. Moreover, the Page Act of 1875 limited female immigration to the United States by marking them all as prostitutes.³⁰ A few years later,

²⁶ Wing-kai To and the Chinese Historical Society of New England, *Chinese in Boston 1870-1965* (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2008).

²⁷ Charles Sullivan and Kathlyn Hatch, “The Chinese in Boston 1970,” (Action for Boston Community Development Report, Billerica, Massachusetts, 1970), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 18.

³⁰ George Anthony Pepper, “Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women Under the Page Law, 1875-1882,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6 (1986): 28-46, 28.

the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882³¹ blocked almost all Chinese immigration to the United States and expressly stipulated that Chinese laborers already settled in America could not bring their wives or families to join them. It did permit merchants' wives to immigrate, but these women tended to live a cloistered existence in the country's Chinatowns because of their bound feet.³²

Incited by anti-Chinese sentiment, an immigration raid in 1903 reduced Boston's already small population of Chinese residents by a third. Police rounded up more than 300 men; 50 men were deported and 100 additional men relocated outside of Boston.³³ The remaining Chinese community united by developing tongs (secret social societies), family associations, and social organizations such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association to cultivate educational and support programs. While the Chinese population in Boston's Chinatown had only reached 1,000 by 1920,³⁴ a substantial Chinese commercial district grew, which was made up of Chinese-owned businesses, laundries, and residential houses that occupied the entire block between Kneeland and Beach Streets.³⁵

In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed along with clauses from the Immigration Act of 1924, which had prohibited "Orientals" from citizenship. These changes allowed for significantly higher numbers of Chinese immigrants to be admitted

³¹ The act mandated a 10-year moratorium on Chinese labor immigration. It was the first U.S. Federal law denying entry of a group based on nationality.

³² Yung, "Unbound Feet," 41.

³³ To and the Chinese Historical Society of New England, "Chinese in Boston 1870-1965," 33.

³⁴ Sullivan and Hatch, "The Chinese in Boston," 20.

³⁵ To and the Chinese Historical Society of New England, "Chinese in Boston 1870-1965," 35.

to the United States. As a result, Boston Chinatown's population began to grow at a faster rate, increasing to 2,000 by 1950.³⁶ One of the greatest results of this legal shift, however, was the effect on the gender composition of Chinatown. The increased number of women and children restructured the predominately male community by creating a more traditional family life.³⁷

Though newspaper accounts of Boston's Chinese community celebrating Chinese New Year appear in the *Boston Daily Globe* as early 1887, the newspaper's first mention of lion dancing appeared in 1929, when hundreds of Chinese New Englanders with the last name Chin conducted a two-week ceremony celebrating their common ancestor in Boston's Chinatown. An image of two men dancing with the lion accompanies the article, which recounts that the lion dance took a prominent part in the opening parade.³⁸ Subsequent news reports describe Boston Chinatown-based social clubs such as the YMCA and the boy scouts performing both lion and dragon dances during various benefits in Chinatown and for Chinese New Year.³⁹

The first reports of female performances of the lion dance appear as part of advocacy events for an independent China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). During that time, Chinese American women became increasingly involved in

³⁶ Sullivan and Hatch, "The Chinese in Boston," 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ "World's Oldest and Largest Family Marks 4127th birthday of Common Ancestor," *Daily Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), Sept. 16, 1929.

³⁹ "Chinatown Dragon Dance Postponed Until Next Sunday," *Boston Daily Globe*, Feb. 19, 1934.
"Chinese Dragon Dance Given for Benefit of Tuberculosis Sheltered Workshop," *Daily Boston Globe*, Nov. 4, 1935.

political issues and joined the labor force and the labor movement.⁴⁰ Organizations such as the politically active New England Chinese Women's Association were established to support Chinese girls and women and to encourage them to join the Chinese war resistance movement. Chapter 1 will address in more detail a group of teenage girls in Boston who performed lion dances on weekends for a year to raise money to send for the relief effort and support Chinese independence.

By the end of World War II, lion dances in Chinatown returned to being a predominately male activity, and female lion dancers disappear from the archives. Chinatown club organizations hosted most publicized lion dances in the 1950s and early 1960s. Boston Chinatown lion dance practitioner Ted Woo recalls six or seven lion dance groups in the 1960s based in clubs or marital arts schools.⁴¹ He named the Knights Chinese Athletics Club, Gung Ho, and Bamboo Hut among the organizations that had lion dance groups. Most performed only on the Chinese New Year, rather than practicing the lion dance rigorously year-round.

Woo recalls a shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s in that the dance had more of "a competitive feel," which he attributes to gang activity that rose in Chinatown and elsewhere in Boston.⁴² At the height of Bruce Lee's fame and influence in the early 1970s, many young men turned to martial arts and lion dancing⁴³ as a way to cope with racism and emasculation in their everyday lives. A scholarly article titled "The Street Boy

⁴⁰ Yung, "Unbound Feet," 7.

⁴¹ Ted Woo (former lion dancer) in discussion with the author, November 28, 2017.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Most kung fu schools had a lion dance team.

Identity: An Alternate Strategy of Boston's Chinese-Americans in Urban Anthropology” noted in 1976 that Boston had recently seen a sharp increase in the number of “street boys” and gang-related violence.⁴⁴ It described youth clubs as in part a way to channel anger and also an exit strategy for gang boys. It listed three, of which the Gung Ho club was the most popular and held the greatest possibilities.⁴⁵ In this environment, lion dances continued to be connected to an aura of danger and unruliness. As a result, lion dance groups in Boston and elsewhere adopted strategies for reducing competition and possible violence, such as lowering the lion head and crouching down when passing another troupe on the street, a practice that persists today.⁴⁶

In the 1980s and 1990s lion dances continued to be a masculine activity. Madeline Slovenz’s 1987 scholarly study of New York City lion dances describes long-standing connections to secret associations and occasionally violent groups known as triads among lion dance groups.⁴⁷ As she explains, disenfranchised Chinese Americans in previous decades required kung fu schools to act as protectors and as extortionists in extra-legal loans made to Chinese-owned businesses or individuals. Though sometimes only loosely connected to criminal activity, lion dance groups within kung fu schools served an

⁴⁴ Kaoru Oguri Kendis and Randall Jay Kendis, “The Street Boy Identity: An Alternate Strategy of Boston's Chinese-Americans,” *Urban Anthropology* 5, no. 1 (1976):1-17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ Ted Woo in discussion with the author, November 28, 2017.

⁴⁷ Madeline Anita Slovenz, "The Year Is a Wild Animal" Lion Dancing in Chinatown,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 31, no. 3, (1987): 74-102, 75.

important function by enforcing territorial boundaries between various social associations.⁴⁸

According to long-time Boston Chinatown lion dancer Adam Cheung, Slovenz's findings apply to lion dance groups in Boston as well. Cheung remembers that when he was growing up in kung fu clubs in the 1980s and 90s, the lion dancers in his community that he looked up to had a "real tough guy vibe"⁴⁹ The dancers, all men, "were the type to have tattoos and sun glasses."⁵⁰ He compares them to the characters in the movie *Young and Dangerous*, referencing a 1996 movie from Hong Kong set in the 1980s about secret triad societies that committed violent crimes. He says that many parents would not let their children join lion dance groups. Two members of Gund Kwok have similar recollections. Jeanne Chin grew up in Boston's Chinatown and never saw women performing lion dances. She remembers that "lion dance groups were always kind of a dangerous thing 'cause some of the groups would fight each other. Parents didn't want their children to join."⁵¹ Similarly, Adriana Li, another member of Gund Kwok, recalls that her uncle was a lion dancer in the 1980s and 1990s and there was always a "very masculine feeling"⁵² about his group and their performances. Cheung says that it was Gund Kwok that really changed the dominant understanding of lion dances in Boston's Chinatown.⁵³

⁴⁸ Slovenz even notes that the Chinese Free Masons Club of New York City maintained a kung fu school to train gang members. See page 75.

⁴⁹ Adam Cheung (lion dance practitioner/ instructor) in discussion with the author, October 15, 2017.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jeanne Chin (Gund Kwok member) in discussion with the author, December 13, 2016.

⁵² Adriana Li (Gund Kwok member) in discussion with the author, October 20, 2016.

⁵³ Adam Cheung in discussion with the author, October 15, 2017.

Cheng Imm Tan established Gund Kwok in 1998 after taking martial arts classes for a few years. After her kung fu teacher stopped teaching, she attempted to locate other classes but felt dissatisfied with their tendency to be male dominated.⁵⁴ Then, one evening while at a Chinatown community event, she saw a performance of the lion dance. “I could see that the dance was martial arts based and used many martial arts stances and I thought to myself, “I can do that, I can do the lion dance.”⁵⁵

Tan grew up in Malaysia. She loved martial arts movies and aspired to be like the women martial artists she saw in them, but her parents had deterred her from training because she was a girl. She recognized the martial arts techniques and stances in the lion dance, and she quickly developed a vision for empowering women through the martial arts training. She asked the former chief of Wah Lum Athletics, Eddie Lau, to teach her lion dance techniques and she traveled to Hong Kong to acquire the equipment—lion heads, cymbals, and drums. She returned to Boston and began gathering about ten of her female Asian friends together in order to begin practicing the dances to perform for the community.⁵⁶

Today, Gund Kwok has national and international recognition as the only current all-women’s lion dance group. It receives hundreds of invitations to perform at cultural events, weddings, birthday parties, and even quinceañeras and b’nai mitzvahs with the goal of building strong communities. Their mission is not to compete with other lion

⁵⁴ “Meet Chang Imm Tan of Gund Kwok Asian Women’s Lion and Dragon Dance Troupe,” July 10, 2017, <http://bostonvoyager.com/interview/meet-gund-kwok-asian-womens-lion-dragon-dance-troupe-chinatown/>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jill SBK Morneau, “Fearless Fighter,” *Audrey: The Asian American Women’s Lifestyle Magazine* (2005), 65.

dance companies but to provide empowerment and support to the Asian community and Asian American women particularly. Gund Kwok requires a ten-week training program to learn the skills of lion dance and demonstrate commitment to the group for all members. The training, which costs \$100, focuses on the company's values and mission, which is to provide women with an opportunity to access power by training their bodies and by supporting each other and fellow women in the community, as well as technique.⁵⁷ Once the training is complete, dancers often decide to join the company. In the beginning, new dancers might continue the training process, rather than immediately being asked to join performances.

0.2 Theorizing the Body and Power

Since notions of empowerment are so prominent in the discourse surrounding lion dancing, it is important to take a closer look at how power has been theorized in relation to bodies. Social constructionists of the twentieth century have forwarded an understanding of the body as a receptor of social forces rather than as a purely biological entity. Michel Foucault's writings have been instrumental to envisioning the body as implicated within mechanisms of power. For Foucault, "bodies are highly malleable phenomena which can be invested with various and changing forms of power."⁵⁸ Foucault's concept of governmentality addresses direct forces of governance (i.e. the nation-state) as well as more tacit forms of power that involve internal and voluntary

⁵⁷ Gund Kwok Asian Women's Lion and Dragon Dance Troupe, "Our Mission," <http://gundkwok.org/our-mission/>.

⁵⁸ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2003), 69.

means of rule that result in the ways we discipline ourselves.⁵⁹ Foucault suggests that governmentality is the “forms of action and relations of power that aim to guide and shape (rather than force, control, or dominate) the actions of others or oneself.”⁶⁰ For Foucault, governance is not necessarily a formal, unidirectional flow of control exerted by the state upon individuals but also manifests, circuitous and complex, within the realm of public and private spheres.

Building on Foucault’s conceptions of power, social theorist Nikolas Rose examines the micro-levels of political control, taking into account these subtler systems of rule. Rose argues that strategies of governance, broadly defined as power exerted over others, come from a “microphysics of power acting at a capillary level within a multitude of practices of control.”⁶¹ Likewise, many of the facets of power that I discuss in this dissertation are not always direct, state-based means of domination, but rather manifestations of power relations that the seeming positivity of multiculturalism, cultural pride, and traditional belief systems often obscures.

Louis Althusser’s theorizing of ideology offers additional insight into how individuals come to adhere to ideological systems that power relations hold in place. He suggests that ideology, as an indirect form of power, funnels through many systems

⁵⁹ Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1999), 4.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17.

(churches, schools, religion, culture).⁶² A repetition of symbols often conceals ideology and creates submission through fear of ridicule and exclusion. Althusser suggests that ideologies are vital to the formation of subjecthood in that ideology “interpellates” individuals as subjects through the existing narratives of ideology that people come to inhabit. One process of this interpellation relies on the ability of individuals to discipline themselves in order to participate voluntarily in the narrative that ideological framework produces.

However insightful, Foucault’s key concepts regarding relations between systems of power and individual bodies have been criticized for overlooking bodily agency.⁶³ As dance scholar Helen Thomas puts it, Foucault’s “analysis of ‘undifferentiated’ individuals as ‘docile bodies’ leaves little room for differences in experience and individuality.”⁶⁴ Pioneering theorist Judith Butler offers a way of envisioning bodies as constituted through performative acts rather than passively subject to power. Focusing her analysis on discursive constructions of gender, she argues that bodies are not biologically fixed as male or female but are rather manufactured from preexisting “linguistic substance”⁶⁵ and held in place through a “sustained set of acts.”⁶⁶ Butler suggests that discourses surrounding gender shape bodies and dictate certain ways of

⁶² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." In *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, edited by Ardhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 86-98.

⁶³ However, Foucault did move away from seeing power as entirely coercive in a 1982 lecture “The Subject and Power.”

⁶⁴ Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 50.

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex,’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x.

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, preface to *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 8.

being male or female. In centering the role of performativity in her understanding of the ways that gender becomes assigned to bodies, she infuses her understanding of the discursive effects of power on bodies with a sense of possibility in undoing these socially defined categories.

While Butler recognizes the subversive potential that envisioning gender as performative implies, she does not pose performance as an act of pure resistance, arguing instead for envisioning the back and forth process of control and agency. She also reminds that this type of performativity is not voluntary, but is better conceived of as a subject that has been interpellated into the system. Yet, unlike Althusser's more passive version of interpellation, Butler describes this subjection as "the paradox of power" as it simultaneously acts upon the body while activating the body. She writes, "although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power."⁶⁷ In other words, agency can occur, but only within the discursive system of power—of regulating norms—that precedes the subject.

On the other hand, Butler suggests performance acts have the potential to critique and possibly subvert social norms. She distinguishes every day performativity from theatrical performance: "In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act," whereas transgressing normative gender performances in real life can have violent repercussions. At the same time, in suggesting that gender is enacted, or performed by

⁶⁷ Butler, "Bodies That Matter," 15.

bodies, rather than simply biologically given, Butler opens the possibilities for greater individual agency by envisioning the body as a process, whereby ideologies inscribe bodies. She suggests that bodies can also actively re-work previous conceptualizations.

For example, she writes,

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.⁶⁸

Dance performances can (but do not always) cast light on the “seemingly seamless identity” of socially fixed norms. As Butler notes, “performance renders laws explicit,”⁶⁹ meaning performance has the capacity to make visible the ways that gender (and also race) have come to be seen through the lens of biological essentialism. I suggest that female performances of the lion dance disturb the fixity of gender normativity in the form, or at least cast light on the arbitrary belief that lion dances are only efficacious rituals if men perform them.

Though the social constructivist approach contributes a much-needed piece of the puzzle in understanding relationships between bodies and society, Dance Studies scholars have continued to explore ways in which the body can gain more agency amid the pressures of social conditioning. In her article “Dancing Bodies,” Susan Foster re-conceptualizes how embodying dance technique (a type of discursive system) provides a means of personal agency, rather than serving as indicator of total power inscription.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 526.

Instead of envisioning the disciplining of bodies through technique in a Foucauldian sense, she looks at how learning dance forms requires a complex interplay between the body, social and historical context, and individual personality. Her article illustrates how different dance techniques create specific dancing bodies—each style of dance seeking a specific “set of metaphors out of which their own perceived and ideal bodies come to be constructed.”⁷⁰ While various techniques train the body in different ways, sculpting and shaping it over time, Foster theorizes the self as a part of the process of inscribing the body with technique, exemplifying ways in which dance is not fleeting but exists clearly within the material body, not passively shaped by learning dance technique but also includes the self to suggest that technique, as a type of discursive construct, inscribes bodies while leaving room for human agency.

Another means of recuperating a sense of agency for Dance Studies scholars has been to focus attention on dancers’ bodily experiences. Interdisciplinary scholar Carrie Noland argues that while movement (she uses the term gestures) are a type of inscription, they also “provide kinesthetic sensations that remain in excess of what the gestures themselves might signify or accomplish within [one’s] culture.”⁷¹ She asks what that excess might actually accomplish in terms of resisting socially proscribed norms to alter the routine and even culture itself. She hypothesizes that “kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body

⁷⁰ Susan Foster, “Dancing Bodies.” In *Meaning in Motion*, edited by Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 253.

⁷¹ Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/ Producing Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be explained.⁷² In addition, “kinesthetic experience—the sensory awareness of one’s own movement—can indeed encourage experiment, modification, and, at times, rejection of the routine.”⁷³ In chapter 2, I explain that while social forces impose constraints, training in lion dance techniques also allow for agency through actively embodying the techniques of the form.

Dance Studies scholar Ann Cooper Albright contributes to this conversation by encouraging scholars to pay attention to “the body’s sensations, kinesthetic impressions, emotional reactions, and physical comportment as well as its historically and culturally inflected signification.”⁷⁴ For Albright, the dancing body encompasses a “double moment of representation in which bodies are both producing and being produced by cultural discourses of gender, race, ability, sexuality, and age.”⁷⁵ Dance, therefore, has the capacity to refashion identities integrated in an analysis of the lived experiences of dancing to recognize how social forces shape dance, while also having the capacity to cultivate individual identities. Similarly, Judith Hamera reflects how dance practices become sites where “participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporeality, and irreducible difference.”⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid., 3.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010), 11.

⁷⁵ Ibid., xxiii.

⁷⁶ Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

Scholars working at the intersections of dance and Asian Studies make clear that Asian American performers experience a messy and contested process. In writing about Asian American performance practices, Yutian Wong grounds conjecture of the potential for dancers to articulate and re-work notions of Asian American identity through the lived reality of a dance company. In her ethnography of the Vietnamese American Club O' Noodles, she asserts that "in order to identify performance as a tactical move, one must avoid draining the body of its agency, otherwise the 'body' becomes a collection of physical markers defined as 'Asian American' rather than a thinking agent in the process of creating history in the moment for the future."⁷⁷ She therefore looks for ways that the company challenges stereotypes while creating new identities for the performance through dance practice.

I also look for ways in which relations of power both enable and constrain bodily subjectivity, analyzing some of the ideological constraints female lion dancers contend with and their resistance to them. It is not my aim to romanticize agency. I also do not want to obscure it. Rather, this dissertation will explore regulatory systems of power and how female lion dancers work to create their own identities in relation to these forces. I will interweave notions of how power implicates bodies while still addressing how those bodies resist through tactical use of techniques and their agency derived from their individual and collective reflexive dancing experiences, their active refashioning of dance to their benefit. Lion dance operates in a multiplicity of frameworks – from

⁷⁷ Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 40.

multiculturalism to nationalism to ritual. I propose that understanding how the all-female lion dance is “empowering” must be thought through in relation to each of these frameworks. In other words, female lion dancers are entering into multiple discourses when they put on the lion costume, and looking at their participation in lion dancing helps offer insight into the ways gender is not a monolithic power system but a multi-faceted one.

0.3 Research Methodologies

In this study, I employ ethnographic, archival, auto-ethnographic, and choreographic research methods to examine female lion dancers in Boston during two distinct periods: the 1930s and present day. To investigate female lion dance practitioners in the 1930s, I analyze primary source material in the form of photos, newspaper articles from the *New York Times* and *Boston Daily Globe*, and archival materials I found at the Chinese Historical Society of New England in Boston. I draw from oral histories of women who lived in Boston during the 1930s as recorded in early editions of the Chinese Historical Society’s bilingual newsletter and in the Chinese-American Women Oral History Project housed in Harvard’s Schlesinger Library. While the interviews within the oral history project have yet to be made public, I was able to secure transcripts from many of the interviews. I was delighted that Marjorie Eng, who was a young lion dancer in the 1930s, participated in one of these interviews. Unfortunately, the participants’ families have requested that some of the other interviews be closed to the public. This category includes Helen Woo, who was also a lion dancer in the 1930s. I was able to

piece together Woo's experiences through an article written about her and the other girls who paraded as lions within a Chinese Historical Society of New England's 2001 newsletter. Other interview transcripts from the Women's Oral History Project helped me to understand Chinese American women's experiences in Boston over the past century. This dissertation is not a thickly described ethnography, but I conducted ethnographic research – conducting interviews, making observations at rehearsals, and attending live performances – with members of Gund Kwok from between August 2016 and September 2017.

The work of feminist ethnographers who advocate for greater awareness of power imbalances in the ethnographic process informed my methodology. Anthropologist Diane Wolf argues that the most central issue of feminist anthropology continues to surround power and unequal hierarchies based on power relations.⁷⁸ She lists three overlapping categories of concern for conducting a relatively egalitarian ethnographic study: (1) power differences stemming from relations between researcher and subject; (2) power imbalances during the research process (i.e. exploitation); and (3) power improperly exerted during the writing process.⁷⁹ In light of this, Wolf advocates for the inclusion of women's voices through methodologies that are “contextual, inclusive, experimental, involved, socially relevant.”⁸⁰

Following Wolf's suggestions, I draw from her call to implement egalitarian research practices. Oral history in the form of interviews and less formal conversations

⁷⁸ Diane L. Wolf, *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

are an important instrument for feminist anthropology. The appeal of oral history lies its ability to “recover [women’s] stories and revise received knowledge about them.”⁸¹ Moreover, this method allows for the subject to articulate the research topics, allowing marginalized groups in particular to claim ownership over their own stories. Oral history provides a way of including women in historical narratives that have typically focused on the accomplishments of men. Yet, there are still disadvantages to collecting women’s oral accounts, in that, as Women’s Studies scholar Joan Sangster writes, “our own culture, class position and political worldview shapes the oral histories we collect, for the interview is a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee.”⁸²

Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran highlights moments of “betrayal” in the ethnographic process where the ethnographer, in a “moment of feminist innocence,” assumes a universal sisterhood of solidarity “in spite of the vicissitudes of difference.”⁸³ In this research, I noticed my own tendency to seek commonalities between myself and my informants based on our shared gender identities. For example, my notes and the taped recordings reveal that at times I interjected a comment about my own experiences of the male gaze as a female performer. While this was an honest attempt to establish a connection with my informants and make them feel comfortable, I believe it was

⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

⁸² Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History." *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1(1994): 5-28, 10.

⁸³ Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 76.

presumptuous of me to suggest I understand their experiences, given the role of race in our divergent experiences.

I struggled to reconcile my own privileges as a white woman predicated on race and racial belonging. This meant using methodologies such as oral histories and interviews to bring forward women lion dancers' experiences (rather than only providing my own observations and bodily experiences), but it also meant respecting the boundaries of insider, group knowledge and not pushing for more information when informants did not wish to share. I will go into my relationship to Gund Kwok in greater detail in chapter 4. The company's restriction of membership to Asian and Asian American women has important functions for the women involved and I was cognizant of my intrusion into the community identity that this delineation has developed. The group allowed me to observe weekly rehearsals on the condition that I ask permission prior to attending every time, and they sometimes refused me. I hope that this minimized my intrusion. Also, because of the clear definitions of group membership based on racial identity, I never asked to dance during a practice, though members invited me to join once and I accepted.

My own experience of studying the lion dance in two settings offered me embodied insight into the physical practice and to re-learn some of the techniques I had learned in college. The first setting was in Taiwan with master teacher Chin-Chang Yeh at Taipei National University of the Arts over the course of two weeks in 2014. My fellow student was a Taiwanese woman, a music student at Taipei University of the Arts learning how to play the drum in lion dances. Yeh told us that the number of women who are learning to perform lion dances in Taiwan is increasing, but that men continue to

dominate. Adam Cheung, a former member of the lion dance group White Crane, also taught me briefly in Boston. Cheung's wife was once member of Gund Kwok but left once her schedule became too busy. The company brings him in to drill lion dance techniques with its dancers at times. Cheung is very passionate about the lion dance and has been practicing it for years. He is also a clear and gifted teacher. I also approached Cheung instead of a member of Gund Kwok because I was cognizant of my demands on members' time. The company receives quite a bit of public interest and is frequently asked to be photographed and interviewed for various newspaper stories and high school research papers. The company's mission to provide an exclusive space for Asian American women to craft their identities through lion dance practice requires the setting of boundaries, which I sought to respect.

The premise that the moving body is a generative site of knowledge production undergirds embodied methodologies I utilize. As Dance Studies scholars have exemplified, by expanding a reading of "texts" to encompass corporeal activity rather than only the written word, we can broaden our understandings of how, as Jane Desmond writes, social and cultural identities are "signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement."⁸⁴ Traditional methodologies alone may be inadequate to explain how dance reflects, resists, amplifies, or animates particular historical contexts. The body-centered framework I adopt looks at how cultural values shape choreographic choices,⁸⁵ how

⁸⁴ Jane Desmond, *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 29.

⁸⁵ For example, in her detailed choreographic analysis of dances in the Philippines Sally Ness observed a baseline movement that proved to be a particular feature within Cebuana folk dances. This one movement

social and historical discourses inscribe bodies, and how dance makes possible opportunities to challenge the status quo. Thus, I look at how and why lion dance choreographies were staged in relation to cultural and historical shifts, but also how the body engaged and continues to engage with gendered and racialized histories in Boston's Chinatown through lion dance practices.

0.4 Chapter Overview

My first chapter traces historical performances of female lion dancing in Boston during the Second Sino-Japanese War. I begin the chapter by asking why evidence of female lion dancing appears in the archives at this historical moment, only to disappear by the 1940s, and not reappear until the inception of Gung Kwok. Chinese American women became important visual representatives in Chinatown because they made public fundraising spectacles for the war more profitable and safe for mainstream consumption. These displays of Chinese cultural nationalism displayed of strength, masculinity, and power while being gender non-normative for women. Lion dancing aligned with a thread of Chinese cultural nationalism, which called for women to enact a sense masculine warriorship. The culture of that time elevated Hua Mulan, a character of legend from the Northern and Southern dynasties period (420-589) who dressed as a man to join the army, as a role model for Chinese American. In analyzing female lion dance during this time, I suggest that Chinese American women were performing in relation to nationalist

connection between all Cebuana folk dances, illuminated the relationship between these dances and Cebu culture to make connections to specific cultural values.

agendas but their participation in public spaces and demonstration of strength and resilience opened up future opportunities for them during World War II and beyond. However, this access to increased gender equality did not permanently change the practice of the lion dance as a gender egalitarian form. Thus, Gund Kwok entered a masculine-dominated sphere at the time of its founding.

Chapter 2 provides an ethnographic account of Gund Kwok to theorize how training the body in a traditionally masculine system of kung fu offers members agency to resist discourses that have framed Asian American female bodies through notions of permeability and fragmentation. I argue that inscribing the body with the lion dance training system activates a corporeal subjectivity that works against gendered and racialized framings of the body. I also discuss how the lion dance costuming provides agency to dancers by restricting audience viewership of their bodies. Since dancers see through the lion's mouth and audiences are usually only able to see the dancers at the end of their performances, they reclaim ownership of how audiences visually consume their bodies.

Chapter 3 maps out the ways that Gund Kwok participates in the Boston Chinatown community through their performances. I examine Gund Kwok performances in three major capacities: as ritual, as feminist performance practice, and as a multicultural endeavor. I explore the multiplicitous ways in which female lion dancing participates in the framework of Boston's Chinatown, simultaneously becoming subject to the pressures of multiculturalism while also engaging directly with gender politics in the community through clear feminist aims and through the support of feminist projects.

At the same time, the women of Gund Kwok demonstrate that women are conducting traditional ritual practices in the same way that male lion dancers do, proving that women are equally able to provide ritual services to the community.

My final chapter considers the role of sisterhood within Gund Kwok. I argue that the oft-spoken desire to join Gund Kwok to acquire a group of sisters also serves a political function in that it disidentifies with the brotherhoods of lion dance groups past while also protecting insider, cultural knowledge. Framing company membership as a unique space for Asian American women only allows the group to define its parameters and resist the assimilative tendencies of other cultural practices. In doing so, the women of Gund Kwok achieve a sense of agency and belonging vital to the mission of the company. Simultaneously, I suggest that notions of *community*, as a group with shared identities and goals, is a fragile construct, and not as cohesive as the term initially implies. Even the sisterhood of Gund Kwok has its fissures.

Chapter 1

Modern Mulans Dressed as Lions: Women's Lion Dance Performances During the Second Sino-Japanese War

In July 1937, Japan launched a full-scale invasion into China, claiming Nanjing, the country's capital, by December. Within months, a group of eight teenage girls in Boston's Chinatown donned lion costumes, practiced wielding swords, learned lion dance techniques from their male friends, and began participating in weekly public parades for an entire year to raise money for their homeland. One of the dancers, Helen Woo, remembers thinking that "if the boys can do it, so can we."⁸⁶ She also recalls that she curtailed her schedule of attending Chinese school six days a week⁸⁷ to train for the dance. In fitted costumes their mothers made, the girls took turns carrying an unwieldy lion head imported from China by an acquaintance's uncle. Winding through crowds of pedestrians, the girls traveled to restaurants and shops, asking for money to send to China. Chinatown spectators would not have found the procession unfamiliar, as it would have resembled the *choy chang*, a parade where the lion travels from storefront to storefront to gather money-filled, red envelopes during Chinese New Year; what would have been unusual, however, is that they were girls and they were raising money for the war effort.

⁸⁶ Carmen Chan and Connie Wong, "Boston's First Lion Dance Troupe Formed over 60 Years Ago," *Chinese Historical Society of New England Newsletter* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2001), 18.

⁸⁷ Chinese school is a place for Chinese Americans to learn about their heritage, including language learning, and cultural activities.

U.S. Chinatowns came alive with fund-raising events and activist campaigns to support China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The Manchurian Incident⁸⁸ in 1931, when the Japanese military blamed an explosion on the tracks of the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian Railroad on Chinese dissidents, had incited Chinese American resistance to Japanese aggression. Japan had invaded Manchuria and set up Manchukuo, a puppet government, six months later. Members of Boston's Chinatown began fundraising at that time and boycotting Japanese goods. The American Bureau for Medical Aid to China, the China Aid Council, the China Emergency Relief Committee, and Chinese Women's League of Greater Boston all raised funds for China's military effort. At stake for the Chinese American community was a sense of shared cultural identity with China and the hope that a stronger China could improve the social status of Chinese Americans living within the United States—a group that had long experienced racism, legal exclusion, and violence.

While Chinese American men and women both contested the Japanese invasion of China, Chinese American female political activism and public visibility notably increased during the 1930s. Chinese American women became more active in community reform initiatives and electoral politics, and took an interest in following the ideologies of Chinese cultural nationalism. For a number of reasons, Chinese American women become the predominant visual representations of the Chinese American resistance.⁸⁹ A *Boston Daily Globe* article reported that the Second Sino-Japanese War “is bringing out

⁸⁸ Also called the Mukden Incident.

⁸⁹ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930-1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 92.

the best in the Chinese women,”⁹⁰ and “Chinese girls of Boston are proving themselves quite as patriotic as their brothers [by]. . . [appearing] in Chinatown streets to sell poppies to raise funds for the Chinese Nationalist Government.”⁹¹ It added, “the girls will be attired in their prettiest Chinese costumes and interested ‘foreigners’ will be welcome in the district—especially if they have open purses with them.”⁹²

One the most popular and effective fundraisers during this period were called “rice bowl parties,” which took place in Boston and nearly every other Chinatown in the United States upon the invasion.⁹³ As Asian American Studies scholars Karen Leong and Judy Wu suggest, “women’s labors and particularly their bodies played a central role in these efforts to elicit sympathy, curiosity, and financial aid from an American audience.”⁹⁴ Leong and Wu argue that Chinese women typically performed two distinct character types within these campaigns—the “mothers of China,” who were suffering under Japanese abuse, and “Oriental” beauty queen.⁹⁵ Hundreds of women framed as “mothers of China” carried large flags through the streets of Chinatown. Bystanders tossed money into the flags. Chinese American actress Anna May Wong was the prototypical “Oriental” beauty queen; young, beautiful Chinese women dressed in Oriental-style clothing, showcased their exotic femininity to draw crowds and money.

⁹⁰ “Chinese Women doing their Best, Says Native Y.W.C.A. Worker,” *Boston Daily Globe*, March 7, 1938.

⁹¹ “Chinese Girls Will Ask War Funds Tomorrow,” *Daily Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), Aug. 21, 1937.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Yung, “Unbound Feet,” 239.

⁹⁴ Karen J. Leong and Judy T. Z. Wu. “Filling the Rice Bowls of China: Staging Humanitarian Relief During the Second Sino-Japanese War.” *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, edited by Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 133.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Women enacted theatrical sketches and staged beauty contests to raise funds. Younger girls sold flowers and other small objects for the cause.⁹⁶

The performance of previously male-only lion dances as well as contemporaneous female dragon dances in New York's Chinatown⁹⁷ seem like outliers when other public events relied on femininity. I suggest, however, that female lion dancing was not an incongruent performance of gender alternative performance, but rather occurred in relation to circulations of Chinese cultural nationalism, which linked gender equality to nationalist goals and glorified women who performed non-traditional gender roles for the benefit of the nation.

Narratives of nationalism fermenting in China by the early twentieth century had begun emboldening women to be “daughters of the rebellion,” and to “sacrifice their flesh and blood at all costs.”⁹⁸ Chinese publications for women at the time often portrayed stories of patriotic heroines to exemplify a refashioned, modern identity for women—free from her former destiny of bound feet and domestic isolation. For instance, the editors of the *Journal of Chinese Women's Society*, based in China, portrayed a multitude of female generals, officials, scholars, and artists, “who either camouflaged themselves as men and possessed men's talent and knowledge, or lived as extraordinary women with political, military, or scholarly accomplishments.”⁹⁹ These written materials highlighted female loyalty to nationalist causes and often revived legends of powerful,

⁹⁶ “Chinese Girls Will Ask War Funds Tomorrow,” *Daily Boston Globe*, Aug. 21, 1937.

⁹⁷ “Girls Take Dragon Around Chinatown” *New York Times*, Feb. 29, 1932.

⁹⁸ Yung, “*Unbound Feet*,” 246.

⁹⁹ C.X. George Wei and Xiaoyuan Liu, *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective: Historical and Recent Cases* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 22.

masculine women to act as models for the construction of a new, modern woman. The folk tale of Hua Mulan (which was “Disneyfied” decades later), portrayed a young woman who disguised herself as a man to fight in war in place of her ailing father was valorized in multiple publications and resuscitated through a popular film produced in China in 1939.

Multiple women’s organizations sprung up across the Chinese diaspora to encourage women to participate in the fight for China.¹⁰⁰ These groups’ goals included gender equality as well as Chinese sovereignty. Female lion dancing was an extension of this call for women to display heroism and strength for their nation. As Dance Studies scholar Rebecca Rossen writes, performing “heritage is not the recovery or continuation of authentic, transhistorical culture and traditions, but rather a strategy for invoking particular symbols and narratives about the past that reflects the needs of the present.”¹⁰¹ In suggesting that lion dances were strategically deployed to fill a need of that sociopolitical moment, I imply that female performances of the traditionally masculine dance served a purpose to nationalist agendas both China and the Chinese diaspora articulated in the years preceding World War II.

Significantly, while the historical and political conditions of this moment opened opportunities for female lion dancers to perform on the streets of Chinatown from 1937 to 1938, female performances of these dances disappear from the archives thereafter. By 1939, China began to regain control of the war and the fighting had reached a stalemate.

¹⁰⁰ Yung, “Unbound Feet,” 229.

¹⁰¹ Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143.

A couple years later, the United States would decide to ally with China against Japan and Germany, muting the need to raise funds for China. Men recaptured dominance of the public performance of lion and dragon dances, according to the political records. A 1941 article from the *Daily Boston Globe*, for example, describes a commemoration of the fourth anniversary of China's war with Japan in which men performed the lion dance.¹⁰² Young men manipulated the head while an older man "tormented the animal with a great globe, representing the earth." The description of the parade suggests a masculine martial feel, as a group of men in the parade "carried the great broad swords with which their ancestors fought."¹⁰³ The only females the article describes were the drumettes in the junior high school band.

In this chapter, I analyze the alternative gender performances from the 1930s. I suggest that female dancers were responding to a thread of Chinese cultural nationalism, which called for women to perform non-traditional gender roles and to subdue their individual needs for the benefit of Chinese national concerns. At the same time, female lion dancing and other male-dominated roles women took on helped pave the way for changes in Chinese American women's positionality in subsequent decades by bringing women increased visibility in public spaces and by exemplifying women's strength and resiliency through lion dance parades. In unearthing Chinese American female lion dance practices from this period, I draw attention to the complex pressures on women's bodies as they negotiated Chinese nationalist discourses in the United States, at times finding

¹⁰² "Chinese July 4th Changed by War," *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1942.

freedom in occupying new spaces (literal and gendered). As this chapter will describe, Chinese American women's active participation in the political development of Boston's Chinatown through live performance practices was part and parcel of their involvement in the lion dance. This research belies accusations of political passivity as female members of the model minority, laying down a history of gender alternative lion dance performances prior to the establishment of Gung Kwok.

Drawing from the insights of many prolific theorists of the diaspora, I envision the Chinese diaspora as fluid, non-monolithic, and imagined. Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic as a space of transnational cultural construction that resists essentialism and the idea of a *double consciousness*¹⁰⁴ provide an important touchstone to the notion of diasporic individuals as they respond to the political environment where they live and a sense of the imagined homeland. Lawrence Ma concisely summarizes how Chinese diasporic individuals respond to this sense of being "in-between" within the Chinese diaspora when he writes that to survive the "uncertainties and/or social alienation, real or perceived, in an adopted homeland" and to more effectively maneuver the "realities associated with being tangled in two or more cultures, countless diasporans have developed highly malleable multiple identities that they use as coping strategies."¹⁰⁵ Thus, while providing a critique of the multiple demands placed on women during this

¹⁰⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.

¹⁰⁵ Laurence J. C. Ma, "Space, Place and Transnationalism in the Chinese Diaspora," in *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*, edited by Laurence J. C. Ma and Carolyn Cartier (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 32.

time, this chapter also understands the strategies they drew from to address these pressures, and the ways that their labor enacted change

This chapter takes its cue from dance historian Linda Tomko's *Fete Accompli: gender, "folk dance," and Progressive-era political ideals in New York City*. In her work, Tomko deftly reveals how girls participating in perk fetes early in the twentieth century aligned with progressive-era politics, which encouraged ideological concerns with health and modernization. These fetes, organized by the Girls' Branch of the Public Schools Athletic League, embodied and promoted ideals such as health and the natural body during a time of historical transition. An unintended consequence of fete dancing was that it brought women to dance in public spaces as well as "mingled and focused contending and changing perceptions about the sorting or taxonomy of activities appropriate to female agency and self-making."¹⁰⁶ Once relegated to the private sphere of domestic life, women began claiming spaces in public.

I add to this history of young female performances in America— an examination of girls roughly the same age, but nearly a decade later— who negotiated a different set of circumstances through their moving bodies. To do so, I first explore why Chinese women in particular were tasked with public performances in Chinatown during the 1930s, becoming the predominant visual representations of Chinese activist and fundraising spectacles. Then, I investigate how lion dances, as clear symbolic representatives of Chinese cultural pride and strength, were tied to notions of Chinese

¹⁰⁶ Linda Tomko, "Fete Accompli: Gender, "Folk Dance," and Progressive-era Political Ideals in New York City." In *Corporealities*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster (London: Routledge, 1996), 158.

nationalism. Next, I theorize how, by performing masculinity, women answered a call to act strong and sacrifice themselves for the nation, and how the tenets of gender progress for Chinese women were embedded within Chinese nationalist discourses that sought to define Chinese modernity. Finally, I examine how these performances brought women into new public spaces, but did not end up blurring gender binaries or traditional gender roles in ways that would subsequently advance the practice of the lion dance as a gender egalitarian form.

1.1 Why Women? Why Lions?

After the Manchurian incident in 1931, Chinese Americans began staging fundraising events in Chinatowns throughout the United States. However, while the parades and other events caught the moderate attention of the American public, white Americans had little incentive to contribute financially to an ethnic group considered alien, peculiar, and even unsanitary.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the Great Depression and a desire to remain uninvolved in international affairs post-World War I contributed to American indifference, rendering their fundraising attempts largely unsuccessful.¹⁰⁸ To change public perceptions of Chinese and to increase revenue to send to China, Chinese community members as well as white businessmen and former missionaries with an involvement in China sought to contract a new image of China. To do this they sought to

¹⁰⁷ Erin Pattison, "Changing Perceptions of China in 1930s America" (Master's thesis, Washington University, 2012), 14.

¹⁰⁸ Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 116.

re-brand Chinatown, which had been seen by the public as bachelor enclaves rife with crime, prostitution, and poverty.

Henry Luce, the founder and chief editor of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* magazines and the son of missionaries, was largely responsible for re-creating U.S. public perception of China in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁹ Luce, having spent much of his childhood in China, believed that China was committed to adopting American values and would modernize along American, democratic, Christian principles.¹¹⁰ Using his vast media influence, he cultivated an image of China that could appeal to middle-class, mainstream Americans.¹¹¹ To do so, Luce and other creators of this new representation of China accessed longstanding Orientalist notions of China as feminine and exotic to frame China as a submissive nation ready to accept American assistance. Leong and Wu argue that Luce and other image “re-makers” quickly discovered that portraying women as victims in need of support, or by framing women as exotic attractions, most reliably secured increased interest in Chinatowns and increased economic resources for the war cause.¹¹² Both white men and women responded to these performances of carefully curated Chineseness. White men could imagine themselves surrounded by Oriental beauties,

¹⁰⁹ T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China 1931-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), xv.

¹¹⁰ Jespersen argues that the belief and hope that China strove to be like America and adhere to American principles was not based in reality, or actual similarity between the two cultures, but rather stemmed from a projection of American desires fueled by various political, economic, and religious interests.

¹¹¹ Leong and Wu, “Filling the Rice Bowls,” 138.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 147.

while white women could admire the attire of Chinese women, which stoked consumptive desire through a desire for exotic, material possessions.¹¹³

While younger Chinese women attracted spectatorship through their performances depicting “authentic” Oriental beauty, the slightly older generation of Chinese American women, the “mothers” who carried flags and wore traditional Chinese costuming, “perfectly embodied a nonthreatening and accessible image of China and the Orient.”¹¹⁴ According to Leong and Wu, the absence of Chinese men in these performances allowed white audiences to see themselves as paternal figures in this exchange, envisioning themselves as “a benevolent surrogate father who could provide economic support and eventually military protection for his female partner.”¹¹⁵ This insight dovetails with how historian Warren I. Cohen categorizes U.S. policy towards China from 1900 to 1950 as the “era of paternalism.”¹¹⁶ Accessing this perception of China raised funds by allowing America to adopt what Film and Media Studies scholar Hye Seung Chung calls “the fatherly self-image of protector for the peace-loving, defenseless Chinese violated by belligerent Japanese imperialists.”¹¹⁷ U.S. newspapers reported widespread rape and torture by the Japanese army, and the marching women evoked these claims.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Hongshan Li and Zhaohui Hong, *Image, Perception, and the Making of U.S.-China Relations* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1998), 14.

¹¹⁷ Hye Seung Chung, “Between Yellowphilia and Yellowphobia: Ethnic Stardom and the (Dis) Orientalized Romantic Couple in Daughter of Shanghai and King of Chinatown.” In *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, edited by Davé, Shilpa, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 158.

Shirley Lim suggests another practical reason wartime public spectacles showcased women: white Americans saw them as less threatening than Chinese men since Americans might mistake marching Chinese men for Japanese enemy soldiers. She writes that “since soldiers are overwhelmingly marked as male, women during wartime functioned as safer representatives of racial minority community loyalty. Given the racial conflation of Asian American with Asian, male Asian American bodies in drum corps uniforms marching down Main Street might raise the specter of a hostile invasion.”¹¹⁸ Though Lim refers to the women’s increasing role as public figureheads during World War II, I extrapolate that large groups of Asian American men marching in the streets prior to 1945 would have s made Americans uncomfortable given existent tensions between Japan and the United States and Japan’s imperialist tendencies of that era.

Leong and Wu suggest additional reasons for Asian men’s absence in public spectacles. Namely, while images of strong, militant Chinese men surfaced in the United States during the 1930s, these visuals did not align with prevailing stereotypes of Asian men as effeminate and passive and therefore were not latched onto as viable marketing strategies.¹¹⁹ Additionally, Leong and Wu argue that before Americans entered WWII, “an overemphasis on the achievements of Chinese soldiers sent a problematic political message to the public, namely that a U.S.-China military alliance was desirable when the American government and people had not yet made such an official commitment.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women’s Public Culture, 1930-1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 92.

¹¹⁹ Leong and Wu, “Filling the Rice Bowls,” 144-145.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

Though male performances of the lion dance continued during the pre-WWII period, the archives suggest they were rare and that they generally accompanied demonstrations in which women dominated. For instance, the *Boston Daily Globe* notes that for the 1937 Chinese New Year celebration at Hon Loy Doo restaurant, “a group of beautiful Chinese dancing girls” would accompany the lion dances, which the article notes were “unusual for Boston.”¹²¹ A different article of the same year also notes that a Chinese New Year benefit staged for Americans, likely as a fundraising benefit, included lion dances performed by two Chinese boys. The accompanying photo (see figure 1) shows five young Chinese American women surrounding a lion head. Even when men performed the dance during this period, women lent their bodies to frame these dances as safe so that they would be an effective means to acquire monetary support.

Given the ancient associations between lion dances and martial arts and secret societies, women were necessary to blunt the threat they might have presented. As lion dance historian William Hu notes, lion dancing in the United States in the early twentieth century was largely associated with male-dominated tongs. This would have been problematic since gang violence within Boston’s Chinatown was seen as rampant and was being heavily reported on during the first few decades of the twentieth century. In fact, most of the newspaper articles from the 1930s that reference Chinatowns at all focus on criminal activities and tongs. A 1933 article, for example, writes that a tong war is feared and “trouble expected” in Boston’s Chinatown between the Hip Sing and On

¹²¹ I take the author’s use of “unusual” to mean that the sight of Chinese dancing girls in public had been rare up until that point. “Chinese Observing New Year Festival,” *Daily Boston Globe*, Feb 11, 1937, 11.

Leong tongs amid reports of murders and gun violence.¹²² Certainly, the militant and masculine performances of lion dances, which had long been tied to the Chinese underworld, would have been better performed by women to avoid public misunderstandings.

Of course, Chinese Americans could have not performed lion dances at all. But lions were a potent symbol of Chinese national strength and lion dance costuming visually compelling. Even today's Chinese nationalists frequently depict China as a lion, ready to act against foreign imperialism.¹²³ Lion dances signify Chinese traditional culture, which would draw the curiosity of white Americans. Lion dances also invoked a specifically Chinese model of nativism for Chinese Americans in the audience and among the participants who would read a subtextual message of fostering strength against foreign aggression. Lion dances were among the four traditional dances Mao included in the nationalist parades following the communist takeover of China. As historian Chang-tai Hung describes, the new leader carefully selected a few native art forms that were "visual signs with popular resonance."¹²⁴

As World War II approached, lion dances would also have demonstrated something significant to an American public that Chinese Americans were ready to fight alongside the United States. They specifically addressed the prevalent stereotype that

¹²² "Links Murder Here to Tongs' Warfare," *Daily Boston Globe*, Jul 30, 1933, B8.

¹²³ Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 45.

¹²⁴ Chang-tai Hung, "Mao's Parades: State Spectacles in China in the 1950s." *The China Quarterly* 190, (2007): 411-431, 412.

Chinese were passive and docile. An article from the *New York Times* in 1936 describing a Chinese student demonstration of support for China against Japanese invasion reveals the reporter's deep-seated notion about Chinese American passivity:

Adults drift over to watch and listen, standing with an air of indifference, even of boredom, as if unconcerned by the antics before them. But for all their detachment they, too, become stirred, for this is the only expression the solidarity of the race can find.¹²⁵

While articles reflected the belief held by white Americans that Chinese Americans could not be “stirred” into action, other reports suggest that “China’s inchoate hoards [were] beginning to stir, to act, to live—not as a docile mass but as individuals.”¹²⁶ As scholar Erin Pattison argues, perceptions regarding Chinese passivity were beginning to budge ever so slightly in the 1930s.¹²⁷ Pattison makes clear that while many newspaper articles continued to reinforce problematic images of the Chinese, describing “alien or threatening aspects of Chinese society,”¹²⁸ many reflected the notion that Chinese and Chinese Americans were becoming “something better.”¹²⁹ Lion dances would have assisted this changing narrative suggesting Chinese Americans were willing to march and display aggressive, military strength in parading with lions and dragons. In essence, lion dances were important symbols to showcase Chinese activism and power,

¹²⁵ Nathaniel Peffer, “The Chinese Student Sounds a Tocsin: When His Country Is Menaced He Rallies the People While the Arms Lolls in Barracks.” *New York Times*, Jan 19, 1936.

¹²⁶ James W. Bennett, “The Five-Thousand-Year Plan in China,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1931, SM6. Quoted in Erin Pattison, “Changing Perceptions of China in 1930s America,” (master’s thesis Washington University, 2012), 32.

¹²⁷ Pattison, “Changing Perceptions of China in 1930s America.”

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

strength, and resilience. Female bodies rendered them safer and more palatable to white mainstream audiences.

1.2 Chinese Cultural Nationalism and Warrior Women

When writers for the newsletter of the Chinese Historical Society of New England asked female lion dancer Helen Woo if her family objected to her joining the traditional male lion dance practice, a generally “un-lady like” activity, she said “no.” While her father was rather strict about gender roles—believing that “bicycle riding was improper for girls, often reminding her that a good girl ‘should cross her legs at the ankle, never at the knees; should not giggle or laugh out loud; and must always be polite,’”—he nonetheless encouraged her to practice lion dances.¹³⁰ He understood that it was for a patriotic cause and that other girls were participating.¹³¹ Performing in fundraising events during the Japanese invasion, he believed, was an act of patriotism valid enough to override any displeasure at his daughter’s performance of the dances. Woo’s experience illuminates female lion dances performing for the good of China animated discourses of gender, modernism, and nationalism.

Shifts in China during the early Republican period (1911-1949) affected women’s relationships to cultural nationalism in the U.S. Chinese diaspora. Chinese citizens were calling for an end to the dynastic system and the development of modern nation that could protect itself against foreign invasion. Gender became an important site in the

¹³⁰ Chan and Wong, “Boston’s First Lion Dance Troupe Formed over 60 Years Ago,” 18.

¹³¹ Ibid.

construction of this emerging national identity. Commentators and politicians began shaping a sense of Chinese modernity through the imagining of the “modern woman.”¹³² One of the major focuses of cultivating a new national identity centered on the emancipation of women from feudal gender hierarchies, which included the practice of footbinding, which revolutionists saw as a backward practice. Efforts had already begun to define modern womanhood since the 1898 Reform Movement, when nationalists sought to emulate the West as a means of modernizing and saw raising the status of women as a part of the effort to strengthen and defend China against further foreign encroachment. Later, after the 1911 collapse of China’s last dynasty, the Qing, women’s liberation was used as “a powerful symbol of the eradication of the last vestiges of imperial Chinese society.”¹³³ Yet as historian Tamara Hamlsh notes, “new constraints framed in the rhetoric of gender equality” replaced “many of the ‘feudal’ constraints on women.”¹³⁴ In place of so-called gender liberation, women became tasked with conflicting agendas—to be both preservers of traditional Chinese culture, while also modernizing along new principles of femininity.

According to historian Weikun Cheng, new discourses positioned women as the symbolic bearers of the nation, tasked with performing “traditional virtues and feminine roles,” to enact the “authentic cultural legacy which could define the boundary of Chinese

¹³² Weikun Cheng, "Creating a New Nation, Creating New Women: Women's Journalism and the Building of Nationalist Womanhood during the 1911 Revolution." In *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective: Historical and Recent Cases*, edited by CX George Wei and Xiaoyuan Liu (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

¹³³ Tamara Hamlsh, "Calligraphy, Gender and Chinese Nationalism." In *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, edited by Tamar Mayer (New York: Routledge, 2000): 211-236, 215.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

civilization and resist Western materialism.”¹³⁵ Women were expected to act as receptacles of cultural authenticity while producing and raising Chinese citizens to repopulate nation depleted by war. They were also encouraged to leave behind domestic confinement typified by foot binding, to demonstrate increased physical strength and mental fortitude as a way of moving forward.

Modernity for women was constructed through notions of female strength and national loyalty. Tamara Hamlish argues that thinkers and writers considered modern women who took on non-traditional gender roles to be “honorary men.”¹³⁶ Films, books, and magazines produced in mainland China during the 1930s indicate that this blend of patriotic and “feminist” discourses translated to ideologies surrounding the body.¹³⁷ Modern women developed strong bodies that could resist foreign invasion. Scholar Yunxiang Gao suggests that the Manchurian incident and the subsequent national crisis (*guonan*) touched off a situation in which “Chinese nationalists, attempting to reinforce the strength of their threatened nation, encouraged women to become physically strong.”¹³⁸ The Nationalist government (KMT) in China began to impose compulsory participation for women in *tiyu* (physical education, physical culture) as a civic obligation.¹³⁹ *Tiyu*, according to Gao, was a means to cultivate a physical aesthetic of *jianmei* (robust beauty), which promoted sturdy, more masculine bodies, healthy curves,

¹³⁵ Cheng, "Creating a New Nation," 16.

¹³⁶ Hamlish, "Calligraphy, Gender and Chinese Nationalism," 214.

¹³⁷ Yunxiang Gao, "Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on Jianmei (Robust Beauty) During China's 'National Crisis' in the 1930s," *Gender & History* 18, issue 6 (2006): 546-573.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 546.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

and strong legs. Popular magazines such as *Linglong* “repeatedly called on women to make sacrifices for the nation, educate themselves in politics and develop courage, power and bodies as tough as men’s.”¹⁴⁰

The tradition of the “warrior woman” was revived and circulated around China and the Chinese diaspora to enlist women in the national cause. These legendary women possessed physical prowess and martial skills. They fought in battle and often dressed as men.¹⁴¹ Revitalized interest in the usefulness of women during wartime portrayed stories of patriotic heroines to model a revised modern identity for women. For example, the editors of the *Journal of Chinese Women’s Society*, based in China, depicted a history of a “large number of women generals, officials, scholars, poets, or artists, who either camouflaged themselves as men and possessed men’s talent and knowledge, or lived as extraordinary women with political, military, or scholarly accomplishments.”¹⁴² They described stories of a village girl in Guangdong who died while “resisting a local powerful gang with her extraordinary martial arts and tactics was adored as a modern female knight errant whose heroic character could be the model for all patriotic women.”¹⁴³ Female novelists took interest in female knights and warriors called *nuxia*.

The figure of Hua Mulan re-surfaced, invoking themes of filial piety, sacrifice, and gender role transgression. As legend tells it, the young Hua Mulan from the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589) wore a men’s military uniform to take the place of her

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 550.

¹⁴¹ Susan Brownell, “Challenged America: China and America – Women and Sport, Past, Present and Future,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22, no. 6 (2006): 1186.

¹⁴² Weikun Cheng, “Creating a New Nation, Creating New Women,” 22.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 23.

ailing father for twelve years of service in Khan's army. Famous for her skills with a sword and her martial arts techniques, Hua Mulan has long appeared within the Chinese cultural imaginary as a means of exploring relationships between individuals and familial and state authorities. Women paid tribute to the legendary, cross-dressing female warrior in their efforts to raise funds for an independent China.¹⁴⁴

In 1939, Chinese film director and screenwriter Bu Wancang produced a hugely popular film titled *Mulan congjun* (Mulan joins the army). It depicts Mulan's heroism in hazardous battle scenes and risky military operations. As Chinese historian Louise Edwards argues, viewers recognized that women risked their sexual virtue as well as their lives, and the film foregrounds Mulan's moral integrity for this reason.¹⁴⁵ In this context, audiences would not have viewed Mulan's cross-dressing as an alternative gender performance. Rather, it served to "amplify the magnitude of her devotion" as the violation of gender norms placed her in "extreme physical and moral danger."¹⁴⁶ Likewise, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Christina Lee suggest that "versions of [Mulan's] story consistently depict her prime motivation for joining the military as emerging from her desire to defend her country, her father and her family line—not from an enthusiasm to forge new social roles for women."¹⁴⁷ They write "warrior women are

¹⁴⁴ Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 229.

¹⁴⁵ Louise Edwards, "Transformations of The Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of The State," *Nan Nü* 12, issue 2 (2010): 175-214, 180.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁴⁷ Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Christina Lee, "Mulan Illustration? Ambiguous Women in Contemporary Chinese Cinema." In *Images of the 'Modern Woman' in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings*, edited by Shoma Munshi (United Kingdom: Routledge Curzon, 2001).

submerged in romantic or filial return or their bodies are sublimated to national ends at the expense of the personal.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, female sacrifice, not a desire to transgress gender norms, lay at the heart of women’s performances of masculinity, demonstrated through putting oneself at risk to uphold national aims.

The visual representation of the new woman of modern China as a heroic tomboy took hold. Chinese women envisioned and promoted this “modern woman” in relation to national discourses. Judy Yung reflects that “unlike in the West, in China the argument for improving women’s lot was always put in terms of how it would benefit the race and nation, rather than how it would benefit women as individuals.”¹⁴⁹ In essence, this line of thinking aligned with traditional Chinese thought that the collective good was more important than individual needs and, therefore, “was more effective than Western feminist ideology in gaining wide support for women’s emancipation.”¹⁵⁰ Women not only received the message to put nationalist concerns before feminist ones but believed that in loyally demonstrating nationalism, they could gain access to equal rights.¹⁵¹

Chinese newspapers in the United States drew from these themes of feminism and nationalism to integrate women into the sphere of Chinese nationalist sentiment. Yung writes, “[t]he Chinese press in the United States played heavily on the themes of nationalism and feminism in an attempt to link Chinese American women to the fate of their sisters in China and to arouse them to action.”¹⁵² “By contributing to our country

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴⁹ Yung, “Unbound Feet,” 54.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 230.

¹⁵² Ibid., 229.

and humanity,” the *Chinese Times* newspaper intoned in promoting women’s role in supporting the Chinese diaspora’s support of the war effort, “women can thus prove they are as valuable as men.”¹⁵³ The New England Chinese Women’s Association organized fund-raising activities to raise funds to send home to China. As Yung points out, female members of patriotic clubs based in Chinatowns in the early 1930s used examples of heroic women in Chinese history to mobilize other women to join the cause of raising money to send to China. The Chinese YWCA became an important site for cultivating a mix of both nationalist and feminist sentiment. Calls in the U.S.-Chinese press for women to, as Yung writes, “shoulder the same responsibilities as men,” frequently evoked Mulan.¹⁵⁴ She cites the case of Jane Kwong Lee, a member of the YWCA who used newspaper reports of heroic Chinese women as the basis for plays revolving around them.¹⁵⁵ One such play was called “Awake the Heroic Lion” (*Huan Xing Xionsi*). While it drew from the masculine lion imagery, it also portrayed the predicament “of refugees and the dangerous work of female commandos at the war front.”¹⁵⁶

The *Boston Daily Globe* reported on Rose Lok’s joining of the Chinese Patriotic Flying Corps by foregrounding the women who expressed their support, although she was the only woman to do so:

Miss Rose Lok, dressed in her aviation costume, gave a stirring address on the need of airplanes in China with Chinese pilots.... At the conclusion of the exercises, street bands formed with drums, bugles and Chinese bells and cymbals. A great weird figure of a dragon danced in front of 10 little girls carrying a flag, into which contributions were thrown. From the gaily decorated windows of the

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 237.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

homes, bamboo rods were suspended with tiny colored envelopes containing offerings, tied to the end. The girls untied the gifts.¹⁵⁷

Yung notes that San Francisco's Chinatown held large public receptions for female heroes who broke traditional gender roles, including the war hero Yang Huimei and aviator Lee Ya Ching.¹⁵⁸ The *Boston Daily Globe* ran an article titled, "Women Fighting in Chinese Front Lines" describing women who were fighting the Japanese in China. It featured a large picture of two women holding guns, prepared to shoot the enemy. The caption stated, "these Chinese 'Women of Valor,' not more than 18 years old, but well-trained soldiers, fight in the front lines alongside Chiang Kai-shek's own men."¹⁵⁹

Shouldering lion heads instead of guns, Chinese American women who performed lion dances in Boston articulated their membership in a group of Chinese women transgressing gender roles. One former lion dance group member named Marjorie Eng who participated in Boston's Oral History project explained the transgression of gender roles thus: "we were raising funds so we had to do something. You know, to go parading on the street. (laughs)."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ "Chinese Aviation Corps Conducts Celebration: Dance of Dragon Marks Parade in Chinatown Streets as Planes Circle Overhead," *Daily Boston Globe*, June 13, 1932.

¹⁵⁸ Yung, "Unbound Feet," 245.

¹⁵⁹ "Women Fighting in Chinese Front Lines," *Daily Boston Globe*, Sept. 29, 1937.

¹⁶⁰ Chan and Wong, "Boston's First Lion Dance Troupe Formed over 60 Years Ago," 18.



Figure 1: Girls take the lion around Chinatown in 1937¹⁶¹

Eng's response suggests that performing the lion dance was more an act of civic obligation than an activity taken on because of personal interest. In fact, she and many others only performed in 1937, then abandoned the practice. Three lion dancers the Oral History Project identified only as Mina, Midge and Helen, reflected in a joint interview in 2001 that their community received their performances of the lion dance well even though they were not technically proficient in its performance. Because it was done for a good cause, people perceived it in a positive light. Of course, lion dancing in public doubtless elicited passion and joy from some Chinese American women. Yet the fact that they did not seek proficiency in the form suggests many did not have such passion. They subsumed their personal goals and voices under the rhetoric of national loyalty, making their bodies tools of Chinese cultural nationalism.

¹⁶¹ To and the Chinese Historical Society of New England, "Chinese in Boston," 84.

In Figure 2, the girl within the head lifts it into the air. The shaggy mouth of the lion reveals her tired expression. Lion heads are typically made from paper mache and bamboo, and they weigh a good deal.¹⁶² Yet she holds the lion head high above her head. As Priya Srinivasan reminds, dance is not simply an art form relegated to the aesthetic realm but is a form of labor that offers not only economic but also cultural capital.¹⁶³ Here, the dancers exert themselves for national causes and for community-based solidarity. Looking at the image incites a somatic response in my own body, the remembrance of the physical exertion needed to hold the weight of the lion head above. My arms would shake from the exertion and sweat would accumulate at the base of my spine. Though these traces of the bodily labor of the dancers only exist in these photographs, the kinesthetic response lives on, viscerally, in my recognition of the experience of the dancer.

While the girls labor in the photo to perform Chinese cultural nationalism, they simultaneously stretch the limits of the spatial areas Chinese American women previously occupied. In doing so, they maneuver the confines of the space but also the contours and complexities of the demands of Chinese cultural nationalism. Unlike the generation of women before them, these dancers challenge the limits of the domestic sphere to a greater degree and take ownership of the city. Men who once claimed these spaces stand in the background.

¹⁶² Lion heads typically weighed between 30 to 50 pounds depending on the style and amount of decorations. It is hard to say how much this particular head weighed but it would have required a significant amount of physical effort to hold it overhead for long periods of time.

¹⁶³ Srinivasan, "Sweating Saris," 9.



Figure 2: Girls Carry the Lion Through Chinatown¹⁶⁴

In Figure 3, the girl holding the lion head is invisible. The way it bends forward suggests it is heavy for her. The Chinese costuming of the girls behind her contrasts with the western attire of the men and children in the background. The dancers perform traditional Chinese culture through their costuming and usage of the traditional lion mask. In his exploration of Chinese performance and fashion, Sean Metzger asks how Chineseness has taken shape as spectacle for U.S.-based audiences.¹⁶⁵ Performances of Chineseness such as these, he argues, have shaped American audiences' perception of Chinese people. Other women in the parade would likely have worn the qipao. As Metzger suggests, it acted as an "embodiment of cosmopolitan modernity."¹⁶⁶ Tight

¹⁶⁴ To and the Chinese Historical Society of New England, "Chinese in Boston," 85.

¹⁶⁵ Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 17.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

fitting, restrictive, it would have contrasted with the silk pant outfit of the lion dances that allowed bodily mobility. At the same time both signified both Chinese tradition and Chinese female modernity, if in a different mode.

Though it appears that one of the girls might have a slight smile as she gazes outward toward the spectators, another who looks at the camera seems sad. Perhaps she did not enjoy parading in a lion dance procession. Her bleak facial expression suggests a resistance to the demand to perform publicly, to demonstrate warriorship. The variety of facial expressions interrupts notions of an imagined shared community identity and shared cultural identity through a display of nationalism while revealing the faulty seams in their construction. Clearly living in the same city and demonstrating for the same national project does not translate into a shared identity.¹⁶⁷ As SanSan Kwan explains in her analysis of Chinese cultural spaces, terms such as community or identity or nationalism, or even space and place do not describe primordial entities but are rather discursive constructs that must be continually reiterated to sustain meaning.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, those spaces do not reflect static meanings but are continually reshaped by those within them.

Conflating women’s bodies with national projects is in fact an act of violence. It diminishes the body from an individual entity to one constructed for and used for the nation. As Mariam Beevi (Lam) writes in reference to Vietnamese women, using the figure of a woman in nationalist agendas and using female bodies to stand in for national

¹⁶⁷ SanSan Kwan, *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

values “inflicts epistemic violence,” on women’s bodies by “subvert[ing] their own potential agency in both nation-states.”¹⁶⁹ The seemingly mild recruitment of women to perform Chinese and U.S. national endeavors nonetheless encompasses the formula for the violence that conflating women with the nation and reveals the enormous pressures of the nation that their bodies are no longer their own but rather become tools of the Chinese nation. As the photographs above suggest, performing lion dances many not have given all of the female participants pleasure. Tasking women with the survival of a nation can exhaust them. Not only does it gloss over individuality but it neglects women’s voices, feelings, and personal experiences. It coopts women for larger aims.

In the demonstration of traditional culture and the modern woman, Tamara Hamlsh writes with respect to women’s roles in Chinese nationalist projects of the 1930s, “women become emblems – called upon to act as ‘guardians of national culture, indigenous religion and family tradition – in other words to be both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional.’”¹⁷⁰ Women’s lives become linked to the successes and failures of the national project. The responsibility of re-producing the nation, through the preservation of culture and the reproduction of national citizens through motherhood, relies on women and their bodies. Women’s bodies become particularly surveilled, subject to control, and restricted through notions of purity and modesty. They are policed to preserve the sanctity of culture and the continuance of an unpolluted race. As the guardians of traditional values, women are often tasked with the maintenance of the inner domestic

¹⁶⁹ Mariam Beevi (Lam), “The Passing of Literary Traditions: The Figure of the Woman from Vietnamese Nationalism to Vietnamese Transnationalism,” *Amerasia Journal* 23, no. 2 (1997): 27-53, 29.

¹⁷⁰ Hamlsh, “Calligraphy, Gender and Chinese Nationalism,” 213.

sphere and to support men's endeavors in the outside, rapidly modernizing world.¹⁷¹

Though the lion heads were eventually returned, and the swords put back where they belonged, the bodies of female dancers continued to remember the new spaces they occupied, and the techniques of female warriors. While female lion dancers performed female warriorship for their benefit of nationalism, getting beyond the China doll or mother figure required them to symbolically lift the nation even as they literally lifted the lion head through symbolic cultural labor. Nonetheless, the practice of female lion dancing rehearsed new encounters for Chinese American bodies and built strong frameworks for the years to come.

1.3 New Spaces for Chinese American Women

While I am critical of the ways in which nationalistic agendas coopted women's bodies, I also see female lion dancing as a part of women's campaigns in gender non-traditional social and political causes, as giving Chinese American women visibility in public spaces and the chance to demonstrate loyalty, strength, and endurance. In symbolic terms, they highlighted their potential to carry the burden of war. Yung rightly locates "unprecedented opportunities to improve their socioeconomic status, broaden their public role, and fall in step with their men and fellow Americans during a time of national crisis" in Chinese American women's experiences of the years during the Second Sino-Japanese War.¹⁷² They gained a chance to voice opinions, to develop

¹⁷¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁷² Yung, "Unbound Feet," 223.

political agency among women's organizations, and to articulate notions of Chinese American womanhood on their own terms. Through this time period, Chinese American women became relevant and crucial participants who shaped the sociopolitical future of Boston's Chinatown and, as a consequence, the greater community.

Once the United States officially decided to go to war with Japan in 1941, prejudice against Chinese Americans by contrast to Japanese Americans alleviated. Though wartime expanded workforce opportunities for all American women, Chinese American women had already begun demonstrating their capabilities as active citizens in the 1930s. While women did not gain equal entry into mainstream culture, there were important gains to recognize. As K. Scott Wong notes, in responding to the call to enter the public sphere through the workforce and war effort, women helped "shape a positive public image of Asian Americans,"¹⁷³ which set an important precedent for increased entry into the public domain and in future political developments for women. Though Chinese American women's tasks in the war effort were often limited to more feminine jobs such as fundraising and engaging in Red-Cross work under male dominated organizations, these organization drew women further into the public sphere. As Yung writes, through this wartime work they could "develop leadership skills, learn to work cooperatively, and gain confidence and respect as active participants in a political movement."¹⁷⁴ She credits Chinese American women's involvement in the war effort

¹⁷³ K. Scott Wong, "From Pariah to Paragon: Shifting Images of Chinese Americans During World War II." In *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, edited by Sucheng Chan and Madeline Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2008), 58.

¹⁷⁴ Yung, "Unbound Feet," 230.

with bringing them “closer to the promise of women’s emancipation in the overall process of social change.”¹⁷⁵ As ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu writes in her exploration of the labor involvement of Asian American people from a gendered perspective, the opening of U.S. employment markets during WWII “helped many Asian men and women to break down race-based and gender-based occupational barriers and to launch new careers outside their ethnic communities not only during but after the war.”¹⁷⁶

Racism remained, of course. As Espiritu writes, the labor market “continued to... den[y Asian Americans] access to high-paying craft, manufacturing, and construction jobs. Another recurrent problem was discrimination in earnings.”¹⁷⁷ Chinese employees who worked alongside white people were routinely passed up for promotions while their white colleagues advanced.¹⁷⁸

However, former lion dancer Marjorie “Midge” Eng took full advantage of the opportunities World War II afforded her. She graduated from high school and went to work for the coast guard during the war. Later, she became a social activist and was involved in many community organizations. She helped develop the Chinese American Civic Association (CACA, now called the Asian American Civic Association) in 1967. The AACA, still active today, provides critical economic and social resources to Boston’s immigrant community. She also helped found a health group, an elderly center, and an English language school for Chinese immigrants. In an interview, she said, “We started

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 60.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

teaching English, and from then on, we said maybe we could do better than that, so we set up another group. Each group made a study to find out what they could do to help the [Boston Chinatown] community.”¹⁷⁹

The activism of women of Eng’s generation paved the way for the next generation of Chinese American women to find success in the workplace and take leadership roles in their communities. This included Eng’s much younger partner in starting CACA, Caroline Chang. Born in 1943, Chang also broke barriers in the workplace as a junior scientist for Avco Corporation.¹⁸⁰ She was the first Chinese American person to work for the Boston company and likely the first woman. In an interview, she had this to say about being the only Chinese American female at the company:

So, it was a little bit interesting, especially dealing with people who pretty much had not had much contact with Asians, and with women, in professional jobs. So, sometimes I was mistaken for a secretary. And one vivid memory is the day that I went through the cafeteria line with a colleague, and the cafeteria worker, in chatting with my colleague, asked why I was allowed to work in that company, which was a defense research company, because I looked so foreign. My colleague said, “what do you mean? She’s just as American as you and I.” So that was sort of an interesting memory [chuckles] that I had. But I think I was very lucky. I had a very progressive supervisor who made the decision to hire me, and I’m sure had to advocate for me to be hired with his higher-ups. And I don’t think he ever regretted it, because I think I did my job professionally, and did it well.¹⁸¹

Chang left Avco to become an activist and later went to law school. She became a founding board member and president of the Asian Community Development

¹⁷⁹ Marjorie Eng, interview by Nancy Eng, Chinese Historical Society of New England, Nov. 17, 2010, 8.

¹⁸⁰ Caroline Chang, interview by Ai-Li Chin, Chinese Historical Society of New England, April 7, 1994, 29.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Corporation and served as the manager of Chinatown's Little City Hall for the Mayor's Office of Public Service in the 1970s.

The year Chang was born, women like Eng were part of the reason that the United States revoked the legal exclusion of people born in China. Even as other Asians remained ineligible for naturalization, changing perceptions of Chinese women and citizenship, and the enthusiastic displays of cultural citizenship through patriotism, combined with global political developments, led to the 1943 passage of the Magnuson Act.¹⁸² Before Congress, President Roosevelt described the proposed legislation as “important in the cause of winning [World War II] and establishing a secure peace. China is our ally. For many long years, she stood alone in the fight against [Japanese] aggression. Today we fight at her side. . . . By the repeal of the Chinese exclusion laws, we can correct a historic mistake and silence the distorted Japanese propaganda [that portrayed the United States as racist].”¹⁸³

Having furthered the cause of Chinese American incorporation into U.S. life, Chinese American women ceased to perform female lion dances in public, according to archival material. Scholar Shirley Lim describes a period of “superfemininity” that began affecting American women. U.S.-Chinese relations deteriorated in 1949 with the ascendance of Mao Zedong, and the needs of Chinese American women changed.

As Lim writes, in the United States the Cold War “realigned gendered nationalisms into the Soviet asexual worker drone versus the hyperfeminine consumer

¹⁸² Lim, “A Feeling of Belonging,” 94.

¹⁸³ Yung, “Unbound Feet,” 251.

American mother or sex kitten.”¹⁸⁴ Amid a sociopolitical environment shaped by ideologies of Cold War containment, suburban life, and traditional gender roles, Lim asserts that Asian American beauty pageants became popular performances of the Asian diaspora because Asian American women felt the need to perform superfemininity to prove their loyalty to American culture, especially important when seen in relation to China’s fall to communism. For women to transgress gender roles by performing lion dances might have suggested an affinity for communism. As Lim states, “through beauty and culture, Asian Americans demonstrated their fitness for belonging to the American nation-state.”¹⁸⁵

Though gender roles shifted significantly in the years following the Second Sino-Japanese War, the experiences of the first recorded female lion dancers in Boston offers a glimpse into this transitional historical moment and the fluctuating contours of gender expectations in Boston’s Chinatown during the twentieth century. Women performed within the scope of culturally defined expressions of patriotism, while simultaneously offering new possibilities for women in the decades to come.

¹⁸⁴ Lim, “A Feeling of Belonging,” 124.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 133

Chapter 2

Nimble Fingers, Strong Fists: Women Embody Warrior Essence in Lion Dance

I am on the hundredth sit-up when I hear the leader of Gund Kwok, Cheng Imm Tan, call out that we are more than halfway through the 180 we will do today. Each of nine dancers will count out twenty and my turn has not yet come. When it does, I can barely get the words out. My stomach starts to burn as it contracts; a warming sensation rises to an uncomfortable smolder. My only consolation is that the end is near—or so it appears. The last woman counts us down, her voice raspy from exertion. When she hits twenty, I collapse on the floor in fatigue, rejoicing that it is over, anticipating that we will now begin to stretch as we would in other sorts of dance practices. Yet, only seconds later, I hear Tan call out: “Okay everyone, into plank position for abdominal holds.” I look around in covert disbelief—hoping to catch someone’s eyes in a spirit of incredulous comradery—but no one notices. The other dancers are not shocked. They are certainly tired but they are more accustomed to this rigor than I am. I take the plank position and my arms shake rather embarrassingly. Sweat gathers on my forehead. A sense of regret for accepting the offer to “warm up” with the company begins to take form. We had already run laps around the space interspersed with circuits of squats, crunches, pushups, and leg-lifts. This feels more like basic training in the military.

We pull ourselves up to standing to move into kung fu stances to strengthen the leg muscles. “Let’s get into *Ma Bu*, Horse Stance,” Tan directs as we shift our feet into a

wide, standing position and sink down to about ninety degrees, toes slightly turned out. We stay in Horse Stance for what my legs sense to be an extravagantly long period of time. I notice that every cell in my body wants to move up and out of this position. Squatting, legs apart, with my tailbone directed to the floor and pelvis angled in, I feel indelicate and, honestly, a bit too masculine for my own preference (a feeling of which I instantly feel ashamed). As my legs tremble, Tan provides some direction: “straight back, like you’re sitting in an imaginary chair.” I think about William Hu’s *Chinese Lion Dance Explained* when he writes about the practice of various stationary stances: “The tedious, strenuous and monotonous training in the stationary stances, besides building strength, is designed to afford the shih-fu [teacher] the opportunity to observe and evaluate the student’s attitude of patience, determination, strength and stamina.”¹⁸⁶ Tan looks around to make sure we are still in our lowered positions and I try to drop a little bit further down while repeating to myself: “determination, strength, stamina, determination, strength, stamina,” on and on until we are finally able to exit the stance.

Undoubtedly, the intensive physical training that Gund Kwok dancers receive is a pathway to generate female empowerment. Many of the dancers who participated that day have been acquiring physical power for years, and they do not feel the shock that I do. In interviews about the practice they used the word *empowerment* very frequently. Yet this is a broad term, and their access of it through a performance tied to martial masculinity requires a substantial amount of unraveling to understand. What is it about

¹⁸⁶ Hu, “Chinese Lion Dance Explained, 187.

embodying this “lion-esque” martial essence that makes it such a source of power for women? What significance does inscribing one’s body through lion dance training provide Asian American women within the context of gendered and racialized histories within the United States? How do lion dances, in particular, contribute to a personal understanding of one’s bodily self beyond martial arts practices?

Research on women who practice stereotypically masculine forms such as martial arts and taiko drumming suggests that embodying masculinity provides women with agency by encouraging them to take up space and the opportunity to move in large gestures that fall outside the scope of socially defined feminine bodily comportment. For Asian American women, an added dimension is that these forms call on them to be loud, strong, and physically bold as a counterpoint to characterizations of Asian female submissiveness.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, the act of gaining physical strength provides power through the sheer capacity to defend oneself against outside aggression. Beyond these aspects, ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong argues that an appealing facet of practicing masculine forms for Asian American women lies “in its redefinition of the Asian American woman’s body and its dialogic relationship to ‘women’s work’—i.e. the nimble fingers behind the clothing and computer industries.”¹⁸⁸ Wong describes this shift in bodily subjectivity as coming from the

contained movement of women’s fingers vs. the woman’s body filling space with large gestures; the closed doors of the sweatshop vs. the stage; women taking orders vs. the women stepping forward, in “leisure”, into furious movement.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Deborah Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 216.

¹⁸⁸ Deborah Wong, “Taiko and the Asian/American Body: Drums, ‘Rising Sun,’ and the Question of Gender.” *The World of Music* 42, no. 3 (2000): 74.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

These alternative ways of moving the body in taiko—the wide stances, the purposeful and strong gestures—are similar to the bodily practices of lion dancers. Gund Kwok members move in ways that are neither small nor light; their gestures are not parceled out to the wrists nor to the fingers as fan dances or other folk dances might require. Instead, lion dance movements are large, integrated, possessed, and sweeping. There is a clear effort towards a “mastery of the body by way of controlled movements”¹⁹⁰ and big muscle groups—the thighs, the biceps, and the abdominals—are activated, often simultaneously, in rehearsals and performances.

Previous scholarship on female participation within “masculine” forms has illustrated the significance of loudness, strength, and taking up external space on bodily subjectivity for Asian American women. In this chapter, I add to this research by analyzing the bodily knowledge that is accumulated through lion dance practice in particular and how this knowledge enables transformative shifts in bodily subjectivity. Though evidence of physical and emotional empowerment certainly emerges within my study, I aim not to suggest that training in the lion dance is a direct conduit to agency or empowerment. As Wong reminds, Asian American performance is complex in that it might feel empowering to the performers themselves while still remaining subjected to the orientalist gaze. In her words, the opportunity for empowerment “stands side by side with the susceptible audience that consumes with the greedy expectation of orientalist

¹⁹⁰ Audrey Yap, “(Hip) Throwing Like a Girl: Martial Arts and Norms of Feminine Body Comportment,” *The International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 9, no. 2 (2016): 110.

pleasure and is inevitably gratified.”¹⁹¹ As such, I would never suggest that lion dance training can solve the already baked-in layers of racialized and gendered inequalities that centuries of oppressive discourses have held in place, nor will it provide a simple balm to remedy symbolic corporeal wounds. Instead, I draw from ethnographic observations and interviews with Gund Kwok to argue that the training and performance regimen of the lion dance allow for a transformation in Asian American female bodily identity in response to racialized and gendered constructions of bodily personhood. In particular, I focus on how the techniques of lion dance provide bodily options outside the construct of the fragmented, permeable Asian American female body manifested through discourses related to the ways in which Asian American women have become subsumed within the economic structures of late capitalism and in patriarchal and racist systems. This chapter will also call attention to how lion dance training assembles the body to complete large-scale, whole-body tasks and how the lion dance costuming prohibits a sense of bodily permeability and enables bodily propriety by thwarting the social gaze that hypersexualizes Asian American women.

2.1 Legacies of Feminized Labor in Boston’s Chinatown

Gund Kwok member Jeanne Chin and I arrive at Caffè Nero during peak hours. After scanning the room for an empty table, we end up finding only a corner of a fading couch, surrounded by students and business people. Though I tell her I will treat her to

¹⁹¹ Wong, “Speak it Louder,” 7.

coffee in exchange for her time, she looks at me with a quick smile and jolts up before I have a chance to stop her. She returns a few minutes later with two cups of hot coffee, a pleasant contrast to the blustery winter weather swirling outside in the streets of Chinatown. We settle into our end of the couch to talk about her life growing up in this community during the 1980s.

Jeanne recalls that she had plenty of time in her youth to explore Chinatown, often marching with a group of friends to the library or hanging out at each other's houses. While her memories of growing up are fond, her mother was away from home much of the time to work in the ubiquitous garment industry. "That's what women did because that's what they could," Jeanne tells me, meaning other jobs were not available. "Back then, they got paid by the piece." It was strenuous, repetitive work and it took many hours to accumulate even a modest income. For Jeanne, who now works for a successful technology company in Boston, the type of manual labor that defined much of her mother's generation seems like a distant past. Though I want to linger on her mother's experiences working in the garment industry a little bit longer, Jeanne quickly redirects the conversation back to a less sensitive discussion about Gund Kwok's workout routine. I want to ask what it felt like to have her mother gone most of the time and what her mother's physical labor means in terms of her decision to practice the lion dance, but I hesitate, sensing that this is either a sensitive topic or simply one that she did not discuss

much with her mother. Both knew it was just the way it was, and perhaps there is little to say.¹⁹²

Many Chinese American women worked in the garment industry in Boston during the 1980s, as Jeanne's mother did. The repeal of Chinese exclusion in 1943, the War Brides Act of 1945, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed large numbers of Chinese to enter the United States legally. The garment industry in Boston, fading by the 1970s, was revitalized because of this incoming surge of immigrant women as factories had a need for cheap labor. By 1981, the garment industry was Boston's second largest manufacturing employer, providing work to over 4,600 people in the Chinatown area.¹⁹³ Nearly 75 percent of women who lived in Boston's Chinatown who worked outside their homes had garment jobs.¹⁹⁴ A *Boston Globe* report from 1981 recounts that these women "work[ed] mostly as stitchers, hunched over sewing machines in factory warehouse rooms, sewing hundreds, even thousands of skirts or dresses a day at a frenetic pace."¹⁹⁵

The work was difficult and the wages extremely low. The annual wage for an immigrant woman working in the garment industry in New York in 1979 was \$5,300, and the median hourly pay was \$2.90, equal to minimum wage.¹⁹⁶ Those who worked in union shops in Boston in 1981 made a minimum of \$4.30 an hour, just about a dollar

¹⁹² Jeanne Chin (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Dec. 13, 2016.

¹⁹³ "The Garment Industry: Will It Survive in Boston?" Boston Public Library Government Documents Department June 30, 1981.

¹⁹⁴ Joan Vennoch, "Stitchers Cling to Chinatown Lifestyle," *The Boston Globe*; Jul. 19 1981.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Min Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 180.

above minimum wage (\$3.35).¹⁹⁷ Most factory owners were also Chinese and while there were many cases of exploitation of their employees, they too were at the mercy of a larger economy that dictated the market. Many factory owners routinely worked in their own shops, often putting in longer hours than their workers.¹⁹⁸

Social economist Min Zhou notes that, however demanding, the garment industry offered Chinese women work with the flexibility that they could complete the myriad of other tasks required of them. Women were expected to perform caregiving roles as daughters and wives that were incompatible with less flexible schedules. As Zhou notes, though China underwent changes in gender relations during its revolution, allowing women increased freedoms, Chinatowns maintained a sense of traditional patriarchal dominance, and women new to the United States often did not have outside resources (such as extended families or social services) to help them deal with these pressures.¹⁹⁹

As Zhou describes,

Day in and day out, row after row, they bent over sewing machines, surrounded by piles of fabric scraps, and sometimes with toddlers and infants at their feet. On the home front, they were expected to attend the needs of their children and husbands (and parents or in-laws, or both), as well as the household chores: cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, paying bills, and so on.²⁰⁰

Jeanne said she never saw women or girls lion dancing before Gung Kwok, that most of the lion dancers she saw were Freemasons. The Boston Chinatown Freemasons was an athletic club that provided young men with a place to gather and play basketball

¹⁹⁷ Joan Vennoch, "Stitchers Cling to Chinatown Lifestyle," *The Boston Globe*; Jul. 19 1981.

¹⁹⁸ Zhou, "Chinatown," 171.

¹⁹⁹ Zhou, "Chinatown," 156.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

or learn martial arts and lion dances. As Jeanne remembers that the club “kind of had a gangster attitude” in the 1980s. An activist energy emerged within the Asian American community in the late 1990s,²⁰¹ and this set the stage for the emergence of Gund Kwok.

2.2 Discursive systems, feminized labor, and bodily subjectivities

The language factory owners used to recruit Asian female bodies into this garment work shaped constructions of the Asian American female body in public discourse. As scholar Yu Shi suggests,

the “old norms” of women being subservient and patient resonate with the assumptions embraced and perpetuated by the U.S. labor market, that is, the expectations that Asian immigrant women are patient, have long attention spans, agile hands, and less ambition than men. These expectations sustain a racialized and gendered division of labor and legitimize Asian immigrant women’s ghettoization in low paying, labor-intensive industries.²⁰²

Whether her mother participated in this exploitative labor or not, an Asian woman today lives in a world that regards her body through a conception of Asian American womanhood based on, in part, their individual, exploitable parts, rendering the boundaries of the body open to exploitation. This bodily subjectivity, compounded by patriarchal underpinnings within Chinatown family life and by stereotypes of Asian American women, is what the women of Gund Kwok work to refashion through their training practice.

²⁰¹ After the closing of P&L Sportswear, which was the largest garment industry in Chinatown, Asian American women became active in petitioning for their employment rights.

²⁰² Yu Shi, “The formation of a Chinese immigrant working-class patriarchy: Reinventing gendered expectations within the structural confines of US society.” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 9, no. 1 (2008): 31-60, 37.

Given that bodies are created at least in part through discourse, bodily subjectivities become inevitably intertwined with the discursive system of capitalism. Sociologist Barbara Sutton reminds that “the neoliberal globalization model is built on a disembodied approach to the social world, one more concerned about balances, profits, and alleged rational choices than with real human beings with bodily needs, desires, and emotions.”²⁰³ She describes Marx’s notion of alienation as “suggest[ing] that violence against workers’ bodies is integral both to the functioning of capitalist societies and to the dehumanization of workers under a capitalist organization of labor.”²⁰⁴ Similarly, as Felicity Callard points out, Marx understood the fragmentation of workers’ bodies as a key dimension of the capitalist organization of work:

it is precisely through the figure of the fragmented body. . . that Marx was able to narrate with such horror and vigour the arrival of the capital-labour relation. For it is only when the manufacturing worker had his body torn and reconfigured so that it became “an appendage” . . . of the workshop, that division of labour, through the branding of the body in this way, could be seen as a characteristically capitalist one.²⁰⁵

While Marx wrote of the fragmentation in metaphorical, universal terms, American Studies scholar Eva Cherniavsky examines bodily subjectivities marked by racial difference in relation to the mechanisms of capitalism. She argues that bodily personhood is not a universal given, asserting that racially marked bodies experience

²⁰³ Barbara Sutton, *Bodies in Crisis: Culture, Violence, and Women's Resistance in Neoliberal Argentina* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 38.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Felicity J. Callard, "The Body in Theory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16, no. 4 (1998): 387-400, 392.

“asymmetrical modes of existence.”²⁰⁶ She theorizes that in the context of the U.S. racial and political environment, the raced subject becomes “characterized by a missing or attenuated hold on interior personhood—by an openness to capital(ization) without the conventional protections (legal, social, political) of embodied individuals.”²⁰⁷ These unstable interiors allow “the bodies of the colonized [to be] made in varying degrees susceptible to abstraction and exchange.”²⁰⁸

Cherniavsky’s argument centers on the notion that bodies are at different risk for this sense of dispersal—that various bodies have different claims to their interior spaces. She writes:

I am calling “incorporation” or “incorporated embodiment” a specific idea of the body as the proper (interior) place of the subject, and my claim is that incorporation emerges as the privileged form of embodiment for a modern social and economic order predicated on mobility: the geographic mobility of the labor force relative to centralized manufacturing zones, for example, or the abstract mobility of “free” economic agents to enter into and to terminate contractual relations.²⁰⁹

Though chattel slavery is the clearest example of the violations of bodily personhood, those who must accept invasive conditions required of low-wage, labor are also at risk. As Cherniavsky notes, the forces of colonialism, in its many forms, a process that “involves expanding metropolitan capital into zones of precapitalist production—only to claim down the line that the ‘backwardness’ of indigenous productive modes and social relations requires withholding modernity’s social benefits (democracy, rule of law) from

²⁰⁶ Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xix.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

the colonized.”²¹⁰ What guarantees the person against these “centrifugal forces” of a person’s bodily interiority and sense of self is not equal.²¹¹ These forces of capitalism have laid claim to women’s inner bodily autonomy by permeating and exploiting the bound corporeal interiority and sense of full-body ownership that mainly white (male) citizens can enjoy.

Unequal invasions of bodily interiority of bodies and body parts is especially clear when seen in relation to histories of Asian American labor practices. Aihwa Ong examines intersections of gender and race in factory work in relation to the modern mode of capitalist development. She suggests that since the 1973 world recession, new patterns of “flexible accumulation” have emerged as corporations are forced increasingly to compete in a global arena.²¹² As a result, “flexible labor regimes, based primarily on female and minority workers, are now common in the Third World, as well as in poor regions of metropolitan countries.”²¹³ Factories and local communities have positioned flexible labor, such as low-wage, part-time, and often unstable garment work, as women’s work. Ong argues that this feminization of the industrial workforce occurs because patriarchal systems are replicated in factory work by emphasizing the junior status of women, framing them as “working daughters,” and “factory daughters,

²¹⁰ Ibid., xvii-xviii.

²¹¹ Ibid., xvi.

²¹² Aihwa Ong, “The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity.” In *Globalization and the Challenges of a New Century*, edited by Patrick O’Meara, Howard D. Mehlinger, and Matthew Krain (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 279.

²¹³ Ibid., 279-280.

“industrial labor relations articulating with local norms often elaborate and reinvent principles of male and racial superiority.”²¹⁴

Recent models of capital development have framed Asian women as uniquely suited for low-wage, flexible work, drawing on stereotypical notions of “women’s nature” and Asian women’s “docile bodies” to bolster the development of an Asian, female industrial force.²¹⁵ Notions of Asian (and Asian American) women’s fingers as nimble, spines as supple, and bodies as small and docile conform to an idea of flexibility. The labor practices of garment factories themselves atomized their disparate body parts—not just fingers, but also eyes, arms, and lungs—to liquidate capital. Ong argues that “gender and race-based forms of domination help make ‘scientific management’ an even more formidable apparatus for extracting surplus value.”²¹⁶ These racialized and gendered tropes not only recruited women into factory work but justified the control of managers and overseers over workers’ bodies once employed. As Ong writes, such industrial discourses worked to “‘disassemble’ the female worker into eyes and fingers adapted for assembly work, at the same time reassembling other parts of their bodies according to commodified sexual images.”²¹⁷ By means of both overt restrictions and subtle tactics of surveillance,²¹⁸ women were often withheld bathroom breaks, ridiculed

²¹⁴ Ibid., 289.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 291.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 289.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

for their menstruation²¹⁹ and conditioned to accept the exploitation of their bodily sense of self down to the minutiae.

The body became a site of exploitation for women in this labor force. As Lisa Lowe suggests, for the Asian female worker, exploitative labor practices “extracted surplus value not only through her ‘labor’ as an abstract form but from using and manipulating her body itself.”²²⁰ Lowe recounts the testimony of Fu Lee, who worked in the San Francisco Bay Area industry, to illustrate how surplus capital was extracted through her labor by piecing out and exploiting her body parts: “from her eyes that strained under poor lighting, her throat that hurt because of the chemical fumes from the fabric dye, and her back that ached from being bent over the sewing machine all day.”²²¹ Each body part, a cog in the factory machinery, was available to be separately harnessed and the “protection of interiority”²²² provided to white subjects was violated.

Gender hierarchies within Chinatown homes and communities also curtailed Asian American female bodily subjectivity, as did mainstream racism. Images of Asian women in the 20th century in photographs, novels, and film depicted them as war brides and prostitutes typified by *The World of Suzie Wong*, a 1957 novel as well as a stage production and film about a Chinese prostitute.²²³ Asian women’s bodies were fetishized as hypersexual, exotic, and pleasantly submissive. These various sources of discursive

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 156.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Cherniavsky, “Incorporations,” xvii.

²²³ *The World of Suzie Wong* began as a 1957 novel by Richard Mason. Suzie Wong, one of the main characters, is a Chinese woman who works as a prostitute.

framings have led scholars to theorize Asian American bodily subjectivity in relation to a sense of permeability and fragmentation.

In *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, Karen Shimakawa argues that Asian American subjectivity constantly shifts in relation to Americanness as “a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation.”²²⁴ Yet, as Asian American literary scholar Traise Yamamoto suggests, for Asian American women, “feelings of invisibility within mainstream society compete with feelings of being all too visible, resulting in images of fragmentation, splitting and corrosion.”²²⁵ Asian American women, who “cannot be imaged outside of sex,”²²⁶ may have, according to these accounts, a simultaneous desire to gain a tangible presence in society while feeling uncomfortable about what that visibility incurs.

As Yamamoto suggests, “being situated in a culture that does not grant them subjecthood, or grants them only contingent subjectivity” creates fragmentation “for subjects marked by race, or by gender and race.”²²⁷ According to Yamamoto, poststructuralists have theorized that ontological fragmentation is commonplace in everyone since there is no coherent “self” to begin with. Yet, while dominant subjects might experience subjectivity as constantly shifting self in an ontological sense, racially

²²⁴ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.

²²⁵ Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 74.

²²⁶ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 97.

²²⁷ Yamamoto, “Masking Selves,” 75.

marked subjects “not only experience such contingency ontologically, but socially as well.”²²⁸

2.3 Technique and Agency

If discourse at least in part shapes bodies, dance techniques are a set of discourses that also produce the body. In the same way as discourses attached to Asian American female bodies have worked coercively, embodying technique with self-awareness and agency has the potential to re-work bodily subjectivities. As Carrie Noland explains, “gestures, learned techniques of the body, are the means by which cultural conditioning is simultaneously embodied and put to the test.”²²⁹ The following sections will explore Noland’s assertion that “embodying socialized gestures produces an experience of movement—its texture and velocity—that ends up altering the routine, the body that performs the routine, and eventually, perhaps, culture itself.”²³⁰ In them I argue that in embodying lion dance techniques, dancers work to re-structure bodily subjectivities. I am interested in understanding how embodying lion dances offers an opportunity to reshape and work against gendered and racialized histories of Asian American female bodily subjectivity. However, this examination warrants a brief discussion on technique and what sort of resistive potential embodying dance lion dance techniques offers the body.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/ Producing Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Susan Foster theorizes that certain movement practices train the body in ways unique to that form. She writes that a “set of metaphors out of which their own perceived and ideal bodies come to be constructed” guides every style of dance, “reiterated in daily routines.”²³¹ Randy Martin also examines the way that technique acts as an organizing principle for dancers and becomes manifested through bodily practice.²³² Martin takes a modern dance technique class as the basis for his analysis, showing the ways in which the values and political underpinnings of modern dance as an “American” form trains the bodies of modern dancers in specific ways. Martin argues that dance training is political, as particular cultural values are selected and inscribed on bodies through repetition. As a political practice, dance training and technical work end up training dancers to become not only ideal citizens of the classroom but also reveal the process whereby other political aims, stemming from the state, work to inscribe material bodies.

Dance anthropologist Sally Ann Ness investigates the ways in which dance techniques inscribe bodies. In her essay “The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations in Dance,” Ness argues that technical dance training creates a “quasi-linguistic mark-making” on bodies. Ness delves into an analysis of how bodies as musculature and matter adjust in relation to the technical values of a dance form. While it might seem as if inscription reveals the way power controls bodies, Ness problematizes this idea, arguing that dancers actively train in techniques, making decisions that inscribe their bodies, thus

²³¹ Susan Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” in *Meaning in Motion*, edited by Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 253.

²³² Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

providing ways of envisioning dance training and inscription as a form of agency. In another essay, “Dancing in the field: notes from memory,” Ness also dwells on the idea of how embodying movement forms impart certain knowledge or values.²³³ She compares her experiences taking tourist dance lessons in Bali and the Philippines, becomes aware of how she is able to begin to embody the different types of knowledge specific to that form. This section looks at the metaphors and knowledges embodied through lion dance practice and what they offer in relation to fragmentation and permeability. In this section, I map out both the values embodied through lion dance practice and the body produced through training to understand how lion dances offer a means of working against, or reshaping, racialized and gendered bodily subjectivities. I examine three “knowledges,” though there are likely many more. Lion dance techniques train the body within a specific system of ideologies, sculpting a particular lion dance aesthetic.

As Dance Studies scholar Ann Cooper Albright reminds, it is important to include the bodily experience of performers in addition to theories of how audiences experience and construct their bodies. The dancing body, Albright states, exists at the intersection between “the realms of representation and physical experience.”²³⁴ Understanding how bodily experience—through the training and performance of lion dances—can open up pathways for recapturing one’s bodily agency in relation to histories of exploitative labor

²³³ Sally Ann Ness, “Dancing in The Field: Notes from Memory.” In *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster (London: Routledge, 1996), 129-54.

²³⁴ Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 13.

practices and racist, sexist ideologies not only provides insight into the crucial link between how discourse shapes bodies but also suggests how technique can work against those discursive forces.

Female lion dancers embody a sense of Chinese culture through kung fu movement and a rigorous training system that is distinctly Chinese. Martial gestures are transformed into lion dance choreography and are seen in the cultivation of the body. Unlike other forms of Chinese folk dance, such as the fan dance, which necessitates a feminine aesthetic of lightness and beauty, lion dances strive for bent knees, weightiness, and power. This is apparent, for example, in the particular way the lion dancers articulate their feet in kung fu stances and in the way that the dancers choreographically respond to the drums. The long-term, repetitive techniques emphasize strength, flexibility, balance, and self-discipline. These bodily signifiers culminate in a pliable, strong, yet combative body rather than a purely aesthetic body.

2.4 Embodying the Warrior: Lion Dance Training Regimens

In this section, I tease out the specific metaphors of the lion dance and the major knowledges acquired through its practice. Though lion dance techniques likely embody many values, I have identified a few that play a crucial role in reshaping bodily subjectivities in relation to the corporeal disassembling, fracturing, and permeability that discursive social factors create. These values are: martial masculinity, whole body/

assembled body, and breath and interiority. Other dance practices train in one or more of these qualities, but their combination defines lion dance training.

Not masculine, Not feminine (but definitely martial)

The first value lion dancing embodies is a sense of martial masculinity. I use masculinity as a part of this label to reflect on how lion dances have been constituted as masculine practices and how masculinity has been deeply tied to notions of Chinese martial symbolism. However, Gung Kwok members unsettle the definitions of masculinity in lion dance, as I describe later in this section, leading me to re-frame the “masculine” embodiment historically significant to lion dance practices to take into account this increased fluidity and more nuanced conceptualizations of gender categories.

In Chinese tradition, lions are powerful, masculine creatures with the capacity to drive away evil spirits. The essence of martial embodiment, achieved through training in the lion dance, is linked to notions of Eastern masculinity. Chinese ritual practices, according to martial arts scholar Avron Boretz, are inextricably intertwined with Chinese constructions of masculinity. Therefore, as Boretz suggests, the lion dance and other related rituals have come to iconify masculine qualities of aggressiveness and physical prowess.²³⁵ He writes that “the ethos of popular, or local, religion is active, brash, and sometimes violent and valorizes the military and the martial.”²³⁶ Ritual performances such as the lion dance are a time when “intrinsic qualities of martial ritual (the fighting

²³⁵ Avron Boretz, *Gods, Ghosts, And Gangsters: Ritual Violence, Martial Arts, And Masculinity on the Margins of Chinese Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

images of demonic soldiers, for example) automatically generate an aura of theatricality, a mood equally morbid and festive, constrained and unleashed.”²³⁷ This fighting, combative quality continues to frame lion dance training practices. True to their roots in Chinese martial arts, lion dances utilize the stances, kicks, and gestures of the masculine and militant kung fu trajectory. For example, most lion dance training sessions begin with moving through a series of kung fu stances such as Horse Stance, Bow Stance, and Cat Stance. Gund Kwok integrates this martial quality not only through usages of these stances in practice but also through training kung fu kicks and punches, which help prepare the body for the martial aesthetic embedded in lion dance performances.

Traditionally, this martial quality has been linked to notions of Chinese masculinity. Boretz theorizes that a *wen/wu* dyad is a fundamental structure of conceptual organization in Chinese culture with a broad application.²³⁸ Louie and Low have theorized Chinese constructs of masculinity, arguing that while *wen* masculinity reflects a more scholarly, refined sense of manhood, *wu* masculinity manifests in Chinese history through wars and large-scale battles. It is a foundational construct of Chinese manhood. *Wu* masculinity appears in the expression of martial arts culture and is often represented through a muscular, working class subjectivity; it is symbolically tied to the red-faced Guan Gong, god of war—found in smoky temples and home altars—and other brawny heroes from Chinese history.²³⁹ Acrobatics and military skill through kung fu movement

²³⁷ Ibid., 14.

²³⁸ Boretz, “Gods, Ghosts, And Gangsters,” 42.

²³⁹ Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

vocabularies connect lion dances to *wu* masculinity. However, as Louie and Low note, “*wu* is distinct from unconstrained violence; it is the power of controlling violence with force, to forestall chaos by uprooting or obstructing its causes. Here *wu* serves only to defend and protect the legitimate moral/political order against disruptive forces within and from outside of society.”²⁴⁰

Ethnomusicologist Colin McGuire suggests that the percussive music that accompanies lion dances plays a crucial role in its embodiment of martial qualities. This type of percussion, he notices, “is capable of formidable loudness designed to cut through the din of battle.”²⁴¹ He argues that learning to lion dance “fosters a corporeal sensitivity to the percussion music that is undergirded by a foundation of kung fu training and explicitly positioned as a martial skill.”²⁴² In a similar fashion to soldiers receiving “signals from a commander with a better view of the whole scene, lion dancers rely on sonic directions from their drummer.”²⁴³ Gund Kwok holds drummers in high esteem and only works with very experienced musicians.

Despite the lion dance’s history of embodying eastern warrior manliness, the women of Gund Kwok carefully avoid defining their training through frameworks of masculinity. As member Adriana Li mentioned to me in an interview, “I don’t want to say I feel masculine when I do it because I don’t like to suggest that masculinity is equal

²⁴⁰ Boretz, “Gods, Ghosts, And Gangsters,” 43.

²⁴¹ Colin McGuire, “The Rhythm of Combat: Understanding the Role of Music in Performances of Traditional Chinese Martial Arts and Lion Dance,” *MUSICultures* 42, no. 1 (2015): 1-23, 12.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

to strength but I feel strong. I feel energetic, raw, like more at the core, even if I'm not doing the best job."²⁴⁴ Another dancer, QJ Shi, expressed a similar sentiment:

Well, I'm not embodying masculinity but I'm performing power and I like that people might be surprised that it's a woman under the lion. At least for myself, I like to break convention because I don't conform to certain stereotypes. So, I feel like that part is empowering. Sort of like "I can do this, in your face."²⁴⁵

Li and Shi suggest that when Gund Kwok members access empowerment through moving in ways typically defined as masculine, they are working to untether automatic associations between masculinity and specific ways of moving the body. In other words, lion dances shape the body through metaphors of masculine martial arts culture but the women of Gund Kwok are working to de-link those connections.

The performance of a martial quality, with its emphasis on loudness and aggression, provides women an opportunity to reconstruct their bodies through a loud, active embodied self. They reframe gendered constructions of the female, Asian corporeal subject. As Wong reminds, with taiko drumming, large, "masculine" and direct movement patterns provide a sense of agency in confronting stereotypes of the subservient, quiet, Asian female. The emphasis on "strength and command" established through taiko practices is significant in terms of the "transformation of the Asian/ American women from a delicate, submissive stereotype to a figure capable of moving with power and authority."²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Adriana Li (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, October 20, 2016.

²⁴⁵ QJ Shi (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, September 28, 2016.

²⁴⁶ Wong, "Speak it Louder," 217.

Whole Body/Assembled Body

A second value embodied through lion dance practice is that of whole body (i.e. a fully inhabited body) and an assembled body. This corporeal value of lion dance practice is also related to the martial quality discussed previously but touches more fully on the idea of how the body activates a kinesthetic sense of *full-bodiedness*, not socially valued in women. Iris Marion Young speaks about bodily comportment for women in her essay “Throwing Like a Girl: The Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality.” Young asserts that women’s enculturation induces an inhibited bodily expression, exemplified in a characteristic failure to commit the whole body to a particular task. The feminine subject has difficulty taking up space outside of the body and in coordinating motions from different parts of the body toward a single intended action. She writes,

Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men. For example, in attempting to lift something, women more often than men fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead, we tend to concentrate our effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task—the arms and shoulders—rarely bringing the legs to the task at all. When turning or twisting something, to take another example, we frequently concentrate effort in the hand and wrist, not bringing to the task the power of the shoulder, which is necessary for its efficient performance.²⁴⁷

In terms of martial arts in particular, scholar Audrey Yap asserts that the norms of proper feminine body comportment make it harder for women to engage with other bodies in combat situations. Therefore, “many women intending to perform a physical

²⁴⁷ Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33.

task find themselves inhibited in its performance despite having the muscular capacity to complete it.”²⁴⁸ Since Gund Kwok is not a kung fu school, members do not partake in combative physical relationships like those Yap studied. Yet, her insights seemed to apply. For example, my notes from observing a rehearsal that was in progress when I arrived on October 20, 2016, suggests that Gund Kwok’s training regimen works to retrain this stereotypically female sense of embodiment by overt physical assertiveness. Adam Cheung who also served as my individual teacher and is a very present member of the Chinatown lion dance community, a regular Gund Kwok lion dance consultant, and husband of a former Gunk Kwok member, was helping to train the dancers in power moves.

“Tornado kick, tornado kick,” he called out. All of the dancers were practicing inside lion heads. The tornado kick sequence requires that the dancers make a circular swoop with their upper bodies, moving from an upright position toward the floor, as they hold onto the head structure from within. Upon circling the head, they jump into a swift kick where one leg is planted on the floor and the other shoots out behind. The dancers did this over and over again until the timing started to shift, and the swoop got tighter, the kick more explosive.

“It’s getting better,” Cheung praised them. “But you need to move faster through the tornado and then flick the head on the kick. It all needs to be sharper, stronger, tighter.” Another dancer called out to the group, “Use your core on the tornadoes. You

²⁴⁸ Audrey Yap, “(Hip) Throwing Like a Girl,” 93.

don't want to throw your back out." The dancers put in a few more repetitions before some began to remove the heads and take a short break, hands on their hips or shins as they panted. A relatively new dancer had splotches of red moving across her chest and neck. She looked visibly tired. I heard her whisper, "That's so hard."

Cheung told the dancers to try a slightly different move in which they would jump into a deep lunge, back legs shooting out rapidly to catch their weight. After a few tries, the women peeked out from their heads again to listen to Cheung's feedback. "Can you do it again?" he asked. "But this time sink lower into the legs. When you push out, it seems like the back leg isn't pushing hard enough. You'll get twice the amount of power as before if you push out the leg." The dancers put the heads back on and tried the move again, this time with more vigor, their leg muscles working twice as hard to force the back leg out faster, while the lunging leg supports the body and the weight of the lion head. Cheung's advice seems entirely in line with what Yap and Young describe as the limitations enculturation places on women. The training works against these stereotypically female ways of moving the body.

Lion dancing requires dancers to move with quick, bound, and direct bodily efforts – what Laban describes as characteristically masculine moves. For example, the dancers kick out their legs swiftly while pushing the lion head above into the air, or they must lift their partner overhead, quickly and efficiently. Dancers must fully inhabit the movements and commit to them entirely, or drop a partner or a lion head. This whole body kinesthetic exertion restructures discursive structures that position women and might apply with particular keenness to Asian American women.

Yet, there is another aspect to the whole body—not just the commitment of the full body to a task—but an assemblage of body parts. For Asian American women, the constructs of bodily comportment are shaped in ways that are both gendered and racialized. Asian American women often inherit the bodily subjectivities of all women as Young defines them, but also those imparted through discourses of the smallness, passivity, and nimbleness of factory work particular to histories of “Asian-ness” and the Asian immigrant. Lion dance practices cultivate a bodily subjectivity geared toward large, bound, and direct movements, but they also train the body to function together as a whole rather than as the disassembled parts found in the rhetoric surrounding factory work.

Lion dancing engages all parts of the body. José Gil writes that dance in general requires an assemblage of the body. He writes:

What do danced gestures assemble? We can say: they assemble gestures with other gestures; or an actual body with all the actualized virtual bodies; or still, a movement with other movements. In all cases, danced gesturality experiments with movement (with its circuits, its quality, its strength) in order to obtain the best conditions to execute choreography. In this sense, to dance is to experiment, to work out all possible assemblages of the body. This work is precisely what assembling consists of. To dance is therefore to assemble the body.²⁴⁹

For Gil, this notion of assemblage is significant because “it is in this sense that we can talk about the body as a totality. Not as an organism where we could find a global function operating in each part, but a body-total that constitutes in and of itself a map of

²⁴⁹ José Gil, “Paradoxical Body,” *The Drama Review* 50, no. 4 (2006): 21-35, 30.

the assemblage of all possible assemblages.”²⁵⁰ While I agree with Gil with respect to other dance forms, I would argue that lion dancing requires an extreme assemblage that may be unique. Dancers not only assemble their own bodies and that of their partners according to the dimensions of time and space, they assemble the unwieldy lion costume, with its required manipulations housed within the mask’s interior. Lion dances require a complex number of ingredients—assembly of one’s own body, large object manipulation, and partnering.

Lion dancers must engage all parts of their bodies, fully inhabiting every piece, and orchestrating multiple aspects of spatial negotiations and timing with the drummer to perform adequately. This is perhaps why Gund Kwok’s founder Cheng Imm Tan stated: “If it looks easy, we are doing it right.”²⁵¹ In fact, combining all of the moving parts of the lion dance is quite complicated.

Colin McGuire argues that “a kung fu body must control the rhythm of a physical confrontation for strategic purposes, whereas lion dancers’ movement is dictated by musical patterns.”²⁵² I would say that the aesthetic requirements of the form, which demand that the dancers manage and coordinate many body parts to achieve the choreographic intention or narrative, as well as rhythm disciplines the lion dancing body. Additionally, I would argue that although kung fu trains the body to engage in combat, the lion dance also requires a strategy for engaging with the bodies of others and for

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Kristi Palma, “Lion Dancing at the Lunar New Year: A Recipe for Women’s Empowerment,” Feb. 25, 2015. <http://www.boston.com/culture/travel/2015/02/25/lion-dancing-at-the-lunar-new-year-a-recipe-for-womens-empowerment>.

²⁵² McGuire, *The Rhythm of Combat*,” 3.

managing the lion costume. Lion dancing pairs must work intimately to embody the somatic sensitivity needed to perform partnered lifts and choreographies. While kung fu certainly integrates many body parts, the lion dance disciplines the body uniquely to achieve whole-body orchestration to manipulate the lion head and costume simultaneously while executing set and improvised movement patterns, negotiating complex spatial dynamics, and coordinating with a partner.

The dancers underneath the lion heads have to multitask. For example, the torso swings while holding onto little wooden bars within the mask while the feet shift and kick out immediately after. Dancers have to gauge their spatial direction, which is no easy feat considering their limited vision through the lion's mouth. They also have to regulate the mask itself by holding the mouth shut with one hand while holding it stable with the other. Often the dancer at the head also manipulates the eyes and ears of the lion from the interior frame. The dancers necessarily tend to the choreography—the particular stances, kicks, and transition steps that make up the movement patterns. The dancer at the tail prepares to lift the dancer at the head of the lion, who must be ready at the correct time. As with Young's description of women failing to put their shoulders into opening a jar or their thighs into lifting, if dancers do not coordinate their body parts they will fail, in spite of strong muscles.

Dancing under the heavy cloth costume and head requires that all parts of the body activate with a sense of pressure. The bodily knowledge they gain over time includes where and when to exert internal conduits of pressure. Horse Stance and Bow Stance, for example, place pressure into the legs while the back remains erect (vertically

for the head and horizontally for the tail). This coordinated neuromuscular sending of energy throughout the body works to link it together so that all the parts can move toward a common purpose, whether it be to dip into Cat Stance or to lift someone overhead.

Sally Ann Ness described something similar in her analysis of the embodied knowledge gained through learning Balinese dance. She writes,

The recipes in performance assumed the character of systemic proprioceptive feelings of pressure. They might be verbalized as “whiles,” “pushing (myself) up here” while “pressing (myself) back there,” while “lifting this (area of myself),” while “flexing that (area of myself),” while “bending this,” while “spreading that,” while “tilting this,” while holding that,” etc. These instructive impulses stabilized within the standing being the routing of intense pressing energy investments throughout the body. The effect was a stabilization that enabled the most extreme intensification of those investments sent simultaneously into different areas of the dancer.²⁵³

In lion dance, there is a sense of these different “investments of pressure,” but also the need to coordinate and bring multiple tasks together at the same time, and all of these disparate parts need to activate to accomplish lifts and other feats within lion dance praxis. The body becomes a high functioning orchestra, each part moving as it should to accomplish a particular move and all subsequent ones after that. All of this bodily integration and organization is done while maintaining an air of simplicity. The illusion is a lion that, while playful at times, is controlled, possessed, and formidable. I learned firsthand how hard it was to harmonize all of these aspects of lion dance choreography into a whole-body network when Adam Cheung taught me privately.

²⁵³ Sally Ann Ness, “Dancing in the Field: Notes from Memory” in *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power* Edited by Susan Leigh Foster (New York: Routledge, 1996), 135.

The pattern he taught me included sudden drops into Horse Stance with weight shifts to the right and left while the arms shot up simultaneously. The lesson began in a playground. I tried a move where I planted my right foot into the pavement while my left foot swung up into a kung fu position so that my foot was pointed down and slightly inward, theoretically protecting my groin area. At the same time, my hands extended high into the air while holding his son's backpack as a lion head substitute, their contents rattling. As I lowered back down from there, I moved forward, waist slightly bent, and shook the backpack side to side as a fictitious lion might playfully move forward in space.

Cheung was patient with me as we tried this phrase over and over but I think I might not be his best student. "You could be a little sharper," he said gently. "When you come back to Horse Stance in the center, you have to get lower and pop down almost." I couldn't seem to get the correct feeling into my body. He showed me again. He moved with incredible directness—crisply moving from one stance to another, everything integrated—the weight shifting, the arms lifting, the minute details of the placement of the head. It was coordinated, grounded, and focused. When I tried again I felt comparatively light, and I found it hard to drop into the stances and link the thrusting of my upper body at the correct time.

We continued the lesson at his house, this time with an actual lion head instead of a backpack. Cheung has a couple of heads designed for kids so that he can teach his sons the lion dance. One of the heads was large enough for me to fit under (but still smaller than what Gung Kwok would use) and I tried the sequence again with it on. A friend of

his children's, Lily, was at the house, and she asked to join the lesson. She got under the cloth in the back to become my tail. As she held my hips, we moved through the opening choreography while Cheung called out the drum patterns vocally. I tried to embody the martial quality that he had demonstrated, down with the legs, up with the arms, my back muscles now straining to lift even this very small head. I had to balance the mask on my shoulders while holding the mouth shut, which was difficult. I tried to stay somewhat on the beat that Cheung provided while keeping track of the movement. After what felt like a very long time, I gave up, exhausted. Lily giggled as I removed the head and pulled the cloth off of her and thanked her for helping me. I was exhausted from trying to align all those moving parts. The furrow in Cheung's brow signaled to me that I had not acquired the technique. However, I had acquired a sense of awe for the prowess of the women of Gund Kwok.

Gund Kwok member Adriana Li affirmed my sense of lion dancing when she said, "Lion dance is a very strong art . . . it's so empowering to be under that lion head and just doing it." Yet she described this in a way that transcended gender:

When I first started doing it, I really have to say I wasn't thinking of it like a woman. It was the theatrical aspect. I had a background in theater so it was more like just being under this amazing puppet. That's empowering in and of itself. I felt strong, I felt amazing to be doing it. That's empowering—doing something theatrical with my body and with my mind. It's amazing to be able to do that and feel so free.²⁵⁴

While Li does not describe herself as masculine in performing the lion dance, it is clear that bringing together the disparate parts of the body has the potential to enable a sense of

²⁵⁴Adriana Li (Gund Kwok member) in discussion with the author, October 20, 2016.

power in that it counteracts the feminine ways of moving that Young describes. I argue that this type of full bodied and cohesive movement is particularly significant for Asian American women, given that their bodily subjectivities have been constructed as open to disassembly through racialized discourses.

Breath and Interiority

Another important aspect of lion dance training and source of bodily power for women comes from the martial arts training component of lion dances, which seeks to develop a sense of protection against bodily permeability. As Cherniavsky made clear, the boundaries of the body are in flux in relation to socioeconomic demands. Other scholars have pointed out how conceptualizations of the bodies' boundaries between the internal body and the external body have the capacity to shift in relation to discursive factors. Chris Shilling argues that conceptualizations of the body in the West have produced a sense of individualization of bodies such that the body has formed a "'case' or 'barrier' separating individuals from each other and from the external world."²⁵⁵ Other cultures conceive of the boundaries of the body differently. For instance, Anurima Banerji's article "Dance and the Distributed Body: Odissi, Ritual Practice, and Mahari Performance" argues that the devadasi institution in India, a Hindu religious practice, did not conceive of individual bodies as we do in the west but instead saw the lines of the body extended to inanimate places of worship, deities, and other dancing bodies.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Shilling, "The Body and Social Theory," 163.

²⁵⁶ Anurima Banerji, "Dance and the Distributed Body: Odissi, Ritual Practice, and Mahari Performance," *About Performance*, no. 11, Jan. 1 2012.

The martial arts have long been a means to develop an awareness of the inner body to repel external threats to the body. As philosopher Seamus Carey notes, the martial arts are a way to connect “various organs and substances of the body as well as its surface and interior.”²⁵⁷ Carey analyzes Yasua Yasuo’s Eastern-based phenomenology of the body, which sees the body as an interconnected organism whereby the different organs and systems of the body are connected by meridians and nourished by *qi* energy.²⁵⁸ These meridians, or channels, also link together the body’s surface and interior. Yasua distinguishes the martial artist from the modern, western athlete based on how their respective training practices view embodiment:

For the modern athlete, the body is understood as a machine-like thing with the goal of making that machine as fast and as strong as possible. In contrast, the goal for the martial artist is the cultivation of the whole person culminating in *samadhi* or “no-mind,” which involves a deep awareness and integration between Qi-energy and the emotional-instinctual activities of the body. Thus, their training is focused as much on the unconscious and emotional activities of the body as it is on the conscious (motor) activities of the body, because balanced emotion and energy is an integral part of the art that is performed.²⁵⁹

Martial arts philosophy differentiates the internal, *neigong*, and external, *waigong*, forms of martial arts. kung fu prioritizes *waigong*. It calls on practitioners to meet force with force directly manner (i.e. with a punch or kick).²⁶⁰ Tai chi and qigong, by contrast, emphasize internal techniques, “soft” techniques of breathing, meditation, and *qi* energy circulation. Though lion dance training requires proficiency in kicking, Tan’s training

²⁵⁷ Seamus Carey, “Cultivating Ethos Through the Body,” *Human Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 23-42, 34.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶⁰ Fen Sun, Patrick TK Leung, and Roy Vellaisamy, *Kung Fu and Science* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2016), 74.

strategy prioritizes the training of the interior body. For example, during rehearsal warm-ups, she would reference the *dantian*, a traditional Chinese concept used in qigong, meditation, martial arts and other embodied practices. Located in the lower abdomen, the *dantian* is considered to be an energy source that provides strength to the entire body.²⁶¹ As the dancers lowered into their sturdy kung fu stances, Tan would remind them to focus on their *dantian* point. In recalling the bodily center and groundedness to the dancers, this attention on the bodily center and groundedness was meant to enable the dancers to access a whole-body mindfulness to prepare them for the work of lion dancing through developing this sense of wholeness stemming from traditional martial arts foundations. She wanted them to use *qi* in the development of inner strength.

Cultivating an ability to resist outside, nefarious forces influences Gund Kwok's emphasis on maintaining or stiffening the boundaries between the body and the outside world. Self-defense, internal discipline, and the prevention of outside threat is one of the most defining aspects of martial arts training. These emphases firm up the bodies' boundaries, protecting them from external forces. Boretz writes "*wu* serves to defend and protect the legitimate moral/political order against disruptive forces both within and from outside of society."²⁶² The way that lion dances achieve efficacy in ritual is through a protection of one's inner body through training in order to perform the task for the

²⁶¹ Kenneth S. Cohen, *The Way of Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1997), 124.

²⁶² Boretz, "Gods, Ghosts, And Gangsters," 43.

community of removing evil spirits from a given space. According to Boretz, this requires a military approach.²⁶³

The protection of bodily interiority has been especially significant for female practitioners of martial arts. In the past couple of decades, several ethnographic studies have examined how self-defense training activates women's resistance to patriarchal culture by subverting dominant gender ideologies.²⁶⁴ These scholars have argued that martial arts allow women to shape their bodies in new ways, to gain physical and mental agency.²⁶⁵ Women who practice martial arts, sociologist Martha McCaughey writes, can "embrace their power to thwart assaults and interrupt a script of feminine vulnerability and availability, they challenge the invulnerability and entitlement of men and, by extension, the inevitability of men's violence and women's victimization."²⁶⁶ Yet, as Alex Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge explain, "however important self-defense is, social self-defense—defense against the slights and larger injuries associated with social class—is also very important, and becoming proficient in a martial art can offer sanctuary."²⁶⁷ This extends to a sense that the martial arts trained body and the lion dance trained body are not only defending against the metaphysical world of evil spirits but outside social forces as well. Take for example the hard body imagery of Bruce Lee, his body

²⁶³ Ibid., 26.

²⁶⁴ Alex Channon and George Jennings, "Exploring Embodiment Through Martial Arts and Combat Sports: A Review of Empirical Research," *Sport in Society* 17, no. 6 (2014): 773-789.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Martha McCaughey, *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self Defense* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 178.

²⁶⁷ Douglas S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 6.

recapitulated as impenetrable to Western influences.²⁶⁸ This strength represents a fortification against colonization and a symbol of an intact China. Scholar and cultural critic Siu Leung Li writes,

Lee's body [is] powerful as a result of the internalization of hand-to-hand combat skills of traditional martial arts. And kung fu itself as a Chinese tradition "naturally" lends itself to the construction of *amour propre* (self-love) and the invention of the Chinese nation. . . . Lee's an imagined collective identity against imperialism and colonization.²⁶⁹

Lee's ability to protect himself from symbolic threats through his martial arts practice, elucidates the importance of refining one's inner body to defend oneself against both imminent and abstract forces.

2. 6 Costuming to Thwart Permeability

Though lion dance training practices shape the body, costumes actually cover much of the body. Returning to Wong's caution that practicing masculine forms is at once liberating and restrictive due to the orientalist gaze, this section will focus on spectatorship and the Asian American female body in lion dance performances. I argue that lion dance costuming works against notions of the Asian American female body as permeable by diminishing or opposing the hypersexualized gaze that befalls Asian American women's bodies. As Yutian Wong writes, "the idea of the dancing Asian female body is doubly sexualized through Orientalist fantasies of Asian female sexual

²⁶⁸ Siu Leung Li, "Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity," *Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3/4 (2000): 515-542.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 526.

availability, as well as the suspect nature of dancing within American society in general.”²⁷⁰

Audrey Yap describes a split among her informants’ focus, in that they were conscious of how they looked executing martial arts techniques.²⁷¹ This diverted attention away from the movement itself and potentially reduced their effectiveness. Women in general occupy a bodily subjectivity divided by their own corporeal experiences and the external gaze. For Asian American women, sexualized stereotypes of their corporeality intensify this split gaze as embedded in representations of surplus sexuality.

For Asian American women, the paradox of embodying masculine physical regimens such as the lion dance lies in the fact that in doing the very activity that would recover the patriarchal control of the body, women become vulnerable to additional objectification. Young taps into this predicament succinctly when she states, “to open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directions is for a woman to invite objectification.”²⁷² Though Asian American women practicing lion dances are able to generate empowerment through an embodiment of lion dance techniques, they simultaneously risk objectification and the penetration of the male gaze by performing publicly, opening up the body to some of the same exploitative discourses they seek to avoid. For many of the women of Gund Kwok, being visible yet mostly invisible was a means to perform without feeling overly exposed. As Shi reflected in our interview,

²⁷⁰ Wong, “Choreographing Asian America,” 19.

²⁷¹ Yap, “(Hip) Throwing Like a Girl,” 105.

²⁷² Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,” *Human Studies* 3 (1980): 137-156, 154.

The costumes are really tiring. I mean it's really hard to do all the things you need to do but with the weight of the head. My arms get so tired. For me though, it's also nice because I'm an introvert and I like performing but I also like being under the lion as some protection from the audience.²⁷³

For Shi and the other women of Gund Kwok, wearing costuming that prohibits view of the body in lion dance performance could enable a sense of agency, allowing them to claim a resistant subjectivity. As such, it reveals an important component of the lion dance as a source of empowerment and resistance that goes beyond the martial training practices, as this form of masking becomes a protective layer that eschews the colonial and male gazes. The absence of a visible body allows the dancers to maintain a sense of privacy and control over the deployment of how spectators read their bodies. As such, the focus of the performance fixes on the mastery of the lion and the techniques of the dancers within the costume, the narrative being performed, and the technical integrity of their movement. While audiences can often see the dancer's bodies partially during the performance, the body is largely obscured in ways that are atypical of most other dance forms, and the prominence and boldness of the lion head and costuming often draws the eyes away from the dancers themselves and toward the illusion of the dancing lions.

It is also significant that the dancers can see the audiences through the mouth of the lion, providing, in essence, a flip of the gaze. While the dancer at the tail of the lion is bent over and guided by her partner, the dancer at the head of the lion can sneak glances at the situational surrounding of the performance through the lion's mouth. From there, she can see the audience and monitor their reactions. This came home to me once when I

²⁷³ QJ Shi (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Sept. 28, 2016.

played the head of the lion in Colorado Springs when I was in college. As I moved through the crowd assembled for a Chinese New Year's Banquet, I opened the mouth to see a little girl, tears running down her face, transfixed in terror at the lion's head. She could not see me. Although with the mouth open the dancer's face is quite visible, she had apparently been so fixed on the mask that surrounded me that opening the mouth to show my face did not put her at ease. "It's okay," I told her. "I'm actually a person," I tried to reassure, speaking loudly over the beat of the drums. Though an extreme example of control that I held in that moment, it does illustrate the shift in the gaze from being watched to watching.

A reading of this outward gaze from within the lion's mouth has resonance with bell hooks' notion of the "oppositional gaze" of resistance. This gaze, she argues, is political; in other words, "there is power in looking."²⁷⁴ Drawing from the work of Foucault, hooks suggests that it is important to look at the "margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found."²⁷⁵ Though subtle and non-confrontational in its affective register, the gaze outward through the lion's head has vital resistive potential as a site, not only serving as a way of bodily protection, but also a way to be more active in flipping the gaze to resist objectification. Implicated within a vexing back and forth between hypervisibility and invisibility, the lion dance offers the dancers the possibility of being seen without overexposure.

²⁷⁴ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

Gund Kwok was formed to counter the way that society has defined Asian American women and to provide the Asian American female community within Chinatown the opportunity to gain power through a particular bodily training system. The members of Gund Kwok challenge notions of what it means to perform such a long-held masculine tradition. In training and performing lion dances so effectively, Gund Kwok has worked to dispel claims that women are not fit for this tradition. Within the repetitive and demanding martial aesthetic, the women of Gund Kwok acquire a productive and intelligent martial body, equipped to link the vast parts of the body together to sustain the rigorous demands of the form. In doing so, the body gains the knowledge of bodily wholeness, assembly, and ownership. This corporeal insight has the potential to unravel and redefine a corporeal subjectivity discursively enacted on Asian American female bodies through notions of permeability and fragmentation. These bodily tactics that have opened up opportunities to reverse the logic of the dispersed, segmented, delicate, nimble stereotypes along with enabling a sense of bodily ownership that the rigorous physicality of the form stimulates.

Chapter 3

Gund Kwok's Modes of Performance

The China Trade Center, a gray, concrete square, sits in the center of Boston's Chinatown. The building houses a range of businesses and organizations, and Gund Kwok has negotiated weekly rehearsal spaces in the basement, an area that also includes the office of the New England Chinese Historical Society. The basement is resplendent with red paint, multicolored lanterns, festive red banners with Chinese script, and a large mural that chronicles Chinese women's histories in Boston.²⁷⁶ The back corner of the basement has a room called the den, which holds about a dozen lion heads of vibrant and assorted colors. Red and golden lions are traditional; the den also holds bubble gum pink and flashy purple varieties. A large, golden dragon is carefully stashed along the back wall along with a slew of musical instruments, props, and banners all neatly arranged in the room.

Each Thursday night, the members of Gund Kwok trickle into this space as they rush from work in disparate parts of the city. Though they arrive with the air of stress from maneuvering around Boston's famously aggressive traffic or traveling the subway, they soon soften as they see their team members and settle into the conversational rhythms of a place protected from the restless city. As they set up for rehearsal, the women ask each other about life in general, inquiring about recovery from injuries, from

²⁷⁶ The mural details Chinese American women's active role during the Second Sino-Japanese War and their increased leadership in Chinatown since immigrating to the United States.

relationships, and from incidents and frustrations at work. Gund Kwok is indelibly linked to Chinatown, and in this chapter, I map out the various kinds of performances in which Gund Kwok participates. I investigate how these choices intertwine with the social and political fabric of Chinatown and the greater community to understand how the company's work is functioning in this contemporary political moment and its effects for audiences. I pay attention to three predominant modes of performance for Gund Kwok—as ritual, as political activism, and as a performance of Chinese cultural expression. I explore how these performances shift in relation to the context in which they are performed and how these types of performance make meaning in overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways.

I use ethnographic observations from performances observed and online materials, news clippings, press reviews, and promotional materials. In the first section, I examine how Gund Kwok's participation in the annual Chinese New Year ritual enacts a complex web of meanings by performing an important ritual to maintain tradition for the Chinese American community, establishing social networks important to the women themselves and subverting the male stronghold on the tradition. In the second section, I explore how performing in social activist projects work to effect social change while making clear through a performance of Asian culture the need for an intersectional inclusion of racial equality in feminist cooperatives such as the organizers of the 2017 Women's March. In the final section, I consider the effects of performing within designated cultural performances. I analyze two types of "cultural" performances that

Gund Kwok commonly undertakes—performances in museums and those in cultural festivals such as the yearly Autumn Moon Festival performance.

I argue that in their various performances for the Chinatown community, the dancers of Gund Kwok perform a complex web of meanings—at times providing important ritual and social functions for the community while simultaneously resisting the traditional tenets of the form and resisting white dominance through a performance of culture. The dancers of Gund Kwok perform important functions for the community while still becoming implicated within ideological frameworks such as multiculturalism, which generates profit for museums and other cultural spaces.

3.1 Performing Ritual

A couple of days after the New Year's parade in Boston's Chinatown in 2017, I noticed Youtube had a video of the event.²⁷⁷ The winds had been gusty and the temperatures raw. Spectators surrounding the lion dancers were bundled up in heavy winter coats, hats, and boots. As the cymbal players began, lions spilled into the street—a blossoming of pink, red, yellow. A flurry of snow fell around five dancing lions as they begin their opening sequence. The snowstorm that hit New England was so bad that all the buses from New Hampshire where I was living at the time had been cancelled, and I had to fail in my promise to help Gund Kwok in the parade. Yet a substantial crowd watched—little kids in their snowsuits, their parents trying to keep them in a warm

²⁷⁷ Mandy Chan, "GK Gund Kwok! Boston Chinatown Lunar New Year 2017 Parade," *Youtube*, Feb. 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3jOu8NbGxE>.

embrace, people with cameras squatting to get a better glimpse. The lion dancers begin the introductory choreography and maneuvered toward the oranges and lettuce on chairs lined up in front of them. Eating the lettuce and oranges is symbolic of bringing prosperity to the community. I could imagine how cold the dancers must have been, their fingers trying to clutch the inside of the lion head, or trying to grasp the waists of their partners in front of them. They remained outside all day after this opening ceremony, moving to various businesses in Chinatown in order to spread luck and wishes of wealth for the new year. The women of Gung Kwok were not going to deny the Chinese American community this ritual service or themselves the chance to show that it is equally effective when women execute it because of Boston's winter weather.

I call the lion dance a ritual because it meets anthropologist Victor Turner's definition: "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, [and] having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers."²⁷⁸ It conjures tales of mythical beings and has the power to bring luck and cleanse space. Rituals have an important role in the construction and maintenance of tradition. As Turner writes, they are "stereotyped sequence[s] of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests."²⁷⁹ The Chinese New Year (also called the Lunar New Year) provides an apt example of the usage of lion dances for ritual means in modern times. The symbols and narratives related to the lion dance, gathered

²⁷⁸ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19.

²⁷⁹ Victor Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual," *Science* 179, issue 4078, (1973): 1100-1105, 1100.

over the centuries, have become a rich mix of nebulous meanings, stemming from Buddhism, local folk religions, and Chinese philosophy.²⁸⁰ One of the major narratives associated with the New Year ritual is the legend of *nian shou* (年兽), a formidable beast who was believed to have possessed the body of a bull and the head of a lion. In ancient times, the *nian shou* terrorized a small village in China year after year, always appearing around the new year. Eventually, the villagers made a costume out of bamboo, which was lion-like in appearance, and along with loud banging on pots and pans, they successfully scared away the beast. Today, lion dancers continue this tradition as they travel—dressed in costumes, flanked by flag holders, and lively musicians—to visit multiple businesses in Boston’s Chinatown.

Lion dancing during the Chinese New Year is similar to Christmas caroling for many secular North Americans. The religious aspect has faded, but it remains a part of shared tradition. Yet, for many, the ritual is more than just a spectacle, and as lion dance scholar Joey Yap suggests, the dance continues to hold spiritual value. Yap notes that the lion dance brings a sense of power to performers and audiences, such that the lion can be “harnessed to become a guardian, protector, a creator and a diviner for a group or community.”²⁸¹ While the ritual impact has lessened for some, many of the business and restaurants in Chinatown still consider it prudent to have the lion dancers cleanse their shops once a year, and they provide the lion dancers with money-filled red envelopes known as *hong bao* to ensure they will come back next year. (Notably, former Boston

²⁸¹ Joey Yap, *The Art of Lion Dance* (Kuala Lumpur: Joey Yap Research Group Sdn. Bhd., 2016), 44.

lion dancer Ted Woo says that the money has little role in the decision to participate. “It’s like a nickel to pick up a dime. It’s more about keeping tradition than anything else.”²⁸²)

As a ritual performance, lion dancing has various social aspects. Madeline Slovenz’s ethnographic study of New York City lion dance groups in the 1980s found that the ritual function of lion dancing extended further than the lion’s capacity to activate a divine connection; it allowed kung fu schools to claim territory in Chinatown and to negotiate community-based relationships. She writes that for kung fu schools connected to tongs and other underground political organizations, “the efficacy of the ritual annually recharges Chinatown’s social and political fabric. . . conflat[ing] spiritual acts with political and personal issues.”²⁸³ Lion dances allowed participants the opportunity to reaffirm their social networks through attachments to their kung fu schools, their masters, and supporters. In that era, lion dancers often served as brokers between organizations, helping to settle differences and acting as protectors for business owners. Kung fu schools and their lion dance teams signified important loyalties. While the age of underground tongs and their connections to lion dance companies has subsided, lion dance performances have given way to other sorts of community connections. Moving through town as lions, the dancers of Gung Kwok pollinate Chinatown like bees—bringing luck, symbolically cleaning nooks and crannies of restaurants of evil spirits, and cementing friendships with shop owners to forge new relationships and lay down fresh networks.

²⁸² Ted Woo (former lion dancer) in discussion with the author, November 28, 2017.

²⁸³ Madeline Anita Slovenz, “The Year is a Wild Animal’ Lion Dancing in Chinatown,” *The Drama Review* 31, no. 3 (1987), 79.

Dance Studies scholar Judith Hamera addressed the relationships between communities and dance companies in her book, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*. She argues that dance communities help to constitute cities, often through commonplace activities. For example, she expresses how “dancers’ social, relational maps may rewrite Los Angeles’s literal landscape as a series of connections between cheaper shoes, good teachers, and understanding healers, but the social possibilities (or the isolation) organized by technique often exceeds material space.”²⁸⁴ In a similar way, the women of Gung Kwok do not simply reflect and reenact ancient tradition but continue to produce new meanings for the Chinatown community through their annual ritual performance. As sociologist Émile Durkheim suggests, ritual actions provide individuals with a community through shared investments in meaning.²⁸⁵ Participation in ritual activity connects individuals to a social order, “which bind[s] the individual to his society.”²⁸⁶ This affective link, experienced through ritual enactment, stirs a powerful collective strength.²⁸⁷

Adriana Li touches on the affective stir generated through performances of traditional culture. Of her experiences performing in the Chinese New Year ritual procession, she wrote on the Boston Chinatown Blog:

Being the head for 175,000 people at the Boston Women's March, or doing back to back performances for two prestigious museums in Massachusetts do not compare in some ways [to the Chinese New Year parade]. Those were life

²⁸⁴ Hamera, “Dancing Communities,” 12.

²⁸⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁸⁷ For more on this topic in reference to Asian American dance specifically, see Yutian Wong, “Choreographing Asian America.”

changing experiences, [that have] prepared me for what counts most in my heart: marching those streets [of Chinatown for Chinese New Year], covering every corner that my grandmother and I would turn every weekend in my youth. [Now] I'll be there as the lion, blessing every business and area where our memories now lay in the air, only for me to carry on. The faint familiar of what once was, will now become an opening for a new chapter in my life. And I will be paying it forward to our name and where we came from, on the streets of Chinatown.²⁸⁸

Gund Kwok's performance of ritual is complex in that the women simultaneously perform tradition for the community while subverting the same tradition by flouting the male-only custom. Considering that lion dance costumes are constructed as historically and symbolically male, I posit that female lion dancers can be conceptualized as performing in male drag. Female lion dancers both subvert gender roles and craft new identities through the lion dance costuming and choreography.

Scholarship on female-to-male drag offers some insight into how the women of Gund Kwok subvert the masculinity of the lion dance. Judith Butler defines drag as a theatrical style that often includes parody and works to complicate fixed gender categories through revealing them as non-essentialized, socially constructed formations.²⁸⁹ While female lion dancers do not parody masculinity, they do adopt a form of male mimicry. American Studies scholar Jack (also known as Judith) Halberstam describes male mimicry whereby the performer "takes on a clearly identifiable form of male masculinity and attempts to reproduce it, sometimes with an ironic twist and

²⁸⁸ Adriana Li, "Chinese New Year Butterflies," *Boston Chinatown Blog*, February 11, 2017, <http://www.bostonchinatownblog.org/2017/02/chinese-new-year-butterflies.html?m=1>.

²⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 176.

sometimes without.”²⁹⁰ Women who practice male mimicry do not necessarily perform a desire to be men, but rather a desire for the power that accompanies being male. In other words, cross-dressing is a means of experiencing the power associated with a male persona.²⁹¹ Female lion dancers do not necessarily see their performance as a display of drag. As Halberstam points out in *Female Masculinities*, performances of masculinity appear less overt than male-to-female drag. Halberstam ascribes this phenomenon to the fact that femininity is perceived as being already excessively performative, whereas masculinity is seen as “natural,” or non-performative. To illustrate, if men donned traditional female costuming to perform the historically Chinese female fan dances, observers and performers would agree that they were performing drag. Unearthing the ways in which female drag functions in lion dances helps to tease out social and political complexities that exist at the intersections between gender, race, and material objects such as the lion head and clothing.

Butler is quick to remind us that people do not simply wear gender like a costume, switching up daily in whatever fashion they prefer. It is, rather, a lifelong practice of performed gender scripts. That said, Butler acknowledges the profound potential that stage performances have in subverting gender categories through drag. Not only do such performances reveal the fluidity of gender categories, they also allow women access to the masculine realm of power and strength. Halberstam argues that by delinking masculinity from male bodies, performances of female masculinity can develop an

²⁹⁰ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 250.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

alternative masculinity that is “produced by, for, and within women.”²⁹² This performance of masculinity enables female lion dances to challenge gender normativity in a number of ways—especially allowing for a resistance to stereotypes attached to Chinese American women. Performing masculinity not only exposes the fragility of gender categories, but it also works to counter these stereotypical gender scripts. The thick, heavy costumes cover the bodies of female dancers in a way that disallows the audience to visually consume them as stereotypes of Asian American women encourage, and the performance of masculinist kung fu choreography charges the performance with a power not normally afforded to female dancers.

Like Butler, Anthropology and American Studies scholar Dorinne Kondo argues that clothing works to incite memory and is also a way of crafting identity.²⁹³ Drawing from Butler’s notion of gender performativity, Kondo suggests that identity is not biological but produced through repeated practices such as ritual that can be constructed and undone. One way to construct this subjectivity is through costuming. She suggests, “we perform ourselves with the costumes, props, and theoretical conventions at our disposal.”²⁹⁴ Eventually, the clothing, or the objects used, become instrumental in shaping who we are. Moreover, Kondo argues that through “enacting/subverting familiar tropes of these and other identities,” both fashion and theater are able to “underscore the performative nature of gender, race, and nation.”²⁹⁵ Costumes, do not simply reflect

²⁹² Butler, “Gender Trouble,” 181.

²⁹³ Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35-36.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

cultural pride or elicit cultural memory but come to shape identity in ways that carry subversive potential.

While costuming might, at first glance, seem a superficial means to accessing power, it carries important implications for identity construction. According to Kathryn Rosenfeld, the importance of costuming in drag performance lies in its connections to mimesis and desire.²⁹⁶ She writes, “desire is both visceral and intellectual, and also includes the political desire of marginalized subjects for freedom of movement within the fields of identity and power.”²⁹⁷ Style, performed through costuming, constructs individual self-representation and engenders a sense of group identification. In performing maleness through the process of mimetically performing drag, the women of Gund Kwok “alter the nature of power-over as it operates in the general culture, and claim power for themselves.”²⁹⁸

During Chinese New Year, Gund Kwok lion dancers claim the streets, snow or shine, to showcase Chinese culture and perform a ritual function and ensure traditional rituals are maintained, but in revised ways. In doing so, the women of Gund Kwok display for the community that women are proficient custodians of customary practice, while also illustrating resistance to the male stronghold on lion dances.

²⁹⁶ Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Drag King Magic,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, issue 3-4 (2003), 201-219.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

3. 2 Performing Social Activism

Three lions took the center space while six women stood on stage left to play the drums. Amid a sea of pussy hats when 175,000 women went out for the Boston Women's March to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump on January 21st, 2017, the women of Gund Kwok put over their heads a different sort of feline during the pre-march rally. The women performed on a small stage in the center of the crowds. Wearing the black Gund Kwok uniform with a red sash, the drummers wore serious facial expressions, reflecting the grim political moment, and yet their arms seemed activated by a vigor I had not seen in previous performances. They beat the drums with a pent-up anger as if perhaps the head of the drum stood for something else—the patriarchy perhaps? The head of a president elect who publicly advocated racist and misogynist ideologies maybe? The dancers under the lions onstage also seemed stronger, their movements more urgent and punctuated. Each time a dancer's face emerged for a moment a cheer from the crowds could be heard.

Gund Kwok's participation in the Women's March was significant, not just performing as women but clearly as Asian American women. They not only made clear their call for racial and gender equality but made visible the diversity of women in this pan-female call to action. While this was not their first performance in the political milieu, having performed at the 2006 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Gund Kwok performing more overtly within national political frameworks represents a shift from the types of performances lion dancers tend to engage in within Chinatown.

Gund Kwok has little interest in promoting themselves as the most technically advanced group in New England. This became evident to me when they did not compete in the New England Lion Dance Competition.²⁹⁹ Cheng Imm Tan attended, as did some members of the company. The event seemed to recall the idea of lion dances as a demonstration of gang strength and claiming of territory. One group, performing on a raised platform, swung the lion too hard and fell off the platform, several feet, crying out in pain. Another young man had to be rushed off to a corner of the auditorium to receive substantial medical attention after an accident. A Gund Kwok member later explained to me that competing does not align with Gund Kwok's mission to build community and empower women. Gund Kwok is not interested in re-performing aspects that made the lion dance masculine earlier decades. They are not interested in defining and marking territory, or claiming to be the most physically dominant of the companies. Rather they focus on giving Asian American women access to spaces not normally afforded to them, thus broadening the intention and function of the lion dance to promote women's rights.

To fulfill this goal, Gund Kwok agrees to certain performances and not others. For example, a regional competition might not warrant their energies but events that are geared toward providing young women access to improved social prospects are highly valued. In June 2015, for instance, the group supported an event benefiting the Asian Sisters Participating in Reaching Excellence, Inc, (ASPIRE) program. ASPIRE was

²⁹⁹ The New England Lion Dance Competition began in 2011 in Worcester, Massachusetts. It was organized by Boa Newgate and Phát Nguyễn. The competition is now supported by two non-profit organizations, The Southeast Coalition of Central Massachusetts and Chinatown Main Street of Boston. Groups from all over New England compete in the event. "2016 New England National Lion Dance Competition," Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1040493132745988/>.

announcing the recipients of a scholarship fund, which was held at the Chinatown Neighborhood Center. Gund Kwok performed a lion dance for about twenty young women heading into their first year of college and their families at the evening ceremony in which two would receive \$1,000 in recognition of their community service and academic successes.

The company's website reflects Gund Kwok's focus by sharing news and photos of powerful Asian and Asian American women, such as the story of Katherine Sui Fun Cheung, the first Chinese-American woman to become a licensed pilot in 1932; Natalie Nakase, the first Asian American female in pro-basketball; Mongolian girls becoming eagle hunters to take over a centuries old the male-dominated role; and Olympic Hockey player, Julie Chu. It also has discussions of Asian female stereotypes and the movement to overcome racism and sexualization. By underscoring these activist and political aims, Gund Kwok has demonstrated the ways in which lion dance practices can serve goals beyond competitions and performances.

3.3 Performing Culture

At the Museum

In this section and the next, I unpack some of the tensions inherent within performing Asian culture in public spaces as they pertain to Gund Kwok. I scrutinize the tension between the benefits of performing Chinese culture and how ethnically marked bodies perform within state-based and city wide multicultural agendas while questioning

how these meanings shift between the space of the museum—an elite institution— and the space of the Chinese cultural festival—an internal, Boston Chinatown community developed initiative.

Gund Kwok is invited annually to perform at museums in Boston and the surrounding area. In February 2016, for example, Gund Kwok performed as part of a Chinese New Year celebration at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.³⁰⁰ Other performers included Syncopasian, an a cappella group, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which performed East Asian-originated songs. Priyanka Satpute, a member of the group, was quoted in *The Daily Free Press*, the independent student newspaper at Boston University: “It really means a lot to us to be performing for Lunar New Year, which is a pretty significant Asian celebration, and to be performing at the MFA, of all things.”³⁰¹ The event, which was free and open to the public, featured Korean, Vietnamese, and Indian elements as well as Chinese and crafting stations where attendees could make decorations. It also featured the unveiling of the new Chinese Song Dynasty Gallery, a permanent exhibit of works from the Song Dynasty.

As Satpute’s comment suggests, the Museum of Fine Arts is indeed one of Boston’s most elite spaces; the event provided an important opportunity for Asian performers to demonstrate their craft to a large audience.³⁰² It also functioned to draw

³⁰⁰ Samantha Bastress, “Culture Shines Through at MFA’s Lunar New Year Celebration,” *The Daily Free Press* (Boston, MA), Feb. 11, 2016, <http://dailyfreepress.com/2016/02/11/mfa-lunar-new-year-celebration/>

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² The article states that hundreds attended at the event.

spectators to return to see the China's Golden Age Collection and pay the museum's hefty admission fee.³⁰³

Gund Kwok dancers are not paid to perform in any of their performances since the group is volunteer based. The troupe is paid by the performance requester and funds go towards the troupe operations and scholarships (per direction of Cheng Imm Tan). Therefore, Gund Kwok members perform free cultural labor within these cultural events. Untangling the issues raised through the performance of culture is difficult. Gund Kwok's participation in this event enlisted their live bodies to sell exotic culture to the public, engendering a sort of window dressing of amalgamated Asian culture to promote an exhibit at the museum. Yet, Gund Kwok and the other performers also gain opportunities for an inter-ethnic shared experience and visibility in elite spaces. Dance Studies theorist Marta Savigliano elegantly captures the complexity of this dynamic in her book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. She makes the claim that the imperialist and capitalist ideologies of the West have engendered a system that stokes a passionate desire to consume exotic culture. In this system, "exotic others laboriously cultivate passion-ness in order to be desired, consumed, and thus recognized in a world increasingly ruled by postmodern standards."³⁰⁴ While colonized performers are caught in a system that forces "autoexoticism," Savigliano also argues that within the system,

³⁰³ Currently adult tickets are \$25.

³⁰⁴ Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 212.

performers have the capacity to recognize the “Western exoticism machinery”³⁰⁵ and locate power for themselves through dance.³⁰⁶

Critics of multicultural events express concern over the way culture is represented in these spaces because of the broader implications within state-based agendas.

According to Stuart Hall, the term *multiculturalism* broadly “references the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up.”³⁰⁷ In other words, multiculturalism is not necessarily a means to celebrate cultural difference through social programs and economic support, as much as it is a superficial way for nations to superficially deal with the integration of multiple cultures.

For Lisa Lowe, the discourse of multiculturalism is an example of hegemonic control of the state and the ruling class. She writes,

The terrain of multiculturalism is then marked by the incorporative process by which a ruling group elicits the ‘consent’ of racial, ethnic, or class minority groups through the promise of equal participation and representation. . .³⁰⁸

Yet, Lowe believes that “the terrain of multiculturalism also provides for the activities of racial, class, and sexual minority groups who organize and contest that domination.”³⁰⁹

As Lowe suggests, this hegemonic nature of multiculturalism both implicates minority group members while allowing spaces for the contestation of power.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 212.

³⁰⁷ Stuart Hall, “Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural Question.” In *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, ‘Transruptions,’* edited by Barnor Hesse (London: Zed Books, 2000), 209.

³⁰⁸ Lowe, “Immigrant Acts,” 42.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

Scholar Karin Aguilar-San Juan argues that multiculturalism often has ties to the marketplace in ways that force Asian Americans to package themselves for mainstream consumption.³¹⁰ Her term *marketplace multiculturalism* illuminates the ways in which cultural production serves the multicultural agendas aimed at bringing diversity into spaces for economic purposes while not actually helping to benefit most community members. She reveals how marketplace multiculturalism encourages areas of difference to attract tourists, increase real estate sales, and enhance the distinctiveness of an area.³¹¹ A museum that boasts a collection of rare Asian artifacts and live cultural performances certainly adds to the interest of an area, bringing tourists and locals alike to spend money in these spaces.

Another point of consideration is that multicultural performances reflect a common trend of collapsing multiple Asian cultures into one event without much recognition for cultural differences. Yutian Wong reflects that this type of programming, which blurs Asian distinctions, creates a collection of “uncontextualized, ahistoricized, and apoliticized practices.”³¹² The lumping of Gund Kwok into this and other types of multicultural programming gestures toward some of the darker side of multicultural ideology, which I will explore more in depth in this section.

While the museum’s third annual Chinese New Year event in 2016 is a demonstration of cultural inclusivity on the part of the museum, it is also a means of using Asian culture to gain increased spectatorship at the venue, which houses a large

³¹⁰ Aguilar-San Juan “Little Saigons,” 119.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Wong, “Choreographing Asian America,” 10.

collection of Chinese art and artifacts. Though all venues seek to increase spectatorship, performances like this link exotic culture to the accumulation of profit. Another event in 2012 that included Gund Kwok, the Peabody Essex Museum's "Celebrate China" event, was co-sponsored by the Boston location of the Mandarin Oriental hotel chain, which suggests its role in increasing attention to tourist attractions. As the museum planner told the business event magazine, "We think of Celebrate China as an educational and cultural program first, and a means of promotion second. We are always primarily about the experience. We have many ways of marketing the museum, but the very best publicity of all comes from a fun, stimulating, satisfying day out."³¹³

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts that museums are undergoing a "crisis of identity" because they must compete with other attractions in a tourist economy that is providing "experience, immediacy, and what the [tourism] industry calls adventure."³¹⁴ Because static objects no longer hold their former appeal, museums are becoming more service oriented and are including more installations to be more evocative.³¹⁵ Gund Kwok's live performances promote museums' permanent collection. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also notes, exotic exhibitions are lucrative strategies for museums. As participants in what Sharon Zukin terms the *symbolic economy*, Gund Kwok aids in the production of symbols, which produces a currency of commercial exchange that enhances

³¹³ Jenny Berg, "Peabody Essex Museum's Free Family Event Provides 'Best Publicity of All,' Says Planner," *Bizbash*, March 14, 2012, <https://www.bizbash.com/peabody-essex-museums-free-family-event-provides-best-publicity-of-all-says-planner/boston/story/22791#.WmzPLTdrw2y>.

³¹⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the economic integrity of a specific location.³¹⁶ Zukin writes that museums act as “specialized sites of consumption,” to participate in a symbolic economy in which culture translates to capital gain. For one part, “they make ordinary people more aware of the elites’ cultural consumption.”³¹⁷ In other words, if elite members of society take their families to the museum to witness cultural performances, and photographs of the museum’s colorful lion dance event and write ups frame these events as sophisticated, other members of society will also want to take part. The risk is that the dancers of lion dance can become Orientalist spectacles as part of multicultural programming.

But exotic displays in museums not only translate to increased spectatorship (and profit) within museums, displaying culture; framing it within the museum also works to demarcate the lines between national or dominant culture and the “other.” In his chapter “Census, Map, Museum,” Benedict Anderson reflects on the constructed nature of museums, the “museumizing imagination.” He suggests that museums that sprung up in Southeast Asia during colonialism were a means for colonizers of Southeast Asia to paint clear the lines of belonging and identity between the colonizer and colonized. He writes that museums “increasingly linked to tourism, allowed the state to appear as the guardian of a generalized, but also local, tradition.”³¹⁸

While the hazards of performing ethnic culture in museum spaces are many, these types of performances are also valuable in that they allow individual performers to

³¹⁶ Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 24.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) 186.

connect with other artists in their community, share their culture with a public that is perhaps unfamiliar with Chinese customs, and perform in highly trafficked spaces. Asian organizations in Boston often support these multicultural performances, realizing the impact that they have for their communities. The Chinese New Year performance at the MFA was presented in partnership with the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, the Korean Cultural Society of Boston, The Vietnamese American Initiative for Development (VietAID), the Chinese Culture Connection, and the National Museum of Korea (NMK). From my interviews with Gund Kwok members, it is clear that the benefits outweigh the negatives in performing lion dances in these multicultural events.

In the next section, I take a fuller view of Gund Kwok's role in cultural festivals. These are events that have been initiated and supported mainly by Chinese American organizations in Boston such as Chinatown Main Street and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), but also by Mayor Marty Walsh and other business sponsors. Though these events are spaces of community-building and creative enterprise, they too are tied to the capitalist production of space through the promotion of cultural diversity.

In Cultural Festivals

By the time I arrived at the September 2016 Lantern Festival, a large group of spectators has already drawn near. We stood shoulder to shoulder watching five lion dance companies, including Gund Kwok, take turns displaying their skills on the mid-

sized, pop-up stage. The bold drums that coaxed the lions also seemed to draw the crowds. I saw some people clearly detour from their original to get a glimpse. Children waved Chinese flags from their perches on the jungle gym high above the stage.

I saw groups of lion dancers stretching and getting ready to perform on the outskirts of the stage. But I also noticed that politicians and sponsors took the stage at various times. In addition to praising the fantastic diversity of Boston's community and congratulating the Chinatown Main Street association on a prosperous event, they called attention to their own political or commercial agendas. A large, plastic banner told attendees the names of the sponsoring businesses and organizations. The intricate interactions between market, state, and cultural laborers in the neoliberal context were clear. Lion dancers became active participants in the strengthening of culture for politically and economically driven initiatives.

For local politicians, speaking of diversity inclusion to a group of diverse citizens might garner votes, while the business sponsors present likely saw opportunities for economic profit. Zukin addresses how the language of cultural diversity promoted in the sponsors' language is increasingly utilized as a means to promote political and economic renewal. She writes that "elected officials who, in the 1960s, might have criticized immigrants and non-traditional living arrangements, now consciously market the city's diverse opportunities for cultural consumptions. They also welcome the employment offered by new culture industries and expanding cultural institutions—as a part of the

cities' new comparative advantage in the 'symbolic economy.'"³¹⁹ According to Zukin, the investment of politicians and corporations in low-income and minority group areas has increased in recent years because they now realize that residents of these areas represent large markets for consumer goods.³²⁰

Gund Kwok's participation in these types of festivals reveals the complexity of performing in cultural events. In this section, my aim is to situate Gund Kwok's role as volunteer cultural laborers in these types of cultural practices. Gund Kwok's involvement simultaneously assists in the manufacturing of saleable culture, while also helping to fortify a sense of tradition and cultural difference, valued by themselves and the Chinese community. Through their performances, lion dancers kindle an affective register—cultural authenticity, nostalgia, and Oriental fantasy—that helps to sell more tangible Asian products at the festival. For non-Chinese spectators, the lion dance performances offer a touristy display of "exotic" culture, infused with the necessary markers of Asian culture expected within ethnic tourist spaces. Their participation in stimulating passion as Savigliano might say, provides opportunity for politicians and businesses to benefit from the performance of ethnic culture, while allowing small Chinese businesses and community members the opportunity to capitalize on the event. Yet, lion dancers also reaffirm Chinese cultural heritage for the Chinese American community, promoting a celebration of cultural alterity while reinforcing cultural identity.

³¹⁹ Sharon Zukin, "Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardisation in Spaces of Consumption," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5-6 (1998): 825-839, 836-837.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 834.

Savigliano suggests the need to sell passionate performances is “recognizable even today when the world show business industry chooses to offer a strong, passionate, dancy dish to its hungry public.”³²¹ Performances especially incite passion, which works to sell the “other.” As sociologists C. Michael Hall and Jan Rath write, “this process amounts to a commodification of diversity, and it has created conditions in which culture—immigrant and minority cultures in particular—can be understood as an economic resource for cities.”³²² In this way, according to Hall and Rath, performances in these festivals are in danger of becoming reduced to the tourist gaze. As they note, the performative display of culture serves the consumptive desires of outsider audiences, and runs the risk of being subject to voyeurism and stereotyping.³²³

Commodifying cultural performances often leads to the flattening of cultural nuances in the prioritizing of consumptive pleasure. Producers of cultural performance events often become less concerned with cultural specificity, as they lump ethnicities together under a pan-ethnic identity, thus visibilizing certain ethnicities while obscuring others. For instance, the August Moon Festival, sponsored by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), is framed in promotional materials as a Chinese event designed “to offer the general public and to educate people on Chinese culture, such as lion dancing, Chinese opera, music and folk dance, and martial arts.”³²⁴ Yet, the

³²¹ Savigliano, “Tango and the Political Economy of Passion,” 88.

³²² C. Michael Hall and Jan Rath, “Tourism, Migration and Place Advantage in the Global Cultural Economy.” In *Tourism, Ethnic diversity and the City*, edited by Jan Rath (London: Routledge, 2007): 1-24. 17.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³²⁴ “CCBA Presents the 48th Annual Chinatown August Moon Festival,” June 13, 2017, <http://ccbaboston.org/en/ccba-presents-the-48th-annual-chinatown-august-moon-festival>.

performers of Gund Kwok are not all ethnically Chinese. As a result, spectators at the August Moon Festival might easily assume that all performers in the festival are of Chinese descent, and the Moon Festival might also be wrongly assumed to be a festival that pertains to Chinese culture only—when in reality, Vietnamese people also celebrate the holiday.³²⁵

Despite the risks, these festivals are an important economic strategy for bringing wealth into the community. Chinese organizations and community members have decided to market cultural festivals because of the potential benefits they offer. According to Serene K. Tan, Chinatown’s inhabitants “have a heightened sense of awareness with regards to the marketability of their culture.”³²⁶ Therefore, members of the Chinese community are fully aware of what it means to manufacture and sell their cultural heritage, making the process one of reciprocal exchange. In this way, cultural capital is not exploitative per se but reflects “a mutually inclusive process.”³²⁷

The shared economic benefits for the Chinatown community became clear to me when I went to the 48th Annual August Moon Festival performance in 2017 with two of my Taiwanese friends. After viewing Gund Kwok’s performance, we stood in line for about an hour to eat Cantonese food at a nearby restaurant, we bought some items from local vendors, and purchased Taiwanese-style bubble tea from a small shop along with

³²⁵ The Vietnamese American Initiative for Development (VietAID) does sponsor its own Autumn Festival in October.

³²⁶ Serene K. Tan, “Making/ Marketing Heritage: Chinatowns in Southeast Asia.” In *New Economic Spaces in Asian Cities: From Industrial Restructuring to the Cultural Turn*, edited by Peter W. Daniels, K.C. Ho and Thomas A. Hutton (New York, Routledge, 2012), 242.

³²⁷ Ibid.

some cakes from Hong Kong. There was variation in the ethnic backgrounds of the vendors, with stalls representing Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. There was also variation in the types of things that were being sold, from those selling small home decorations to those selling insurance, and summer camp opportunities for kids, suggesting how a range of Chinese cultural and class backgrounds find benefit in the festival environment.

While the sale of culture is beneficial to multiple individuals, restaurants, and businesses in Chinatown, these festivals are not solely economically driven but provide an opportunity for insider community members to mobilize political aims. Ethnomusicologist Su Zheng reflects how Chinese cultural festivals have long provided spaces for locals to gather in order to “support or denounce contemporary political affairs.”³²⁸ Likewise, Chiou-ling Yeh has described how the Chinese New Year Festival in San Francisco originated in part because of the political needs of the Chinese American community. She posits that the first highly organized and public festival in 1953 was staged response to the political context of the Cold War era. In essence, Chinese Americans hoped to demonstrate American democratic values while “diffusing anti-Chinese sentiments aroused by the Korean War (1950-1953).”³²⁹ Most Chinese festivals had until that point been celebrated in private homes or smaller venues, but Chinese community leaders strove to align with early multicultural rhetoric stemming from

³²⁸ Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/ Chinese America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 188.

³²⁹ Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1.

postwar liberalism and Cold War politics that espoused notions of assimilation and cultural pluralism. According to Yeh, “these leaders argued that preserving an ethnic cultural celebration not only fended off communism, but also safeguarded the strain of American democracy that championed ethnic diversity.”³³⁰ Yeh describes how lion and dragon dances provided important symbolic meanings:

[D]ragons and lions were important artifacts in the festival because they not only enticed ethnic sentiments, but also showcased multiculturalism: on the one hand, they were symbols that Chinese immigrants could relate to, as they embodied good fortune; on the other hand, they manifested a kind of American democratic practice that encouraged ethnic expression.³³¹

Likewise, I speculate that the origins of one of Boston Chinatowns oldest and most well-attended public events—the August Moon Festival—also had important political considerations. The first iteration of the festival was organized in 1970 by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association as Boston’s Chinatown was undergoing major historical changes. Chinatown resident Beverly Wing reported in the *Sampan* that before that time, most Chinese holidays were not big community-wide celebrations until the advent of the August Moon festival celebration.³³² Yet, the establishment of a festival was important within the budding neoliberal context of the 1970s, when the government shifted social and economic responsibility to minority communities, calling on them to “pick themselves up by the bootstraps.”³³³ This was a daunting task considering that

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid., 51-52.

³³² Ling-Mei Wong, “The Evolution of August Moon Celebrations in Boston’s Chinatown,” *The Sampan* (Boston, MA), Aug. 8, 2014.

³³³ Omi and Winant argue that this “bootstraps” model marks a failure on behalf of whites to consider that racially defined minorities encounter a different set of circumstances than earlier European immigrants.

Boston's Chinatown was experiencing a series of major hardships. The influx of immigrants post-1965 had led to a population boom while the physical space of Chinatown was shrinking. Expansion projects such as a Massachusetts Turnpike extension through Chinatown in the mid-1950s had displaced many residents, which had far reaching repercussions in the following decades. In response to a growing number of issues, leaders of the Chinatown community met to find solutions to increased poverty and social ills.

Prominent Chinatown community member Davis Woo ended up chairing then Boston Mayor Kevin White's "Task Force for the Resolution of Chinatown Grievances, in 1969, which revealed community concerns about deficiencies in healthcare, public safety, housing for the elderly, police protection, and the environment.³³⁴ Along with Task Force Vice Chair Frank Chin, members of the CCBA brought together divergent sectors of the community to advocate for new services and attract more resources and attention from the city.³³⁵ A part of their solution to these issues was to create more community based cultural events, which could increase revenue for Chinatown while building up community involvement.

Another important effect of the creation of the festival was that it helped dismantle public perceptions of the enclave as rife with crime and prostitution. In the 1960s and 70s, Boston's Chinatown was known as the "Combat Zone" because of the

Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States Third Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43.

³³⁴ Sherry Dong, "Boston Chinatown Remembers Davis Woo," *CHSNE Chronicle* 17, no. 1, (Fall 2011).

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

large number of sex shops and strip clubs that often stood side by side with grocery stores and restaurants. A family oriented Chinese festival, where children demonstrated kung fu skills and teenagers and young adults performed cheerful lion dances, allowed the Chinatown community to promote a more wholesome picture of Chinatown to the general public, while also working to mobilize efforts within the community to improve the economic and social environment of area.

Lion dances are particularly effective performances for these types of events because they can easily attract a crowd through their colorful costumes, spectacular moves, and clear expressions of Asian culture. The loud beat of the drums is a conspicuous and accessible mode of cultural display. While attending these festivals, I personally saw passersby change their pathway because of its draw. Though lion dance performers are not paid to perform in these events, their performances are a part of a larger trajectory in which Chinese community members strategically pull from ethnicity as capital to increase revenue in Chinatown and reshape public perceptions of the Chinatown community. Gund Kwok receives non-monetary benefits for their performances. According to those I interviewed, the performances provide valuable opportunities to demonstrate one's skills. As Adriana Li reflected, they also allow the dancers to provide a service to the community, exemplified by "how happy the kids and adults are when they see us."³³⁶

³³⁶ Adriana Li (Gund Kwok member) in discussion with the author, October 20, 2016.

Examining Gund Kwok's multiple sites of performance exposes both the benefits and difficulties activated while performing one's "ethnic" culture. In a national and local sociopolitical framework that espouses, and benefits from, cultural difference, minority communities are often left to negotiate how to use cultural practices such as the lion dance to promote and define culture. It is also within these spaces that cultural products are commodified, strategized, and re-made.

Chapter 4

Cultivating the Sisterhood Within Gund Kwok

Gund Kwok's website, rich with information, highlights the value of joining an all-women's group over an emphasis on necessarily learning the lion dance techniques. The first page of the website opens with a variety of pictures, including images of the lion and dragon but also photographs of over twenty women, huddled together, smiling and posing for the picture. The tone is welcoming, positive, and energetic. The website emphasizes the organization's mission to empower women and gain a community. The "ten reasons to join" page provides the following reasons:

- 1.) Become stronger and more flexible! You'll gain 20+ workout buddies who won't let you quit.
- 2.) Eat, eat and eat lots of food—after practice, random hang-outs, and GK parties. Be prepared!
- 3.) Compete with the men and be as good as they are.
- 4.) Film a movie or TV scene with Matt Damon, Kevin Spacey, and Samantha Brown. . . not to name drop or anything.
- 5.) Need a space to yell and scream? We do a LOT of it here. The louder, the better.
- 6.) Have everyone think you are a badass because you will be one.
- 7.) Clothing swaps. We like to get together and swap clothes that actually fit Asian women.

- 8.) Built-in sisterhood. Have your own group of cheerleaders following you everywhere.
- 9.) Have bragging rights to do something none of your friends can do.
- 10.) Finally, and most important—become powerful in everything you do. Live a bigger life!³³⁷

Clearly the reasons are not necessarily to be taken completely seriously. In fact, as I have described, the “compete” element is something that Gund Kwok doesn’t necessarily prioritize. And the stalking cheerleaders are metaphorical, with members “everywhere,” not to be taken literally. Yet “Built-in sisterhood” is at the very core of Gund Kwok’s mission and it is part of “workout buddies,” the communal eating, and the clothing swaps the list suggests.

A frequent ritual at rehearsals also suggests the importance of community: check-in-time, in which the lion dancers form a circle and share. Though I only witnessed check-ins once, and they do not occur at every rehearsal, Cheng Imm Tan urges the group to each share something about what they have been up to in general, as women and as Asian American women. One by one the dancers share something happening in their lives and the other women respond, in empathy, by sharing a similar problem that they have been dealing with, or simply by listening and offering support. In this way, the rehearsals become more than just a means to train in and perform the lion dance; they become an opportunity to reflect on Asian American female identity and to cement

³³⁷ “10 Reasons Why You Should Lion / Dragon Dance with Gund Kwok,” Oct. 7, 2015, <http://gundkwok.org/10-reasons-why-you-should-lion-dragon-dance-with-gund-kwok/>.

connections within the group. Unsurprisingly, this comradery extends beyond the physical rehearsal space to encompass a symbolic space of the tight-knit realm of sisterhood.

Check-ins served as a significant demarcation between the outside world, where Asian American female experiences are not recognized or valued. In her book *Choreographing Asian America*, Yutian Wong³³⁸ described how check-ins during rehearsals for a Southern California-based dance company called Club O' Noodles provided space for the Asian American participants to cope with outside oppression in an understanding environment while allowing those concerns to translate artistically. She reflects that Club O' Noodles offered “a social space in which Asian American artists [grapple] with questions of form, content, and process markers of identity.”³³⁹ She said the company would often spend a good deal of rehearsal time “establishing cohesive relationships between the members”³⁴⁰ through the rehearsal process but also in discussions of individual feelings about issues related to experiences as Asian American dance practitioners.

The emphasis on collective discourse between members of Cup O' Noodles created a sense that the process and the well-being of community members took precedence over the product, or the quality of the performances. Likewise, the focus on creating alternative spaces for Asian American women takes priority over the quality of the performances of Gund Kwok. As Shaina Lu told me, “we are certainly not the most

³³⁸ Yutian Wong, “Choreographing Asian America.”

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

technical lion dance group in town, nor the best, but that's not really our goal. Our goal is to create this community of women and to show everyone that women can do the lion dance."³⁴¹

Members of Gund Kwok frequently reported that their primary motivation to join the group was a desire to become a member of a sisterhood, a close community of Asian American women. Apart from the "ten reasons why you should lion dance with Gund Kwok," the section that introduces the dancers also highlights this point. For example, alongside her picture, Angela Kao's statement about why she joined Gund Kwok reads in part, "I love being in a group of Asian women where there are so many incredible personalities; but one purpose. We strive to perform our best but have a lot of fun while doing it. There's nothing else like it!"³⁴² A bit further down the page QJ Shi's statement says, "when I first joined, I was looking to challenge my physical abilities, but as time went on, I found myself as a part of a supportive sisterhood."³⁴³ In fact, almost all of the biographical statements emphasize the desire for entrance into a group of sisters above all else, and a shared sentiment that the sisterhood provides irreplaceable value to the company.

Notions of shared community are often portrayed positively as a source of collective empowerment. Yet, the concept of community is a fraught subject within the

³⁴¹ Shaina Lu (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, July 7, 2017.

³⁴² "Our Members," <http://gundkwok.org/members/>.

³⁴³ Ibid.

humanities. Poststructural scholars such as Jacques Derrida³⁴⁴ and Jean Luc Nancy³⁴⁵ have convincingly deconstructed romanticized visions of community. In his influential *Inoperative Community* (1991), for example, Nancy suggests that idealized notions of community encompass a violently universalizing potential and a demand of sacrifice of individual freedom that renders community engagement potentially dangerous. In a similar vein, Miranda Joseph warns against the usage of community in purely idealistic terms. She points toward the “exclusionary and disciplining characteristics of community”³⁴⁶ but also the ways in which community has been deployed as a mechanism of capitalism. Joseph argues that idyllic constructions of community reproduce and rely on the reification of social hierarchies that capitalism implicitly requires.³⁴⁷

Conceptualizations of community have likewise been problematic within Asian American Studies. As I have suggested, even the term *Asian American*, by portraying a singular community obfuscates the varied linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic differences under this umbrella taxonomy.³⁴⁸ Initially used in the 1960s as a means to accrue political clout and draw together groups in alliance against racism, the label has created what Linda Trinh Võ calls an “imagined homogeneity” that reinforces notions of “precarious interchangeability.” For example, the model minority stereotypes attached to this group as a whole have served to justify treating all Asian American groups as if they

³⁴⁴ See Derrida’s commentary on “community without community,” Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 106.

³⁴⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³⁴⁶ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxi.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

³⁴⁸ Deborah Wong, “Speak it Louder,” 131.

have the resources common in the Japanese American community but almost unknown in, for example, the Indonesian American community.³⁴⁹

Sisterhoods, as types of communities, have also not been exempt from folly. White women, in calling for a united feminist sisterhood, have disregarded the large power discrepancies between themselves and women of color, thus reestablishing hierarchies within a pan-female coalition, for more than a century. These tendencies continue today as many feminists fail to account for the intersections of power differentials in race, class, and sexual orientation. On an international scale, scholars and activists have questioned whether sisterhoods sought between Asian women have some of the same risks. Aihwa Ong, for example, points out instances when first world women such as those from China, Taiwan, and Japan, have ignored the historical and cultural differences between themselves and those from the third world, such as those from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia.³⁵⁰

Yet, as feminist scholar Sonia Shah³⁵¹ suggests, some major similarities between the experiences of Asian American women should not be overlooked. The U.S. government and its citizens treat them as a single group and apply racism, stereotypes, and misogyny to them equally. As Shah writes, Asian American women come to “share the same rung on the racial ladder.”³⁵² A coalition based on shared identity can be both

³⁴⁹ Linda Trinh Võ, “Community,” in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, edited by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 33.

³⁵⁰ Aihwa Ong, “Strategic Sisterhood or Sisters in Solidarity? Questions of Communitarianism and Citizenship in Asia,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* (1996): 107-135.

³⁵¹ Sonia Shah, “Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire.”

³⁵² *Ibid.*, xiii.

problematic and politically useful. Dance studies scholar SanSan Kwan posits that “a discourse of community, however flawed, is still a necessary political construct in any project for social mobilization.”³⁵³ She labels her formulation of community as “alternative forms of collectivity, always implicated in formations of power, sometimes resistive, always temporary.”³⁵⁴ While it is vital to recognize the fickle nature of community-based relationships, the risks of forced shared identities, and the inherent social hierarchies present within groups of people, my observations of Gunk Kwok suggest Kwan is right to feel that community formations, especially those that are at odds with mainstream, white culture, offer important functions for their constituents.

In this chapter, I argue that Gund Kwok’s usage of sisterhood, despite its limitations, carves out an alternative community that contends with modes of racism and patriarchy, and resists the tendency to assimilate into white, mainstream culture. Sisterhood as a strategy offers an opportunity to take refuge from a racist and patriarchal social environment and to confront inequalities from within the confines of the group. The sisterhood Gund Kwok offers is less than idyllic, marked by the fractures and hierarchies of most community-based human relationships, and yet, the usage of an ideology of a sisterhood is still politically and socially potent. Knowing themselves the limitations of shared community, the dancers of Gund Kwok use the ideology of sisterhood to develop a supportive group of women who have each other’s backs, literally

³⁵³ SanSan Kwan, “Kinesthetic City,” 11.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

and figuratively, in the face of patriarchy and racism, while countering long-held histories of the lion dance as embedded within exclusionary brotherhoods.

From my outsider perspective, I analyze the micro-aspects of community formation within Gung Kwok to suggest that the friendships and relationships that develop through participation in Gung Kwok have bearing on the wider community. Members, sharing the common language of lion dance techniques, establish networks throughout the city, bringing with them their philosophies and missions for social activism. These connections also have important functions for the individual women themselves. On the concrete floor in the basement of the China Trade center, in private homes and other social venues, trust is established, solidarity and shared experiences work to shorten the synapse between generations of women. Ideas gestated within these spaces move forward and become activated within the larger urban sphere. In her book, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City*, Judith Hamera suggests such intimacies are created between dancers through shared daily practice.³⁵⁵ Hamera argues that “both concert dance and amateur practice are laboratories for examining and revisioning the myriad complex interrelations between gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture in urban life.”³⁵⁶ Participating in dance communities, she argues, “exposes aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporeality, and irreducible difference.”³⁵⁷ In this way, Hamera positions a community of dancers as

³⁵⁵ Hamera, “Dancing Communities.”

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 1.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.

active shapers of their group identity to highlight how different personalities might come together to produce and preserve dance forms and challenge the status quo. In a similar vein, I analyze the lived experiences of Gund Kwok members as they cultivate a sisterhood, based on their own reflections.

In my ethnographic study of Gund Kwok, my appearance as a white woman granted me access to certain shared affiliations and not to others. Many of the members of Gund Kwok spoke to me freely of the ways that the company was resisting male dominated histories of the lion dance through their work, and I believe that they would have been less forthcoming with a male researcher. Yet, my whiteness prohibited me from gaining access to other aspects of Gund Kwok's community-based knowledge and participation within most company rehearsals. Tan remains committed to clear racial as well as gendered boundaries, and they are crucial for securing this space as a unique opportunity for Asian American women. These distinctions serve important functions for the community and I deeply respect them. That said, definitions of gender and Asian ethnicity within Gund Kwok are quite fluid. For instance, Gund Kwok allows anyone to join the company who identifies as female regardless of biological sex. The company encourages anyone who considers herself Asian, even if she has non-Asian parentage, and members of all Asian ethnicities to apply. Company member Shaina Lu noted that members encompass a wide range of gendered and sexual identities, and many company members care deeply about this openness. The company has never turned away an applicant for failing to meet the gender and race requirements, and applicants have respected the boundaries clearly listed on the company website.

The first section of this chapter lays out some of the reasons individual Gund Kwok members have sought an Asian American sisterhood rooted in lion dance practice. Their reasons include a desire to join a group in solidarity, a desire to gain a platform for resisting sexism and racism, preserving their culture, and getting exercise. Here, I analyze members as individuals within an alliance, understanding their unique experiences for joining the company. In the second section, I explore how shared experiences, common language, and cooperative corporeal experiences construct notions of sisterhood. In this section, I also discuss some of the internal power differentials and group dynamics of Gund Kwok to reflect on the ways that this community is subject to fissures inherent in communal engagement. In section three, I examine how Gund Kwok defines Asian-ness and in-group membership and how those definitions produce supportive spaces that are sequestered from external hegemonic forces. These spaces provide members with a space for identity affirmation and the freedom to express culture in a self-directed manner. I also focus on how the sisterhood “disidentifies” with mainstream cultural practices by working against assimilative tendencies. The fourth and final section interrogates the deployment of sisterhood to resist historical usages of lion dances as a means to create exclusive brotherhoods. My aim is not to suggest that Gund Kwok should be seen as a community of similarity, but their ultimate impact depends upon other factors surrounding their usage.

4.1 Individual Reasons for Joining the Sisterhood

In a 1993 article she wrote entitled “Women of Color Reclaiming Power,” Leader Tan describes how a community of women can confront the messages and stereotypes they have received throughout the course of their lives. She wrote:

. . . Over and over in our lives, as women and as women of color, we were told by people around us—by the culture, social attitudes, media, school. etc.—that we were not good enough, not smart enough, not fast enough, not thin enough, not white enough, not silent enough. . . .

In a racist and sexist world, our realities are hardly ever alluded to, let alone affirmed; the way we see ourselves and the way we experience the world is hardly ever reflected in the images we see around us or in the stories we read. We constantly have to translate information in order to make it relevant and applicable to our lives. Our realities [and] experiences are often discounted, overlooked and ignored. Both racism and sexism make us feel bad about ourselves and about each other. Sexism devalues our humanness, our goodness, abilities and power as females and encourages us to compete to get male attention.

Racism devalues our humanness, our goodness, abilities and power as people of color, feeds [us] false information about each other and pits us one against each other. It is no wonder that we have a hard time trying to remember who we really are and our natural deep connections with each other. . . .

To reclaim our power, we need to peel away the different layers of oppression to clearly see and name what the oppression is. We need to be clear about the operations of racism, to understand how it works on each of our communities and on each of us to keep each of us disempowered and separated. . . . To reclaim our connections is essential to our empowerment.³⁵⁸

In Tan’s vision, the sisterhood is designed to provide space for self-understanding and collective strength in relation to adverse conditions. As she suggests, connections

³⁵⁸ Cheng Imm Tan, “Women of Color Reclaiming Power,” *Trotter Review* 7, issue 2, article 11 (1993): 29-31.

between Asian American women have the potential to provide spaces of solidarity, and a niche where others understand each other's daily experiences of oppression. They are also places where such unionizing alliances create the potential to mobilize as a community, resulting in an impressive wealth of community power, and a springboard for action to combat racial and gendered disparity in Chinatown. In keeping with this, Tan has always focused on empowering women and opening up a space for Asian American women to deal with gendered and racial oppression in a nutritive environment rather than on having the most technical lion dance group in Chinatown.

However, members do not name confronting and challenging racism and patriarchy with their sisters as a major reason for joining. Instead they focus on "family." Shaina Lu, for example, describes Gund Kwok as a replacement for her *wushu*³⁵⁹ (martial arts) team at an all-women's college. "I missed my team a lot so I wanted to have another family environment" after college, she explained.³⁶⁰

For many members of Gund Kwok, the desire to join a "family" was central to their decision to join the company. Jeanne Chin, for example, informed me:

I now have a great bunch of friends. For me that's the best part. Actually, performing is my least favorite part [of being in the company]. But the social part is really important. Everyone has different personalities but we all get along really well and rarely is there a conflict.³⁶¹

QJ Shi agreed:

I actually had a friend who was doing Gund Kwok and I didn't think about doing it for a while. I couldn't consider it until I stopped going to graduate school and then I didn't have a job and I wanted to get in shape so that's when I

³⁵⁹ *Wushu* is a Chinese term that means martial arts, broadly conceived.

³⁶⁰ Shaina Lu (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, July 7, 2017.

³⁶¹ Jeanne Chin (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Dec. 13, 2016.

decided to join. But it ended up being more than I thought it would be. I think it's a great community of women of all ages and I think it's a space for me to be a part of myself where I'm not in other spaces. And it's a good social thing. It's built in social time. It also requires so much teamwork and strength. Our team is unique because it's such a community and not individualistic.³⁶²

While Shi initially desired a consistent group of workout partners, she ended up realizing that her participation in Gund Kwok was deeper than that. The sisterhood was developed over the course of many years of rehearsing and socializing together. Not only do the women see each other weekly for rehearsals and performances, they often get together after shows for dinner, or meet each other during holidays gatherings.

Chien-Mei Chang agreed: "I enjoy being with the other women in the company and our community, our time together. We all come from different backgrounds but we have a lot of dinners together and celebrations, we become very close."³⁶³ She also noted that participating in Gund Kwok led her to access new areas of Chinatown and to become more acquainted with traditional Chinese culture:

I also joined the company because it brings me into new places in Chinatown and exposed me to different parts of Chinese culture. For instance, I've come to know a lot of associations and stores in the area because we perform there during Chinese New Year. That day that we perform for Chinese New Year is a really long day and it's tiring but it brings me to meet lots of people in the community.³⁶⁴

The differences in goals and personal desires shed light on the individual discrepancies within communities, thwarting any notion of homogeneity within the group. Not all

³⁶² QJ Shi (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Sept. 28, 2016.

³⁶³ Chien-Mei Chang (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Oct. 20, 2016.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

women decided to become members of this particular community for the same reasons, and each have discovered their own important reasons to stay.

4. 2 Cultivating Sisterhood

Angela and another woman whose name I don't know were practicing lifts. Standing behind her partner, Angela grasped the woman's red sash as a hoisting device. They took two modest bounces in unison and then Angela's partner jumped backwards onto her thighs so that Angela took her entire way. They held this for a couple of seconds before the lifted woman returned to the ground, feet safely planted back on the floor.

Another pair began to practice again, on top of two-foot high clay pots that were arranged in two rows. Two pairs of women wearing a full lion dance costume would have to negotiate turns around each other and make sure they did not hit another pair. In one lift, the dancer at the front jumps backwards and wraps her legs around the tail dancer's waist. I gasped as it looked like one jumper would fall, breaking her fall with only her face on the floor. The space where they were practicing to perform has a concrete floor, and thus a dancer could injure herself very seriously. The pair quickly tried again, and while again she didn't fall, the jumping dancer's perch looked just as precarious the second time around. She paused and took the lion head off. Her face was flushed and she looked visibly shaken. She said she needed a minute and took an self-soothing lap around the room. Then they tried again.

Gund Kwok members develop sisterhood through physical connections, language, and the micro-politics of these relationships. Jumps such as the one I witnessed require utter trust in one's partner. Even when members themselves may not point to the centrality of body work in forming community, it's my belief that the unavoidable physicality of the practice facilitates these social bonds. These deeper connections inevitably formed as members had to trust each other with their physical safety.

The same week that I witnessed the trust building over the pots, I had the opportunity to sit down to ask Shi about the techniques she needs to embody as a lifter. Shi has been a member of Gund Kwok since 2012, and while many dancers go back and forth between the roles of jumper and lifter, Shi has predominately remained a lifter. She described the strong connections that develop between partners thus:

It's like a willingness to exert as much of yourself as possible for the benefit of the group. I think we all try to do the best we can. We also try to make sure we're coordinating with our partners, too. If they're jumping and let's say they miss a jump, I usually try to encourage them to jump again. We make sure we're coordinating with our partners so if they miss a jump, we don't panic. I usually try to encourage my partner to just try to jump again at another point in the choreography so they don't feel like they let themselves or the group down. You start to form a bond [with your partner]. You begin to understand how they jump and how you can work together.³⁶⁵

As Shi explains, partners encourage each other to advance in their techniques, and more seasoned Gund Kwok sisters often offer their expertise and verbal feedback in order to help train newer members. I noticed in rehearsals that there was often a sense that sisters would help each other out. They would walk over to each other to give a suggestion

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

about a particular move, or offer guidance on the performance quality. Gund Kwok does not have soloists or star performers, which lends to the sense that all of the sisters work together—lifting, supporting, sharing weight, and sharing expertise.

Lion dance practice necessitates partnership. Through this partnership, connections are made through the body. Dancers must synchronize with each other to execute choreography but, especially during timed lifts, dancers develop ways of shared corporeal experiences through sensing each other. As theorist José Gil notes, dancers develop an ability to sense themselves moving in space but also become adept at moving with others through shared energy. This does not mean that dance partners move in the same way but rather that they complement each other's movements by envisioning a "virtual body," through which both partners feel similar impulses. He writes,

A partner's movement tries to enter the rhythm or the form of the other's energy—as a matter of fact, one partner becomes the other, becomes the other's dancing energy. From this we can derive the constitution of series—as if the same energy would spread from one body to another, traversing during the entire process of such a becoming all the bodies that comprise the series. Dance has the vocation to form groups or series.³⁶⁶

Gil also suggests that individual bodies exist beyond the skin to extend into exterior space.³⁶⁷ In other words, the body is not contained within its material boundaries, but comes to infuse space beyond the proper as well. For instance, when driving, one's bodily sensation excretes into the outside of the body such that one senses the car as a part of his or her body. He writes, "the body gives itself new extensions in space, and in

³⁶⁶ José Gil, "Paradoxical Body," 25.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

such ways forms a new body—a virtual one, but ready to become actual and ready to allow gestures to become actualized in it.”³⁶⁸ In the same way, the lion costume becomes part of their bodies. Thus, under the lion costume, the two dancers become linked through this shared lion body moving through space. For this reason, I find lion dance to be unique in the extent to which dancers share kinesthetic understandings, because they not only coordinate lifts through contemplating themselves “from the place of the other,”³⁶⁹ but they come to embody the lion as a unit. That is not to suggest that individuals can presume to fully empathize with or inhabit another body but that there is a nuanced kinesthetic response that allows dancers, and in this case lion dancers, an ability to feel each other’s shared energy.³⁷⁰

Shared understandings are not just cultivated through corporeal sharing but open lines of verbal communication are an integral part of the sisterhood dynamic. This culture of shared knowledge and peer feedback within Gund Kwok extends to the entire organizational structure of the company. As Chien-Mei Chang notes,

We have a lot of teachable moments as a group. Sometimes it’s personal, like about what someone might be going through outside of rehearsal in their everyday lives but often it is just through the technique of learning the dance or even in helping each other think through the logistics of various performances. Someone from the group might contact me and say “hey, I need help thinking through a request.” But whether it’s the actually dancing, our personal lives, or the organizing of the performances, hearing feedback from the other women is really encouraging.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁷⁰ Kwan, “Kinesthetic City,” 9.

³⁷¹ Chien-Mei Chang (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Oct. 20, 2016.

A reinforced commitment to the mission of the company shapes the connections between group members and corporeally building trust between members advances them, as do conversations in the rehearsal process and performances. Years of working together and performing alongside one another, providing supportive feedback and tactile assistance during rehearsals and performances have created a bond within Gund Kwok that has established a unique community of Asian American women.

My observations suggest power differentials within the company are minimal. The company depends heavily on volunteer labor, and members increase their responsibilities as their tenure with the company grows. Many of the women eventually take on administrative tasks in addition to company rehearsals and performances. Some women have helped manage the website and the company's social media presence, while others help to book performances and negotiate payments. Selection of members to participate in various performances and opportunities is not based on technical skill but on experience and commitment to the event.

The trust and community cultivated through membership in Gund Kwok does not, however, insulate the group from discord. When I went to watch the August Moon Festival 2017 performance, I noticed that many of the members whom I had interviewed were at the performance but were not in company costumes. Some of the long-standing members were not at this major annual performance at all. At the end of the performance those in the audience headed in a different direction from those who had performed instead of going out with them afterwards or at least congratulating them on their performance.

One company member who has decided to stay with Gund Kwok explained the rift to me. In her opinion, Leader Tan was moving away from the focus on learning lion dances that had defined the group in order to emphasize leadership training and social justice work that she does outside of Gund Kwok. She said that even some members who had stayed had concerns about the shift. It is unclear how the splinter groups that have formed will affect Gund Kwok; it has built its reputation over years and it may be hard for a newcomer to disrupt Gund Kwok's position as Boston's foremost women's lion dancing companies. New recruits continue to participate in the training programs.

Members who have decided to stay maintain that Gund Kwok continues to offer a type of sanctuary—a sisterhood space that had been defined through connective relationships with each other. Adriana Li describes it as “a space to let your guard down and talk about what it is really like to be a woman and to be Asian today.” Even if it does not always work for everyone, this is a significant value.

4.3 Defining Asian-ness in Gund Kwok

The strong connections between the sisters of Gund Kwok depends on boundaries—the delineations of group membership as Asian and female. This distinguishes the group from dominant society, securing and reinforcing members' Asian American identities to reaffirm Gund Kwok participation as a counter space for the development of traditional dances. In this section, I argue that defining Gund Kwok as female and Asian creates an alternative space that works to disrupt the logic of

assimilation while also allowing the group to secure and protect shared cultural knowledge and insider experiences.

As Judith Butler reflects, the marking of group borders enables a process of disidentification with regulatory norms of society—in this case whiteness and masculinity—to facilitate a sense of resistance to those hegemonic forces.³⁷² Yet, within such clearly defined limits of group membership, there exists a firm recognition of diversity and fluidity within the categories of “Asian” and “female,” which creates an inclusive environment for all those who identify as such. My own experiences conducting ethnographic research with the company and my role as a white, female observer exemplify the unique sisterhood space developed through Gund Kwok membership. Though members and leaders treated me with kindness and respect throughout my interactions with Gund Kwok, I never became an insider. This was fully expected on my part, in keeping with the group’s rules for membership. Gund Kwok is a rare opportunity for Asian American women to participate in a community that is solely theirs to enter, and that extended to me as well.

Throughout my research process, I desired to connect on a closer level to the members of the group and yet, my white body—which is usually so valuable for access—could not access this one. I was not granted access to the inner layers of the sisterhood in a figurative sense but also not invited into the dressing room area. Apart from the one practice I joined, I only observed practices and was never invited to circle up with the

³⁷² Judith Butler, “Bodies That Matter,” xiv.

group or attend social events.³⁷³ Of course, there were times when I longed to be included to a greater extent but having accessed female-only spaces myself, I recognized the value in excluding members of an oppressive group.

As many scholars have suggested, clarifying the attributes of the in-group is a normal mechanism of community development. Communities are by definition exclusionary³⁷⁴ and setting these boundaries can be an act of resistance for marginalized groups. As Shi told me:

[T]he fact that we are an Asian women's troupe is a political statement. We are doing something that empowers women and at the foundation, it's about women's rights and that we should have the same rights as men. I think just having a space for Asian women is political. We get a lot of questions about other people joining and why they're not allowed to join so I think a big part of it is just making sure we have the space for Asian women.³⁷⁵

Gund Kwok is nonetheless a heterogeneous community in many respects. As group member Chang reflected,

We are all different—different ages, occupations, and backgrounds but we get along really well. We are also a really diverse group of Asian women, some have backgrounds from China or Hong Kong while others might have come from Thailand, Cambodia. There was a member who was half Korean, and one who was half Hawaiian and half Chinese. But we work together and with the same goals.³⁷⁶

³⁷³ I was invited to volunteer for the group during their Chinese New Year performance and to join them for dinner afterward.

³⁷⁴ See Stuart Hall, *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 600.

³⁷⁵ QJ Shi (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Sept. 28, 2016.

³⁷⁶ Chien-Mei Chang (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Oct. 20, 2016.

Adrianna Li emphasized the fact that the group did not question the extent of her

Asianness. She writes,

Gund Kwok is very accepting and open minded about diversity. As long as you're an Asian female, you can join the group. Something I've faced—that I love Gund Kwok for and they have totally embraced it and backed me up with—is my mixed heritage. I've faced [issues] with outside people, even friends with the fact that I don't look visibly Asian. Even when I was going to go audition for Gund Kwok the night before my brother was like “is that gonna be a problem? Cause you don't look [Asian].” I kinda of just rolled my eyes. “Well, I am Chinese whether you like it or not.” . . .

It's funny because no one even asked me [what my ethnicity was] when I joined Gund Kwok. Not everyone looks Asian in the company, in my opinion. We're all from different areas of Asian countries—there's Cambodian, there's Korean there's Taiwanese. That's something I feel really embraced by. There even used to be an Indian girl. In our society, not everyone realizes that Indian is Asian. I'm all for that. And there are a lot of different personalities, lot of different lifestyles so it's nice that we can bring those together even when we clash on ideas or things, we work together and that's what matters.³⁷⁷

Clearly, the fact that the members of Gund Kwok accept Li's identity as Asian, or at least biracial, meant a good deal to her. Her brother's remark illuminates the ways in which race becomes attached to the body to become constructed through an external gaze.

Frantz Fanon has poetically described how racial categories become attached to a person's appearance, rendered “fixed” under the burden of the white gaze.³⁷⁸

Li's relationship to the audience also suggests the role of others in constructing her body, and her response to that. As she said:

So, I'm half Chinese and half Puerto Rican and I've always grown up with issues of not looking Asian and that's part of the reason that I wanted to do this—to get

³⁷⁷ Adriana Li (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, Oct. 20, 2016.

³⁷⁸ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 90.

closer to my heritage. During the August moon performance, we were waiting by the side of the stage and this really old Toisanese woman—that’s my heritage, Toisanese that’s where my mother’s from—and this really old woman came up and we are about to go on. The stage is outside and open so people can chat with you while you’re off the stage and we are just standing with the lion getting ready to go on and this woman can’t stop staring at me. She just keeps staring. I’m also really tall and she asks the girls in Cantonese (one of the girls speaks Cantonese so she is translating) if I’m African American. “No, she’s Chinese and Hispanic,” my friend told her. Then I turned to the woman and in Mandarin explained that I am Toisanese on my mom’s side even if I don’t look like it. I start telling her in Mandarin and she totally freaked out and started laughing and looking toward the other girls because I was speaking Chinese. She was really nice but was shocked about me speaking Chinese.³⁷⁹

For the older Chinese woman Li met, Li’s biracial appearance made her seem not authentically Chinese but her usage of Mandarin confirmed her racial identity. The juxtaposition was shocking to the older woman. Yet, for the women of Gund Kwok, who likely have grown up in the United States with more of an awareness of the variety of racial identities, Li’s appearance holds no bearing on her acceptance into the group. Li’s identification with her racial heritage, her Toisanese grandmother, and her willingness to dedicate her time to practicing lion dances is enough “proof” of her racial categorization as Asian.

In contrast to the fluidity of who constitutes an Asian member of the company, there is a specificity in the performance itself. In other words, the lion dance is a specifically Chinese traditional practice that enacts Chinese aesthetics and principles. Performing Chinese traditional culture through the lion dance has been an important strategy to disidentify with mainstream culture and to create alternative spaces. The

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

company's usage of distinctively Chinese tales, movements, and movement techniques, rather than western arts and dance techniques, serves a similar purpose. This fosters a sense of cultural identity by pulling aesthetic material from Chinese historical and cultural frameworks to highlight specifically Chinese myths, symbols, and practices. Gund Kwok draws from traditional stories in its choreography but often re-defines the tales, altering a narrative to fit the company mission or a specific performance opportunity.

In postulating the role of community formations as a form of power, and as a means to subvert states of domination, Foucault's notion of heterotopias is also applicable in conceiving of the alterity that Gund Kwok has developed. Heterotopias are "inverted" sites, or places outside of the normal sociopolitical flow such as prisons and asylums.³⁸⁰ Yet, as scholar Fran Tonkiss suggests, modern heterotopias are no longer considered to be merely disciplinary spaces but include other places outside of the ordinary, where to "enter is to take on a different kind of bearing, to put oneself differently."³⁸¹ Tonkiss describes women-only spaces as heterotopias because they provide a means of "separation that escape[s] the eyes and order of men."³⁸² Gund Kwok's sisterhood is a place to escape and resist the order of white culture. They are places where diversity flourishes against the backdrop of the larger fabric of society, in order to be governed by an alternative sociopolitical logic. Henri Lefebvre's notion of a

³⁸⁰ Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Malden: Polity Press, 2005), 133.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

“counter-space” expands Foucault’s heterotopia to suggest that these alternative spaces have the capacity not only to escape from dominant systems of power, but to “disrupt the smooth story of political order.”³⁸³ In doing so, these counter spaces create pockets of resistance and opportunities for liberation within the social framework. Therefore, I imagine the sisterhood Gund Kwok fostered to be counter space where members explore and enact ways of being outside of, and often against majority consensus.

Lisa Lowe has theorized that alternative spaces that do not align with mainstream cultural practices benefit Asian American communities.³⁸⁴ Lowe contends that specific immigration and exclusionary acts targeted at Asian American citizens have rendered Asian Americans the “alien other,” thus making it impossible for Asian Americans to assume an insider position within the U.S. social sphere. Asian Americans must negotiate the contradictory messages that they receive in relation to citizenship, which simultaneously positions them as outsiders while demanding assimilation. She writes that “disidentification expresses a space in which alienations, in the cultural, political and economic senses, can be rearticulated in oppositional forms. . . [allowing] for the exploration of alternative political and cultural subjectivities that emerge within the continuing effects of displacement.”³⁸⁵ This distance, as Lowe suggests, “preserves Asian American culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is

³⁸³ Ibid., 134.

³⁸⁴ Lowe, “Immigrant Acts.”

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 103-104.

reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlikely varieties of silence emerge into articulacy.”³⁸⁶

The “integrity of the community” protects traditional knowledge. Intellectual property law theorist Johanna Gibson argues that the community has the capacity “to maintain and practice its customs, culture and knowledges. . . [which include] expressions and performance, practices and beliefs, and folklore. . . .”³⁸⁷ The repetition of shared practice between group members gives them a sense of ownership of traditional knowledge, and defining group membership as Asian marks off a cultural territory to provide benefits (social, economic, spiritual) to the inside group—those who gain access to cultural products. Only those who have access to the shared cultural property of the sisterhood are able to follow the particular symbolic allusions within the performances, thus allowing them to accumulate cultural capital within Boston and within Chinatown.

4.4 Sisterhoods as Oppositional Strategy to Brotherhoods

Cultivating a sisterhood allows members of Gund Kwok to negotiate the patriarchal underpinnings of the lion dance as a masculine ritual. As martial arts scholar Avron Boretz points out, participants in Chinese popular religion and martial culture focused on cultivating an ethos of masculinity that was predicated on sworn brotherhoods and shared masculine power.³⁸⁸ This culture of brotherhoods carried over to Chinese

³⁸⁶ Lowe, “Immigrant Acts,” 6.

³⁸⁷ Johanna Gibson, “Community in Resources, Tradition in Knowledge.” In *Returning (to) Communities: Theory, Culture and Political Practice of the Communal*, edited by Stefan Herbrechter and Michael Higgins (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2006), 175-176.

³⁸⁸ Boretz, “Gods, Ghosts, And Gangsters,” 8.

diaspora communities in the years prior to the development of Gund Kwok as male lion dancers drew from the lion dance and martial arts to accumulate physical power and ritual capital. A sisterhood of Asian American women affords the opportunity to emphasize cultural difference from the white mainstream through a traditionally Asian movement practice and rejects masculinity as the foundation for the practice.

The strategic deployment of sisterhood also works to resist hegemonic histories of gendered power over the lion dance ritual and against previous appropriations of lion dance as a masculinist practice that only a brotherhood could own. Before the establishment of Gund Kwok, lion dance groups in Boston and elsewhere existed as fraternal spaces aimed at developing masculine bonds as a means of coping with the emasculation and racism Asian men faced in the United States. Drawing from long-standing notions of Chinese cultural masculinity, Asian American men reinforced notions that women could not practice the lion dance as a means of securing their own power in the face of adversity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, male performers of the lion dance often entered a lion dance community more prone to violence, where various teams broke out into street brawls so frequently that local police departments insisted on overseeing them.³⁸⁹ Rapidly rearranging legal structures exacerbated Asian and Asian American men's racial oppression and disillusionment within the social landscape. The abolition of

³⁸⁹ Sam Spokony, "Chinatown's Wilder Lunar New Year Days Remembered," *Downtown Express* (New York), Jan. 30, 2014. Though, I am also skeptical of accounts of violence were exacerbated, or enhanced, by increased police attention on young men of color.

quotas based on national origin in 1965 vastly increased immigration to the United States, but the inadequate measures to provide opportunities for education, language services, or other services to new immigrant youths inevitably led to large numbers of dissatisfied Asian American men. The martial arts and lion dances became a way to recuperate a sense of cultural identity and masculinity.

Lion dances proliferated in response to both heritage and “family roots” reclamation projects and the call for a militant masculinity by radical youths in the Yellow Power Movement. In *The Snake Dance of American Activism*, Liu et al. note that the new shifts within Asian American activist movements had a tangible impact on the daily life of Chinatown communities in major cities such as San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. Activist work helped to create an assertion of Chinese culture through an emphasis on accepting and promoting difference, rather than in attempts to assimilate. They write, “an important aspect of community-based work was the affirmation of the language and arts of respective homelands to reflect the experiences and values of immigrants resisting assimilation by the dominant Eurocentric culture.”³⁹⁰ As such, “traditional art forms such as the lion dance, martial arts, taiko, and kulintang music became vehicles for expression of anti-colonial sentiment and integral elements in community organizing.”³⁹¹

Similarly, Chiou-Ling Yeh writes about how the New Year’s parades in San Francisco’s Chinatown became a way for young men to assert cultural nationalism while

³⁹⁰ Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy A. M. Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 112.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

also becoming a vehicle for aggressive masculinity in the early 1970s. She claims, “violence became an everyday reality through which youth performed their manhood and formulated their identity.”³⁹² Street fighting was a strategy of resistance to racism and underprivileged minority youths often considered violence and riots the only reasonable response to racism.

The “kung fu craze” spurred by Bruce Lee and his hybridized style and larger ideologies inspired changes within lion dance aesthetics and associations in the same period.³⁹³ As an Asian American male who actively fought against the oppressive West in his films, Lee became an emblem for the dynamic social transformations occurring in the Chinese American community. As Film and Asian American Studies scholar Sylvia Shin Huey Chong describes, Lee’s best-known film, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), “reflected the conditions of the Chinese diaspora in the twentieth century, presenting ‘stories of Chinese who live in places dominated and controlled by non-Chinese.’”³⁹⁴ The glistening, hard physique of Bruce Lee provided a new model for young men within Asian ethnic enclaves that existed in stark contrast to former, docile, and effeminate representations of Asian American masculinity in U.S. popular culture such as Charlie Chan.³⁹⁵ Depicted as a masculine, aggressive, lone fighter, Lee was seen by his fans as directly confronting racism and inequality through his meticulously trained body.

³⁹² Chiou-ling Yeh, “Making an American Festival,” 96.

³⁹³ William C. Hu, “Chinese Lion Dance Explained,” 342.

³⁹⁴ Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 210.

³⁹⁵ Charlie Chan was a fictional U.S. detective seen on film beginning in 1926. His character reflected model minority stereotypes seen by his asexual and subservient depiction.

Unfortunately, much of the attempts to construct male identity during this time came at the expense of restricting women's access to Asian cultural traditions. The drive to create a sense of cultural nationalism promoted notions that the lion dance and other cultural practices afforded men unique access to ritual, or symbolic capital. As Sonia Shah writes, "leftist Asian women in Yellow Power and other Asian American groups often found themselves left out of the decision-making process and their ideas and concerns relegated to 'women's auxiliary groups' that were marginal to the larger projects at hand."³⁹⁶ Yet, it was not just the realm of activism that women remained outside of, it was also the ability to participate in the activities that were cultivating this new identity. As Yen Le Espiritu notes, unitary notions of cultural nationalism and identity were framed as male and heterosexual.³⁹⁷

The means by which the lion dance was sequestered as all male relied on its historical attachment to masculinity and the adherence to earlier taboos. For instance, Slovenz writes about how a sifu, or martial arts teacher, that she interviewed in New York's Chinatown perpetuated the traditional fear of women's interference of the lion dance. She writes that the man warned against anyone stepping over the tail of the lion costume if it was laid out on the floor, but said that it was "especially bad" for a woman to do so.³⁹⁸ This exclusion of women from lion dance and hypermasculine spirit continued in Boston until Gund Kwok was established in the late 1990s.

³⁹⁶ Sonia Shah, "Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire," xvi.

³⁹⁷ Yen Le Espiritu, "Asian American Women and Men," 117.

³⁹⁸ Slovenz, "The Year is a Wild Animal," 81.

Many Gund Kwok members have actively sought out a sisterhood space because they sensed that they were not particularly welcome into the brotherhoods of other Boston-based lion dance companies. Some had tried. Lu, for instance, felt not only excluded from brotherhood of local Boston schools but also when she went abroad to China to study at a Shaolin Kung Fu academy. She recollects that the fraternal dynamics of these other kung fu lion dance schools were pervasive:

There are other groups that have female lion dancers around Boston but Gund Kwok is the only one that is so sincerely predicated on a sisterhood. For me, that is very important because many of the male *sifus* around Chinatown see themselves as so powerful and they're kind of arrogant. They have an overly masculine quality and way of directing the company that's sort of off putting.

A major reason I sought out all women was because I did a Shaolin training program one summer and it was super hostile to women. I was one of four girls who did the program and they stuck us in the international building. They never called me by name as they did with the other [male] participants. Instead, they called me *měi nǚ* [beautiful woman] and even *shǎbī* [stupid cunt]. They would kick me and hide my slippers. Maybe they were kind of flirting but I actually just found it demeaning and annoying.³⁹⁹

These brotherhood dynamics, which are embedded within kung fu and lion dance groups, are a facet of lion dance culture that Gund Kwok continually works to redefine. The commitment to action echoes through Leader Tan's call outs after Gund Kwok performances, where she states that the mission of Gund Kwok is to showcase how women can do the lion dance just as men can. In carving out space as a sisterhood, Gund Kwok exerts an oppositional strategy to the dominance of masculinity that unsettles past and ongoing practices of gendered oppression. Because of the sisterhood that she has

³⁹⁹ Shaina Lu (Gund Kwok member) in conversation with the author, July 7, 2017.

established, women do not have to attempt to gain acceptance into the former brotherhoods of kung fu schools. It also showcases the political power sisterhoods can gain by creating their own spaces, directed by their own interpretation of traditions and cultural narratives. Strategically deployed sisterhood, regardless of its potential failures, offers an arena for Asian American women to build shared partnerships that move against the mechanisms of assimilation, and work to destabilize the presumption that masculine power is the only real power.

Conclusion

In August 2017, Boston's English-Chinese newspaper the *Sampan* reported that Mayor Martin J. Walsh and the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement unveiled a mural as part of the "To Immigrants with Love" public art campaign. The mural was designed to recognize Boston's immigrant population and to promote Boston as a city that welcomes newcomers. "Boston is a city that embraces its rich immigrant history and the immigrant residents who continue to contribute to our neighborhoods," the Mayor said. "East Boston is a neighborhood that has served as a gateway for immigrants who have come to our city from across the globe. This mural celebrates two of the many people who have added to the immigrant legacy in this neighborhood and Boston as a whole."⁴⁰⁰

A month after this dedication to Boston's history of immigration, the *Boston Daily Globe* reported that fifty Boston residents were among the nearly 500 immigrants from across the United States arrested for federal immigration violations. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, reported that its four-day "Safe City" operation was "focused on cities and regions where ICE deportation officers are denied access to jails and prisons to interview suspected immigration violators or jurisdictions where ICE detainees are not honored."⁴⁰¹ This was an operation that targeted sanctuary cities such as

⁴⁰⁰ "Mayor Walsh, Office for Immigrant Advancement Unveil East Boston 'To Immigrants with Love' Mural," Aug. 25, 2017, <http://sampan.org/2017/08/mayor-walsh-office-for-immigrant-advancement-unveil-east-boston-to-immigrants-with-love-mural/>.

⁴⁰¹ Jeremy C. Fox, "50 immigrants arrested in Mass. As part of ICE operation." <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2017/09/28/icearrests/QNxhEFfeJ5zvgeU7cQGnk/story.html>.

Boston and, “in the case of Massachusetts, a state that had not fallen in line with President Trump’s aggressive deportation policies.”⁴⁰²

The juxtaposition of these events lays bare the rawness of our current sociopolitical climate and the ongoing struggle to define the terms of citizenship in the United States. The present national narrative on immigration revives old discourses of citizenship (packaged in different ways), raising questions about how the nation’s borders should be conceptualized. Cultural forms such as the lion dance participate interstitially in these tensions—not only by reflecting these complexities—but also by producing meanings in relation to, and in surplus of the power exerted by nation state.

This study has explored how people create lives for themselves through lion dance practice and how they negotiate these national and local realities, issues of belonging, racism and oppression. I examined how people resist the forces that limit freedom, and the role that the moving body plays within this complicated dynamic. Dance helps to fortify a sense of identity for those who practice, while also sustaining important traditions for the surrounding community. The dancing body, though implicated in power and layers of discourse, also has the capacity to enact new social embodied patterns for individuals and to resist cultural erasure through creative action. The popularity of the lion dance and widespread presence in the Asian diaspora demonstrates how important this form has been in allowing individuals to maintain connections to Asian culture while forming new identities in the United States.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

However, despite the lion dance's ability to serve a number of significant functions, women have not had equal access to the power that such a form accrues. For this reason, my study focuses on the ways that women have challenged a centuries long male stronghold on a cultural tradition and how these women are helping to reshape the foundational constructs of the practice. My analysis demonstrates that lion dancing activates a strong sense of personal agency for the female lion dancers I researched. I have seen and heard firsthand how lion dances train the body to produce new bodily subjectivities, convey important ritual and cultural meanings for their communities, challenge patriarchy and sexism, and provide pathways to develop close connections as a group invested in protecting and sharing cultural knowledge.

Yet, as I have also argued in this dissertation, other aspects of lion dance practice contradict narratives of female empowerment. Female lion dancers inevitably engage with a number of discourses that continue to regulate Asian American female bodies as they perform this type of cultural labor. These mechanisms of power stem from the patriarchal histories that have shaped the form as well as the forces that extend beyond the practice itself, including multiculturalism and cultural nationalism. This contradictory and often multilayered push and pull of power opens up conversation about a number of issues explored in this dissertation, including the varied experiences of Asian American community in relation to gender identity and negotiations of cultural practice as non-majority citizens. To explore these dynamics, I have maintained a dialectical approach to analyzing female lion dances in Boston, taking into account contradictory ideas, and by framing my arguments in overlapping ways.

In Chapter 1, I focused on female lion dancers in Boston's Chinatown during the Second Sino-Japanese War. A small group of teenage girls raised money for the war effort by learning how to lion dance in order to perform the dances in the streets of Chinatown. Though most of the female performances within these festivals sought to capitalize on Orientalized versions of Chinese femininity, the gender alternative performances of the lion dancers revealed another dimension of the political atmosphere—the influence of Chinese cultural nationalism on women. My primary goal in this chapter was to argue that the female lion dancers put national concerns above personal desire to align with discourses promoting strong, heroic women. While I express my concerns over women's bodies being used to support national objectives, I also articulate how in performing the physically strenuous lion dances, these women showcased their ability to take on more responsibilities during World War II and beyond, thus helping to clear the way for other Chinese American women in later decades.

Chapter 2 analyzed how embodying lion dance technique offers a way of constitute new bodily subjectivities. I first examine how the discourses used to frame Asian American women as especially suitable for the garment industry and other low-wage labor, helped frame their bodies as fragmented and permeable—open to the forces of capitalism. Lion dance practice, I suggest, retrains the body to generate new bodily identities through the specific knowledge embodied through its practice. I tease out what I see as the most prominent principles or movement metaphors of the lion dance to explore how embodying them allows for a re-working of the body to resist fragmentation

and permeability but also the hypersexual gaze that befalls Asian America women's bodies.

In Chapter 3, I investigated how Gund Kwok participates in the socioeconomic and political environment of Boston's Chinatown. I underscore how the lion dance—as a non-mainstream, “ethnic” performance—renders the company open to the pressures of multiculturalism while the very same performances of traditional culture animate a sense of ritual efficacy for the community. Gund Kwok's participation within explicitly feminist causes also marks a departure from the types of activist projects that lion dance companies have traditionally supported. This chapter in particular demonstrates the lived experiences, activism of Gund Kwok and how these company objectives impact and transform lion dance traditions for Boston's Chinatown.

In my fourth chapter, I explored the function of cultivating a sisterhood within Gund Kwok. I argue that while notions of *community*, envisioned as a group of similar individuals, is a faulty construct, the impetus to join a group of Asian American sisters still serves a number of important functions for the women who join. The sisterhood, cultivated socially and corporeally, allows members of the company to maintain ownership of lion dance knowledge and shift the tradition away from its former association with exclusionary brotherhoods. Formulating company membership as a space for Asian American women enables the group to amass cultural capital, assimilation, hybridization, or possible appropriation of the form.

In this dissertation, I sought to contribute to a number of current theoretical debates in Dance Studies. By calling attention to the labor of female lion dancers during

the Second Sino-Japanese War, I strove to depict the vital role that performance plays in the demonstration of national objectives and narratives. What may seem on the surface a simple demonstration of cultural loyalty, reveals the intersections between bodies, gender, and the demands of a textured historical moment. Additionally, in reframing the embodiment of technique as a possibility of agency rather than as an example of coercion, I aimed to re-envision some of the relationships between power and bodies. I believe that training the body through a specific system such as lion dance imparts a bodily knowledge that can restructure one's corporeal identity. In this way, dance is a pathway to produce new meanings for oneself and by one's community.

By researching a dance form that is accessible to audiences in its narrative content and the seeming simplicity of its execution, I joined a theoretical conversation regarding the hierarchical divides between high and low art, and between traditional and modern art forms. In locating lion dances in a web of social, political, and economic frameworks, I attempted to illustrate how arbitrary these distinctions are. In mapping the shifts of lion dance in one city, over the course of roughly a century, it is clear that the lion dance is not locked in an unchanging past but rather shift to accommodate the needs of the present. As Gund Kwok makes clear, the gendered inequalities etched into an art form's history have the capacity to be re-written.

I also intended to contribute to Asian American Studies by offering an analysis of Asian American women's experiences in Boston. In conducting this research, I have encountered very little scholarship on Asian Americans in Boston's Chinatown, and virtually no academic writing on artistic, or dance-based practices in the community. In

highlighting the activism of female lion dancers from the 1930s to present day, I hope to shed light on how Asian American have contributed to social progress in this area through cultural creativity. It was also my hope that bringing a Dance Studies analysis to contemporary Asian American cultural production offered a critical analysis of how the moving body challenges stereotypes, resists modalities of power, and helps to refashion bodily subjectivities.

A number of scholars are working at the intersections of performance and Asian/Asian American Studies. Deborah Wong has illustrated how training in taiko has potential to shape corporeal ways of being, ones that work against stereotypical frameworks aimed at Asian American female bodies. Priya Srinivasan argues that young Asian women are often tasked with performing cultural labor, becoming caught between the narratives of their own communities and broader social forces. Yutian Wong has examined how Asian American dance companies provide an important space for engaging in political ideas and for creating self-identity within the through the process of dance making. My future work will likewise concentrate on how the body offers potential for understanding and unsettling dominant discourses on Asian American identity in the United States and internationally.

First, I will further consider female lion dance performances in Boston. In December 2017, I was scrolling through my Facebook feed when a series of video posts from Boston's "Nam Pai Lion Dance Teams" caught my attention. The first video is a slow-motion clip of two young women, perhaps of high school age, performing a "single leg" lion dance lift on a two-foot bench. Surprised to see two women featured in the

video, I continued to explore other posts on the page. Another video, with the caption “getting the cardio up for Chinese New Year,” shows young men and women training together in martial arts dojo, running laps together and carrying weights back and forth across the room. Other pictures, videos, and comments throughout the page mention the female lion dancers specifically. The profile picture for the group shows a nearly even distribution of male and female dancers, suggesting that women have come to make up a larger number of their lion dance students. Though I knew that Nam Pai and other lion dance company’s in Boston have teams that include women, or have separate teams for women, these videos were striking to me in that female practitioners have become increasingly visible throughout Boston’s Chinatown—a development that has taken place fairly recently around the United States and internationally. I would like to interview other female lion dancers in Boston’s Chinatown to understand how their experiences align or diverge with Gund Kwok’s.

Online searches of women and lion dance indicate that women’s increased participation in lion dancing is happening all over the United States and in other parts of the globe. From Colorado to Australia to Singapore, many lion dance company websites are encouraging women to join their companies, either as an all-woman group within the larger company, or as integrated members of the entire troupe. In fact, some of the major international lion dance competitions are beginning to encourage all-women’s groups to compete in these large-scale competitions. For instance, the 2015 MGM International Invitational Lion Dance Competition in Macau and Beijing opened a category for all-female groups, allowing women to compete for a cash prize and the honor of representing

their home country. Troupes from countries including Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, and Singapore competed last year. Six all-women groups participated, making up almost half of the total registered competitors. As such, I would like to look further into the proliferation of female lion dance practitioners in Asia and the Asian diaspora underscoring women's expanding role in lion dances. This study has been a first step in exploring women's contributions to this ancient dance form and an invitation for further research.

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