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“Getting the Greens.” Relationships Between Lion Dancers and Economic  
Ideologies Within the Asian Garden Mall

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

Master of Arts

in

Southeast Asian Studies

by

Casey Avaunt

June 2016

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Mariam B. Lam, Chairperson

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The Thesis of Casey Avaunt is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Getting the Greens:” Relationships Between Lion Dancers and Economic Ideologies Within the Asian Garden Mall

by

Casey Avaunt

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies  
University of California, Riverside, June 2016  
Dr. Mariam B. Lam, Chairperson

During Tết Lunar New Year and other cultural events, multiple lion dance companies maneuver their way through the Asian Garden Mall in the heart of Little Saigon in Orange County, California. These groups perform outside of individual shops and for crowds gathered to celebrate Vietnamese culture. Storeowners within the mall hire companies such as the Anê Thành Lion Dance Troupe from Westminster, claiming that lion dancers bring luck and prosperity to their businesses through the ritual. While the dances seem to provide unmediated cultural expression, lion dances reveal additional narratives—ones that align with capitalism and “marketplace multiculturalism.”<sup>1</sup> I argue that lion dances are integral to the economic ecosystem within the Asian Garden Mall, especially during New Year festivities, because they enable the sale of culture

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Aguilar-San Juan, "Marketplace Multiculturalism: Packaging and Selling Vietnamese America," in *Nature, Society, and Thought* (vol.19.3 2006), 343-50.

through their stimulation of an affective response tied to consumption. Furthermore, the choreographies present in the *cai qing*, or “getting the greens” portion of lion dances fit within economic agendas specific to the sociopolitical matrix of Little Saigon, allowing lion dances to become easily integrated as major cultural performances of the Vietnamese diaspora. In addition to their incorporation into the economic sphere, many aspects of lion dances simultaneously challenge dominant discourses surrounding economic ideologies and symbolic cultural spaces. I focus on the Asian Garden Mall as a microcosmic example of these complex forces to tease out their implications for lion dance companies and other cultural workers performing culture in ethnically designated locations.

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## Introduction

It's Tết, or Vietnamese Lunar New Year, at the Asian Garden Mall in Little Saigon and the festivities are underway. The drums sound deeply, accompanied by crisp cymbals and low-rumbling gongs, before two lion<sup>2</sup> heads begin to crest over the large crowds. Once visible, bold red and yellow paper mache heads punctuate the rhythmic drums, shifting left and right—eyes flicker and ears dance as the lions elicit squeals from the crowd. Under the heavy lion head and thick cloth, the two lion dancers notice sweat trickle down their backs and foreheads. The dancer at the tail gauges every step of his teammate ahead of him. Bent over and barely able to see, he relies on his partner to navigate narrow pathways etched between bodies. The dancer at the front, under the large head, similarly multitasks; he steers the team through crowds, performs intricate footwork, plays to the audience with lion-like theatricality, all while holding up the heavy head structure and pulling chords inside that move the eyes and ears.

Flanked by weapon holders, drummers and flag bearers, lion dancers weave through the crowd, negotiating the space with deliberate, virile gestures. Deftly conveying the tension between drama and comedy, the dancers work to awaken a passionate response within those that eagerly surround the animal. An enthusiastic spectator rushes forward to insert money into its colorful mouth. The dancer—never missing a beat— grasps the money from inside and quickly

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<sup>2</sup> The lions are referred to as unicorns in Vietnam.

secures it in his costume. The music, previously boisterous, slows to a suspenseful simmer as the dancers prepare for the *cai qing*, or the “getting of the greens.” Shopkeepers hang a head of lettuce with a red envelope attached to the highest place they can find—usually above a doorway. The dancers demonstrate their athletic skill through the challenge to reach the money above, knowing well that upon failing a second try, they forfeit the money and thus payment for the performance altogether. However, lion dancers are not just here for the money—they are mostly here for the pride that lion dancing brings along with it. The weekly practices spent over many years, the training in deep kung-fu stances, and the building up of muscle to steady a 13-pound head while dancing in thirty minute bursts are made worth it during these events.

Multiple lion dance companies from the region perform and vie for space within the mall during the Lunar New Year and other cultural events. The companies often compete with each other for the invitation to perform and earn money-filled red envelopes supplied by the shopkeepers in addition to occasional tip money from audience members. While permission for the companies to perform requires confirmed goodwill with mall management, the online advertising materials supported by the mall suggests that lion dances are utilized by mall promotional representatives to recruit shoppers and visitors during the holiday season.<sup>3</sup> In order to create a lively and celebratory atmosphere, mall

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<sup>3</sup> The lion dance is continually issued as a highlight on the mall’s website (<http://www.asiangardenmall.com>) in addition to photographs showing lion dancers.

management typically seeks about five to six companies perform within different designated time slots. The Anê Thành lion dance company reports that they receive no outside sponsorship for their own organization, including sponsorship from the mall. Instead, dancers receive “lucky” money from business owners and spectators.

Asking business owners and lion dancers themselves why lion dancers perform outside of local shops produces a familiar response: “lion dances bring prosperity to the businesses through ritual which cleanses the space.” For example, the 2015 Tet Festival promotional website reads, “The lion dances usher blessings for weddings and new business openings. During the performance, live instruments represent the beating of the lion’s heart. On top of the lion’s head, there are mirrors to ward off the evil spirits.”<sup>4</sup> These blessings are said to give the company or business luck throughout the year. While I don’t call into question the efficacy of the ritual itself, I do explore the ways in which lion dancers are also hired to perform within cultural spaces such as the Asian Garden Mall in order to display diversity while selling and commodifying cultural practices. Masked in the common statement that lion dances bring luck and prosperity to the space through the ritual alone are uses of lion dance as

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<sup>4</sup> “UVSA Tet Festival 2015” (February 2015) <http://tetfestival.org>.

participants in the affective/ emotional economy<sup>5</sup> and in larger webs of economic and political ideologies.

Despite the physical challenges that lion dance performers endure—through training and in the fifty or so individual performances the company typically accomplishes during Lunar New Year festivities— they offer the predominately Vietnamese American audience an opportunity to imagine their past, encapsulated in the sound of the drums and revived for a moment in the familiar sight of dancing lions. For non-Vietnamese onlookers, the lion dance performance<sup>6</sup> provides an Orientalist display<sup>6</sup>, replete with the necessary markers of Asian culture expected within ethnically marked spaces. These dancers reaffirm cultural heritage for the Vietnamese American community while also performing diversity, a necessary ingredient for the multicultural agenda. In part, lion dances serve to cultivate an atmosphere of cultural authenticity, stimulating an affective register—cultural memory, nostalgia, and Oriental fantasy—that business owners realize will help to sell other, more tactile Asian products.

However, dances and dancers are never merely a reflection of the ideological environment that surrounds them, they also provide spaces to challenge the economic and political realm in often subtle ways. Lion dancers

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars have approached this notion of an *affective* economy differently. For example, Sharon Zukin uses the term *symbolic economy* while dance studies scholar Marta Savigliano, refers to a “political economy of passion.”

<sup>6</sup> For further research pertaining to Asian-American dance and Orientalism (see Wong 2010).

facilitate the reinforcement of cultural heritage through community building and physical action. Additionally, the dancers themselves perform a masculinity that redirects stereotypes aimed at Asian American men while working to cultivate the body as a symbolic weapon through the performance of martial arts movements and choreographies.

As a two-thousand-year old ritual, lion dances have been performed for different reasons throughout their genealogical timeline. This paper asks: How and why are lion dances one of the most popular forms of cultural entertainment in Little Saigon? How do they both participate within the capitalistic nexus of the Asian Garden Mall—Little Saigon’s metaphorical economic engine, while also resisting mainstream (white) U.S. culture? Despite the common perception that performances and movement practices lack a deep connection the political or economic, scholars increasingly recognize the ability of choreographed bodies to reflect, participate within, and impact economic decisions related to cultural practices within communities. This study is a multilayered exploration into how lion dances participate in narratives of multiculturalism while simultaneously defying these narratives through community building, the strengthening of cultural identity, and through the moving body itself. In doing so, I tie together an analysis of the economic, spatial, and bodily interactions that are at play within the Asian Garden Mall during lion dance performances and how these processes come together to engender a sense of community and subjectivity that challenges dominant U.S. identity politics.

Methodologically, I draw from personal interviews from the Anê Thành Lion Dance Company, a range of theoretical scholarship, archival materials from UC Irvine’s Southeast Asian Collection, fieldwork conducted at the Asian Garden Mall, and my own physical response watching lion dance performances. This study sheds light on the complex interplay of the lion dance as a cultural performance—a dance between bodies and institutions of power. While lion dances have been virtually left out of academic scholarship, these performances warrant consideration as a form of labor through movement, muscular effort, cultural work, and technique to suggest that lion dancers are embodying complex discourses affecting the Vietnamese community. Existing within a political and economic framework that seeks to commodify culture and cultural bodies through the symbolic economy, attention to the labor of these dancers as they move within fraught spaces unearths the histories they maneuver. It also necessarily complicates the image of such folk dances as economically un-savvy, apolitical, innocuous<sup>7</sup> placeholders easily absorbed into multicultural programming events. Furthermore, in focusing on dance as a strategic participant in the economic sector of a community, this research adds to the growing literature that seeks to avoid the common trope of the vulnerable Vietnamese refugee as a figure shaped by loss and trauma. Instead, this research paints a different picture—one where members of the Vietnamese community have actively and deliberately pulled from their own cultural forms to bolster the economy within Little Saigon.

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<sup>7</sup> “Apolitical” and “innocuous” are often appear as terms used to depict “model minority” citizens in the U.S.

My interest in lion dances comes from my personal history of performing these dances while an undergraduate student at Colorado College. During my four years in the dance department, I joined a group called the Asian Touring Dance Troupe. My professor, Yunyu Wang, a native of Taiwan, headed the company. Although she was formally employed as a modern dance teacher, she felt it important to teach us the traditional Chinese dances that she had studied growing up in Taiwan, including Tang Dynasty choreographies, fan dances, and lion dances. The company was made up of about ten dance students from various cultural backgrounds. As a dance major and relatively tall person, I had the challenge of performing under the lion head. The training process fascinated me in its uniqueness from modern dance or ballet training. I had to build up considerable arm strength to hold up the head while also increasing my leg muscles in order to perform the deep kung-fu stances necessitated by the form. I remember being so sore after one particularly grueling practice that I was unable to walk up stairs the following couple of days.

On weekends and during Chinese celebrations, the troupe would stuff a large lion head into a van, pile in around it and go out into the community to perform. I looked forward to these performances immensely. The performances usually took place in large, open spaces filled with hundreds of Chinese families celebrating cultural heritage events. Our company would quickly and efficiently pull on our bright lion dance costumes and prepare for the show. The range of emotions I witnessed (albeit through the lion's mouth) resonated more deeply for

me than the performances I was participating in for faculty concerts. I saw little girls giggling and running back to tell their mothers they had touched the fur of the beast, saw little boys jump around us and shout, and the faces of parents light up as their children experienced their own culture in the middle of Colorado Springs—a predominately white, politically conservative city.

I also saw how proud my teacher was that her students were participating in Chinese events—that we were building and reinforcing cultural heritage in the country in which she now lives. I saw the communities that surrounded these particular dances—and performing them felt more effective, more deeply intertwined in the praxis of everyday life than my performances on a proscenium stage. Rather than an individual pursuit of technique, participating in lion dances made me aware of community—the community of dancers I trained and performed with and the communities we brought together through performing them. Lion dances shortened the spaces between performer and audience and despite being a white performer myself, lion dances allowed me to understand the way dance rituals enable identity formation while providing spaces for minority cultures within mainstream spaces.

There have been multiple useful studies on the intersections between space, culture and the economic. Spatial theorist, Sharon Zukin, provides a historical analysis of how cultural spaces benefit cities economically. She terms the *symbolic economy* as the production of symbols, which produces a currency of commercial exchange needed to enhance the economic integrity of a specific



location.<sup>8</sup> Scholar Karin Aguilar-San Juan recognizes this symbolic economy in conjunction within specifically Vietnamese American places in her analysis of how place-making endeavors help people maintain cultural identity. 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 serving to benefit most community members.<sup>9</sup> She defines marketplace multiculturalism as, “a discourse and a set of policies and practices that link the global capitalist economy to the sociospatial terrain out of which Vietnamese America emerges.”<sup>10</sup> She contends that marketplace multiculturalism encourages pockets of difference to attract tourists, boost real estate sales, and augment the distinctiveness of an area.<sup>11</sup> Often, multiculturalism has been put forward as a gesture of promised equality with little genuine improvement beneath the surface. In actuality, multiculturalism is an ideology tied to political and economic goals that results in the sale of culture for profit rather than the promotion of diversity for its own merit. Marketplace multiculturalism is a fraught system within which lion dancers perform culture for

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<sup>8</sup> Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Jocelyne Guilbault, "The Question of Multiculturalism in the Arts in the Postcolonial Nation-State of Trinidad and Tobago" in *Music and Politics* (V.1 2011), 1. Guilbault defines the U.S. brand of multiculturalism as a government-sponsored prerogative stemming from the neoliberal political nexus that monitors and regulates the practices related to ethnic and cultural differences.

<sup>10</sup> Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2009), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

the benefit of tourists but also for Asian American business owners who realize that packaging and selling Asian culture for a range of consumers yields economic gain. The lion dancers not only maneuver the crowds, they also navigate and challenge the often-invisible agendas operating within ideologies of the nation-state as well as within the Vietnamese community itself.

Dance Studies scholar SanSan Kwan furthers a spatial analysis by including the role of bodies and bodily experience in her kinesthetic methodologies. She suggests that bodily knowledge is a partial but viable tool for understanding cultural spaces. Since movement in space and time is the backbone of dance choreography, a community dancing within a particular space and time transforms space into a specific place within unique meanings.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, dance scholar Priya Srinivasan, utilizes her own physical response as a method for understanding the labor of dancers and dancing bodies as they participate in global capitalism and narratives of citizenship through her concept of the *unruly spectator*.<sup>13</sup> The unruly spectator is a deeply questioning and restless ethnographer attuned to his or her own body as well as the material labor of the dancers who are inevitably involved in the sphere of capitalism. While Srinivasan's work investigated the experiences of young, female South Asian dancers in Southern California, my research examines how male youth

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<sup>12</sup> SanSan Kwan, *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2011).

have both similar and unique situational conflicts, aims, and values in their work as cultural laborers.

To understand how power functions within this specific space and through individual bodies, Louis Althusser's notion of "ideology" becomes useful. Althusser offers an extension of Marx's notion regarding the capitalist mode of production and the ways in which alienated labor shapes the subjectivity of individuals and re-produces labor power within the class system. Forces of power, according to Althusser, are concealed through symbolism and create submission through fear of ridicule and exclusion.<sup>14</sup> While power acts upon bodies through visible and invisible disciplinary techniques,<sup>15</sup> individuals also challenge power through "the agency bound up with the mental and linguistic abilities of individuals to make and re-make their daily lives."<sup>16</sup> In other words, political agendas are not simply acted upon passive bodies but are negotiated through complex processes that involve the internalization of dominant value systems in conjunction with individual self-awareness. As such, lion dancers, like everyone else, are implicated within systems of power and regulated through diverse operations and yet, it is clear from my research that lion dancers are fully aware of the unique forces that shape their particular experiences. While

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<sup>14</sup> Louis Althusser. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (Verso 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

<sup>16</sup> Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications 1993), 26.

company members earn very little profit for their labor,<sup>17</sup> the dancers engender other forms of power through the processes of mobilization that enable community building.

Dance choreography—organizing bodies within time and space and setting them into action— is already comprised of the processes of political intervention. Dance scholar, Randy Martin argues that the action of a community assembling their talents and efforts together to work against forms of injustice, and mobilizing shared ideologies is a process seen in dance performance as well political organization.<sup>18</sup> A deeper understanding of the ways in which bodies in motion work to challenge systems of oppression, provides information on how political mobilization can affect social and political shifts. Regardless of whether or not the mode of resistance is explicitly physical, the metaphor and process of setting movement into action is still relevant. According to Martin, “politics goes nowhere without movement. It is not simply an idea, decision, or choice taken at a moment but also a transfigurative process that makes and occupies space.<sup>19</sup> I argue that lion dances provide a clear example of the potential for mobilization as they assemble a group of performers under shared intentions to negotiate positionalities of citizenship and to accumulate profit for their economically

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on the invisibilization of danced labor, particularly regarding immigrant bodies see Priya Srinivasan’s *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (2011).

<sup>18</sup> Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*,3.

underprivileged communities. Performed outside, offstage, and in the realm of everyday life, lion dances move through large swaths of space — carving out pathways between spectators and through economically determined, heavily surveilled spaces. As such, lion dances provide a prime example of the process and structure of political action. Analyzing how community members not only organize cultural events but also how dance garners public attention and sets political goals into motion, provides valuable insight into relationships between dance and politics and between bodies and society.

Mobilization is a key ingredient in the development of strong communities. The cultivation of strong communities that work to build shared identities provides a platform to challenge political and economic ideologies. The communities that lion dancers develop encompasses a range of individuals including the dancers themselves, their supporters, family members, and teachers/mentors. Instead of focusing on an idyllic imaginary of community, however, I contend that lion dance communities are built on shared experiences and a sense of being together under common goals.<sup>20</sup> Instead of conceptualizing of the lion dance community as a singular, homogeneous entity, I envision it as a collection of individuals with distinct perspectives who come together with the aim of performing and preserving culture. It was this sense of community that continually rose to the surface during interviews with lion dancers. This feeling of pride was coupled with

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1991). Nancy challenges the utopian community arguing that homogeneous, idyllic communities rarely exist in real life. Instead, he advocates for communities that center around a sense of shared experiences.

a recognition that danced knowledge was being passed from generation to generation of lion dance practitioners, forming a flexible but strong genealogical history able to withstand even the harshest of new environments.

### **The Lions of Little Saigon**

The lion dances of Little Saigon did not emerge spontaneously but rather through sustained and calculated efforts. While the dances are commonly thought to originate from China, Chinese laborers migrating to Vietnam likely introduced lion dances to the Vietnamese during China's extensive, millennia-long colonial presence in the country. Historically performed by men, lion dances have been associated with both masculinity and working-class bodies. Vietnamese revolutionary Trần Tử Bình recounted in his memoir, *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation*, that lion dances were performed as source of amusement. Bình spent a grueling year in 1927 laboring on Michelin's Phú Riềng rubber plantation and writes, "[someone] brought a lion's head for the dance and even brought instruments and drums so we could form traditional music ensembles."<sup>21</sup> Lion dances eventually became localized to Vietnam, where the lion head became known as a unicorn and head became narrower. Today, the character Ông Địa, or the spirit of the earth, accompanies the lion/unicorn in the Vietnamese version of the dance.

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<sup>21</sup> Tu Binh Tran, *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* (Ohio University, 1985), 43.

While documentation has yet to confirm how Vietnamese lion dances came to the U.S., Vietnamese refugees arriving to the U.S. after the fall of Saigon in 1975 probably brought knowledge of the ritual along with them. Performances such as the lion dance were suppressed after the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was formed, making them a suitable ritual to take up in the diaspora as a way of proving that the new community in Little Saigon would maintain and highlight cultural and ritual practices rather than stifle them.<sup>22</sup> One interviewee recounts that despite growing up in Vietnam, she did not witness lion dances until she moved to Little Saigon in the 1990s. While lion dances have since been revived in Vietnam, they have been present in Little Saigon relatively soon after the arrival of Vietnamese refugees.

Performances of the lion dance in Little Saigon began to surface in the late 1970s, albeit humbly within small-scale festivals.<sup>23</sup> In 1982, through the efforts of the Union of Vietnamese Student Association (UVSA), the Tet Festival became consolidated into a formal event that continues to attract thousands of people every year. The festival, which inevitably includes lion dances, has

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<sup>22</sup> On a research trip to Hanoi in 2013, I witnessed multiple lion dances in the street during the Mid-Autumn festival suggesting that cultural performances such as the lion dance have increased since the doi moi economic reform after 1986. Janys Hayes notes that ritual performances have been since revived in Vietnam as a means of solidifying national identity.

<sup>23</sup> Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J. W. Park, *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014).

become a means of offering cultural performances to the Vietnamese community but also as a way to recruit tourists to Little Saigon.

The Anê Thành lion dance group is composed of roughly twenty, second generation Vietnamese Americans. The company members are all male and range in age from twenty to thirty years old. Most members met during their involvement with the Vietnamese Eucharistic youth group at their church, where they often find new lion dance recruits. While the more experienced members of the company now teach the newer dancers, the company did at one point have a lion dance master teacher named Triet Nguyen training them in the form. However, their teacher returned to Vietnam a couple of years ago.

The group performs what they call a mixed hybrid. In lion dances, there are two main styles: Fut San and Hok San, Fut San is traditional martial arts style that centers on the more traditional aspects of the form. It incorporates many of the power moves that are seen in the choreography. Hok San focuses on thematic expression, detailed floor patterns and the aesthetic qualities of the lion performance, while also emphasizing drumming techniques. The fusion of the techniques allows the dancers the flexibility to draw from aspects of each style that will enhance their performance during any given performance.

It became clear to me that the dancers hoped to accentuate acrobatics as a way of gaining spectatorship. “We are different from the Chinese groups,” one interviewee told me. “We include more lifts and new things we see coming out of the competitions [whereas] the groups based in Chinatown emphasize traditional



kung-fu footwork.”<sup>24</sup> I witnessed the acrobatic nature of their performances during a rehearsal the dancers had in a parking lot in Garden Grove. Over concrete, the base dancer practiced lifting his partner swiftly into an overhead position, swaying slightly until the two found equilibrium. Worried, I asked if a dancer had ever been dropped. “Not in a while,” one dancer responded. The others looked at him as if to stop further explanation. There seemed to be a deep trust between the dancers, developed through years of literal and figurative support, through extensive repetition and practice. There was also a willingness to simply let go, to be thrust into the air for the benefit of something greater than the individual, or possibly to claim spaces above and beyond the level of the ground.

Eventually, a security guard from a nearby Chinese restaurant saunters over. She is friendly and asks what we are doing in the parking lot. The dancers, dressed in black with their company logo clearly on their shirts, explain that they are rehearsing for a performance set to happen in an hour or so. She smiles and watches curiously as if to understand exactly why a large group of Vietnamese men are dancing in a parking lot late at night before returning to her post outside the popular restaurant. I look around to notice that a few other security personnel around the plaza are monitoring the practice.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with lion dancer, October 16, 2014.



**Figure 1: Anê Thành Lion dance members warming up in a parking lot before they perform.**

Dancing in spaces such as parking lots and within malls is not particularly unusual in the dance world. In the midst of an economy that continually shrinks funding for the arts, dancers find and create spaces—whether they are sanctioned or not. However, there is an added layer to the lion dance rehearsals I witness in the parking lot. Not only are dancers often relegated to carving out spaces to practice their form, but the Vietnamese community in general has had

to make similar maneuvers in managing their access to space within the confines of Little Saigon and within the national sphere.

### **Little Saigon and the Creation of a Vietnamese Symbolic Space**

Vietnamese immigrants arriving to California in the 1970s entered a tense environment complicated by a range of emotions. Post-Vietnam war America not only included individuals confused by war and unsure how to accommodate a huge influx of Vietnamese citizens, but also a political grappling concerned with “taking care” of racial divides spurred by the civil rights movements and consequently utopic visions of a multicultural future. Not only were Vietnamese refugees escaping intense political turmoil in their home country, they entered into a new nation—one enmeshed in a historical past that included the legal exclusion of Asians, systemic racism, and a host population with mixed feelings about their arrival.

According to dance scholar Yutian Wong, this large influx of Vietnamese immigrants to Orange County was met with confusion in the American public’s imagination as to who constituted an American citizen.<sup>25</sup> Wong claims that war films, popular in the late 1970s, solidified American associations of Vietnamese immigrants in opposition to American society. Essentially, the Vietnam War memorialized in Hollywood film focused not on the Vietnamese as partners against communism but rather on a series of individual injustices committed

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<sup>25</sup> Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2010), 7.

against American soldiers who were the victims of U.S. government policies and the Vietnamese enemy.

The first wave of Vietnamese to arrive in the U.S. was comprised mostly of citizens from the elite class and those who left Vietnam due to the Communist takeover in 1975. This group mainly included army officers and their families as well as government officials, lawyers, students, doctors, teacher, and engineers. This group had been supporters of the U.S. during the Vietnam War and for the most part, had already been introduced to U.S. ideology and imperialism in Vietnam. As Nhi T. Lieu states in *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, these individuals had already experienced American democratic ideals and consumer capitalism before migrating to the U.S. As such, “Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States with hopes of assimilation, fitting in, and becoming free subjects in an advanced capitalist society; in essence, they wished to live the American Dream.”<sup>26</sup> For this group, new identity formations in the U.S. were constructed in opposition to communist ideology through identification with capitalism and a middle-class imaginary.

Later flows of immigrants came from significantly more modest backgrounds, often fleeing regional military conflicts and worsening economic conditions in Vietnam. Ironically, a war exacerbated by U.S. intervention led many Vietnamese to flee terror from their own nation and toward the U.S.—a

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<sup>26</sup> Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2011), xv.

country that accepted them on uneasy terms. The U.S government claimed itself a friendly savior of refugees, willing to accept the foreigners in the name of democracy and freedom.<sup>27</sup> The Orderly Departure Program, for example, sought to quickly and efficiently settle the new immigrants in their new homes abroad. Often, post-war Vietnamese immigrants are seen as a “desperate turned successful” story intended to promote their image as model minorities but also to justify American imperial acts and the moral righteousness of free-market capitalism.<sup>28</sup> Roughly 125,000 refugees arrived to the U.S. after the fall of Saigon. Most of those re-located were brought to Orange County, a middle-class, and relatively homogeneous suburb community.

Over the course of a decade, Little Saigon developed into the cultural and economic center of the Vietnamese diaspora. Yet, the story of Little Saigon is certainly not straightforward or singular. In one respect, as Aguilar-San Juan points out, the constructing of Little Saigon as a business district has stimulated job growth and developed a sense of place for a population marginalized from dominant society. Yet, on the other hand, the growth of this economy is dependent on the commodification of Vietnamese culture.<sup>29</sup> Government policy, white officials, and elite Vietnamese Americans have systematically shaped Little

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>28</sup> Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya, "Enclave, Place, or Nation? Defining Little Saigon in the Midst of Incorporation, Transnationalism, and Long Distance Activism," in *Amerasia Journal* (Vol. 36.3 2010: 1-27), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Aguilar-San Juan, "Marketplace Multiculturalism," 344.

Saigon. Sociologists Collet and Furuya argue that community development in Little Saigon highlighted the structure of local hegemony and paid attention to the physical nature of Little Saigon under control of the state. They write, “Architectural standards, the languages and size of signs, the display of flags, the use of certain colors etc., all come about only through a process that, in most cases, is overseen directly by city council and their appointees.”<sup>30</sup> It is the state that decides which products are sold and which cultural practices are followed. The success of Little Saigon was also dependent on the commodification of Vietnamese culture through efforts to brand Little Saigon and market it as a tourist destination in the name of a free-market economy.

Despite a general sense of ambiguity directed toward the Vietnamese, developers in the region saw an opportunity to gain economically from the cultural symbolism accrued by the immigrants. In performing an overt culture forms, lion dancers intervene in this sense of uncertainty and apathy by providing tangible cultural performances that, on the surface at least, fit within designated multicultural discourses. Chinese-Vietnamese capitalists and white politicians realized that cultural areas could attract new business and capital to the region. Before 1975, Bolsa Avenue, one of the main strips of Little Saigon, was a series of “run-down strip malls, machine shops, auto repair shops, strawberry fields and aging mobile home parks.”<sup>31</sup> However, a few elite Vietnamese as well as

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<sup>30</sup> Collet and Furuya, “Enclave, Place, or Nation,” 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 5.

Chinese-Vietnamese businessmen called the “pioneers of Bolsa” hoped to transform the suburb into an ethnically themed park similar to Disney World. These pioneers strategically positioned new business in ways that could establish Little Saigon as a brand that could easily be sold. In 1988, after years of resettlement, economic struggle, and acclimation to American culture, the name “Little Saigon” was applied to the area. A part of the push to create Little Saigon arose because the city was also trying to fend off bankruptcy caused mostly by Proposition 13<sup>32</sup>, corruption and other failed ventures such as an attempt to bring Queen Elizabeth II to visit. A white council saw the possibilities for Vietnamese business at a critical time. “I can see it becoming . . . like Chinatown in San Francisco, a great tourist attraction,’ the city administrator told the *Times* two years before.”<sup>33</sup> While the *Register* claimed that Vietnamese communities in the area had themselves succeeded in lobbying the Westminster City Council to designate a 1.5-mile stretch of Bolsa Avenue from Magnolia to Brookhurst in actuality, there was a quid pro quo. In return for better tax collection presumed underreported by Vietnamese business, Westminster would be allowed access to resources in order to promote Little Saigon as an economic center.<sup>34</sup> The transformation of Little Saigon from a refugee landing spot into a prosperous economic project sheds light on the interplay between the nation, the state of

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<sup>32</sup> Proposition 13 reduced property tax rates on homes and businesses.

<sup>33</sup> Collet and Furuya, “Enclave, Place, or Nation,” 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

California and the capitalist enterprisers from within and outside of Little Saigon's community.

Multicultural discourses are entangled with neoliberal ideology. Concerned with deregulating the economy and privatizing the sale of public goods and services, neoliberalism strives for capital to move without concern for territorial boundaries. With an emphasis on the "free market," neoliberal ideology developed in part from a threat to the social and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and residual New Deal social policies.<sup>35</sup> These "diversity issues" stirred up by protest and liberal social policy needed to be somehow neatly resolved within government policy. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant suggest in *Racial Formation in the United States*, a laissez-faire free market policy is meant to swing the labor market on behalf of powerful political actors and historically, such policies "developed to assist whites in insulating their jobs from non-white competition."<sup>36</sup> Often residing underneath the guise of colorblind politics, political whiteness the benefit of upper class, predominantly white citizens. Thus, the tension over the control over the market has been a political class struggle with deeply racist undertones. Disapproval of the Vietnamese in Orange County has been seen in a number of racist incidents ranging from the repeated vandalism of

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 38-39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



freeway signs in the area<sup>37</sup> to the murder of 24-year-old UCLA graduate, Thien Minh Ly in 1996.<sup>38</sup>

When thinking about relationships between these political policies and Vietnamese Americans, Lieu argues that “it is vital to think about the Vietnamese American communities formation within the greater context of Cold War anticommunism and Reagan era conservatism.<sup>39</sup> Heavily promoting anticommunist thought along with unfettered free market capitalism, the Reagan era brought forth an economic value system that endorsed material excess in ways that the Vietnamese refugee community desired but could rarely achieve.<sup>40</sup> As Vietnamese American immigrants settled into their lives in the U.S., Reagan’s neoliberal ideologies begin to cement. Lieu states that “the Reagan era not only influenced the ways in which the refugee community and its most vocal members enacted anticommunist politics but also fostered the communities’ faith in capitalism’s promise of freedom and self-improvement as the focus moved from the collective to the individual.”<sup>41</sup> What began as a promise has done relatively little to advance the economic prosperity of the area.

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<sup>37</sup> “Westminster: City to Replace Stolen 'Little Saigon' Signs” LA Times February 02, 1989.

<sup>38</sup> Scott Moxley, “When Gunner Jay Lindberg Killed Thien Minh Ly, Was it Actually a Hate Crime,” (July 17, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 28.

As Zukin writes, the 1970s were a time when “culture became more of an instrument in the entrepreneurial strategies of local governments and business alliances.<sup>42</sup> City planners and developers believed that the homogeneity of suburbia could be countered through aesthetic diversity. Many cities have employed an economic strategy based on the “ethnographic ‘gaze’” and ‘sale and consumption of pleasure.’”<sup>43</sup> The move toward creating cultural spaces also hints toward a strategy for maintaining and managing social diversity. A convenient result of bringing culture into suburban spaces is that artists and cultural workers, and immigrants tend to be flexible, docile and hardworking.<sup>44</sup> Zukin writes: “. . . cultural strategies permit elites to ‘take the high road’ by acknowledging eclecticism and allotting each group a piece of the visual representation of a city or region.”<sup>45</sup> This visual acknowledgement aims to give appearance of a transformed middle class—one that requires fewer resources.

When the economy becomes privatized as in the case of neoliberalism, underserved populations are expected to help themselves climb the economic ladder with little support from the government. As Yoonmee Chang suggests: “If culture is a resource for economic development, those who suffer under capitalist development can now be expected to develop their own cultural solutions, to be

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<sup>42</sup> Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

tested in and resolved by the free market.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, it becomes the responsibility of individual actors to work their way up an uneven system. Those within Little Saigon are required to use their own culture as a means of economic stability.

### **A Multicultural Oasis: The Asian Garden Mall**

The Asian Garden Mall provides a physical space for the consumption of various Vietnamese products, food, beauty services, and cultural productions. The slanted, pagoda-style rooftop and large tiger and dragon statues guarding the front of the building differentiate the mall from other buildings on the block. Inside, the mall is full of shops selling knick-knacks, small statues, flowerpots, jewelry and decorations while a distinct smell of Vietnamese food and herbal medicines fills the air. As a business project developed by “pioneer of Bolsa,” Frank Jao along with the financing of overseas investors built the two-story mall in 1986 through a capitalist venture. A Vietnamese immigrant of Chinese decent, Jao strategically created the Asian Garden Mall as a pan-Asian commercial center rather than a solely Vietnamese space and received considerable backlash as a result.<sup>47</sup> In positioning the mall as Asian rather than specifically Vietnamese, Jao was able to not only attract a larger number of consumers but was also able to move between different economic and social worlds and gain

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<sup>46</sup> Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 49.

<sup>47</sup> See Lieu (2011) and Aguilar-San Juan (2009).

financially in each of them. This pan-Asian goal is reflected in the name of the mall as well as the architecture created to invoke non-specific, “authentic” Asian-style building. Lion dances, performed in both Chinese and Vietnamese cultures are similarly seen as flexible and interchangeable. Like Jao himself, lion dancers perform strategic cultural flexibility in their ability to appeal to a wide range of Asian American consumers and audience members within the mall.

This cultural flexibility contained within the space of the Asian Garden Mall does not necessarily translate to the lion dancers themselves. Rather, the dancers are careful to claim their Vietnamese ancestry. They pointed out to me during interviews that they are all Vietnamese except for one member whom they gestured toward with a friendly smile before they informed me that he is a mix of Chinese and Vietnamese descent. The group also mentioned that the perceived flexibility cultivated through ‘pan-ethnic’ spaces has had important implications on their work. The Anê Thành Lion Dance Troupe performs the southern lion<sup>48</sup> dance. Within that category, they dance hybridized forms of the Fut San and Hok San subtypes. While the Fut San form in particular is known as a more aggressive and energetic style, the Hok San focuses on intricate unique footwork and robust drumming techniques. The company is clear that their style is different from the predominately Chinese companies that are based in Los Angeles. According to Anê Thành, those groups tend to perform the more

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<sup>48</sup> The southern style lion originated from Guangdong and unlike the northern style does not have long, shaggy hair over the body of the lion.

traditional footwork whereas their group tries to integrate more spectacular lifts and acrobatics.

When those hiring lion dance companies fail to recognize that each company has its own particular style, lion dance companies often become viewed as interchangeable. During New Years festivities, for example, some business owners might notice that certain lion groups are attracting more attention over another group. The shop owners quickly request the popular group to come perform outside of their stores. One Anê Thành member recounts: “Last year, some business asked us to come over and perform outside their stores instead of the other lion dance company [originally scheduled to perform]. They liked our style more, which has more athletic skill like lifts and jumps.” Seen as interchangeable, the shopkeepers merely swapped out performers in a way that benefitted their capitalist enterprise. Lion dance companies respond to the outside opinion of lion dances as easily exchangeable through their articulation of differences between themselves and other groups. Additionally, lion dancers continually watch international competitions and videos online to stay current but most importantly to remain distinct enough as to resist tendencies of interchangeability.

Vietnamese American business leaders and politicians have recognized that mainstream society sees the enclave through an Orientalist lens and purposefully capitalized on appealing to this fetishization of Asian culture. The phenomenon of selling cultural performances as consumable commodities to an

eager audience echoes dance studies scholar Marta Savigliano's work *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Savigliano reveals the exotification surrounding the global circulation and reproduction. She suggests the need to sell passionate performances "are recognizable even today when the world show business industry chooses to offer a strong, passionate, dancy dish to its hungry public."<sup>49</sup> Performances especially incite passion, which is an affective register intertwined with the economic that works to sell the "exotic other." Dance Studies scholar, Yutian Wong, suggests that Vietnamese American dance performances are almost always seen through an Orientalist lens. Through this lens, Asian cultures are seen as interchangeable commodities such that the "'Oriental body' can be objectified and shelved."<sup>50</sup> This interchangeability and thus easy reproducibility ties into what Walter Benjamin argues is central to our idea of art in the modern age.

In contextualizing the construction of art in the age of capitalism, Benjamin suggests in his brief essay, "The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction," that these new inclinations were generated out of capitalism itself. The function of art used to fulfill ritual processes. Now, the reproduction of art in mass suggests that art has become stripped of its original "aura" and utilized in

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<sup>49</sup> Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 3.

the capitalist system as needed.<sup>51</sup> This seemingly interchangeability can be seen clearly in an example from Wong who recounts attending a New Years program at the Bower's Museum in Santa Ana, California in 1997:

The New Year program included a lion dance, suggesting the presence of an 'authentic-looking' and 'authentic-sounding' Chinese celebration. Organizers had invited two lion dance groups to the New Year celebration without understanding the protocol that only one should have been invited. The curators of the event viewed the lion dancers as simply 'ethnic entertainers' and did not realize that both groups were highly offended upon discovering that a competing organization had been invited to perform.<sup>52</sup>

Wong goes on to reveal that one of the lion dance companies ended up leaving the performance in protest while the other group simply filled their spot by performing twice. A part of this interchangeability and cultural flexibility stems from ideologies of multiculturalism and the desire to add diversity to a location for economic profit. Sites such as the Asian Garden mall are powerful because they stimulate a broad range of emotions and experiences. These meanings are created and set into action through the arrangement of people's movement and through cultural cues such as the signs in Vietnamese as well as other visual and olfactory signifiers. The movement of bodies, however, is under constant surveillance of hidden cameras and armed security guards. As the lion dancers perform, they do so within an enclosed setting, overseen by mall police and security guards. It's no coincidence that the mall is equipped with its own

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<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," (*Modernism Lab Essays*. Web. 01 Sept. 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 310.

panopticon-like security station at its center.

Security increased within the mall following a 2014 robbery of Tick Tock Watches, a jewelry store. However, surveillance undoubtedly serves alternative functions. One of the great paradoxes of a neoliberal democracy is that it gains credence through increased surveillance from the state and by implementation through private companies. Neoliberalism deregulates borders to keep up with labor demands while providing very little support to those laborers. Therefore, risk management in the form of surveillance is then supplied as a means of keeping the peace, monitoring social norms, and regulating bodies of color.<sup>53</sup> Consumerism provides a means of gaining access to personal information in a way that further serves to manage and observe those perceived to be a risk to the social order. A newsletter from “Behind the Badge WPD” titled “Westminster commander strolls through Asian Garden Mall: ‘Our relationship is very good,’” boasts of the fantastic relationship between mall patrons and the police. The letter includes various pictures of a white police officer smiling among groups of Vietnamese shoppers and reporting: “Isn’t it amazing how nice the people are here? They are such good people.”<sup>54</sup> Statements like this, which draw from model minority rhetoric, reveal a desire to control which bodies are allowed in the

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed analysis of surveillance and neoliberalism see Robert Koulisch *Immigration and American Democracy: Subverting the Rule of Law* (Routledge, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Greg Hardesty, “Westminster commander strolls through Asian Garden Mall: Our relationship is very good,” October 28, 2014. <http://behindthebadgeoc.com>.



space, while making sure that those individuals conform to proper mall behavior thus ensuring a steady flow of consumerism and consumer based regulation.

The mall is an economic nexus and it is also a political arena as well. Recognizing the political potential of the space and the opportunity to recruit the Vietnamese American vote, George W. Bush made his appearance at the mall in 2000. In his speech, he utilized language to reflect a multicultural agenda. Bush claimed, "I love the wonderful fabric of this state. You can move to England and not be an Englishman. You can move to France and not be a Frenchman. But if you move to America, you're an American."<sup>55</sup> In a swift maneuver, Bush spoke to American ideals of multiculturalism and unity under diversity while integrating Vietnamese Americans into the political sphere, all while failing to address social and economic inequalities in the region.

When Vietnamese immigrants came to the U.S., they were expected to follow certain projected modes of acting within their new environment. Model minority discourses already solidified in the 1950s and 1960s, continued to dictate how Asian Americans should exist in the public sphere. The model minority framework served a specific purpose because the body of economically assimilated Asian American subjects satisfies the needs of liberal multiculturalism.<sup>56</sup> Conforming to model minority narratives to fit within the

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<sup>55</sup> Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 14.

multicultural agenda inevitably required substantial amounts of self-disciplining and the self-regulation of one's own body and the spaces that body occupied.

I suggest that one of major reasons that lion dances have been able to survive as popular cultural performances within Little Saigon is due to their ability to satisfy many aspects of the multicultural agenda. Not only do lion dances provide cultural diversity within homogeneous spaces and bring economic profit into local businesses, the choreographic structure of the dances signifies a model minority, capitalist work ethic inherent within neoliberal discourses aimed at proving that individuals, despite their circumstances can advance to success. Through the choreography, lion dances provide a tidy metaphorical example of underrepresented bodies exerting physical strength and muscular labor to grasp at money held overhead. Inside the envelopes exists a familiar story—extremely low payment for work completed by bodies excluded, policed and disciplined by the circuitous dynamics of power.

### **Getting the Greens: A Choreographic Analysis**

The “getting of the greens,” or the *cai qing* is the climax of the lion dance. Once the performance is underway, dancers act out the crowning point of the ritual when they successfully grab the red envelope attached to a head of lettuce. Usually the getting of the greens requires the dancer at the tail to lift the dancer in front into a seated position on his head, a move that requires considerable strength and stability. The lifted dancer then reaches through the mouth of the

lion to grab the lettuce above. After bringing the lettuce and envelop into the lion mask, he removes the envelope and secures it within his costume. With feet back on the floor, the dancer tears the lettuce and throws it out of the lion's mouth.

According to lion dance historian William Hu, the practice of the *cai qing* has symbolic referents to wealth. He suggests that farmers used to believe that these greens would bring luck and prosperity, as the word for "greens" in Chinese is either *qing* or *lù*, a homonym for the word "wealth." Hu writes: "the *Ts'sai Chi'ing* (also spelled *cai qing*) or 'getting the greens' becomes a microcosm which epitomizes human struggle and survival . . ." <sup>57</sup> The getting of the greens, therefore, can be read as both a literal and figurative getting of the greens.

Through its choreographies, the lion dance performs a narration of free market capitalism inherent in the multicultural agenda. I suggest that the lion dance's performance of free market capitalism and its exotic markers allow for lion dances to exist squarely within multicultural framework. Lion dances within the Asian Garden Mall perform symbolic representation of free market capitalism, desired not only by the Vietnamese community but also by dominant society in general. The getting of the greens, while appearing to be a valiant struggle for monetary success through hard work, actually reveals true inequalities at play. Dancers receiving very low wages for their labor, merely appear to be climbing

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<sup>57</sup> William C. Hu, *Chinese Lion Dance Explained* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ars Ceramica with Chinese Performing Arts Foundation, 1995), 1.

the economic ladder through their work ethic and individual, technical prowess. Lion dances embody specific aspects of multicultural ideology that allow for these performances to become one of the most common dance performances of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Lion dancers successfully perform within a free market capitalist system, using their own skills to acquire the money while displaying the model minority work ethic so valued by the government. The dancers symbolize through their performance that the money can be reached through sustained effort, technique, and skill. While it appears that the dancers have also gained economic profit through the dance, in reality they earn very little. Money does exist within these envelopes, but the amount that the dancers accumulate in total for their performance will be quite low. For example, if a shop owner has placed \$50 in the envelope and the dancers perform three shows in the mall per night, they earn \$150 total. That amount divided by nine dancers is almost \$17 dollars per dancer for the entire night—and that's a good night. Considering time spent training for the lion dance, \$17 is a very low price to receive for a whole night of strenuous labor.

Aguilar-San Juan contends that this phenomenon is tied up with an ideology of diversity that blends well with the region's conservative and anticommunist leanings. As Vietnamese leaders develop communities they must engage with the demands of marketplace multiculturalism. She writes:

One of the first demands is to produce and construct a version of Vietnamese-ness that can explain and justify the presence of Vietnamese in the United States and also generate and sustain commerce in the Vietnamese American business districts.<sup>58</sup>

She goes on to suggest that as a result, Vietnamese culture is morphed into an object and removed from its historical context. According to Aguilar-San Juan, marketplace multiculturalism gained momentum in Little Saigon in the 1990s, becoming an essential part of Westminster's marketing vocabulary.<sup>59</sup> A 1996 spread from the Business Directory of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce read: "Westminster: A great place to shop, live, play, or visit! With all that Orange County has to offer, visitors and residents alike will find Westminster centrally located, with a wide variety of shopping and one of Southern California's more unusual ethnic shopping districts—Little Saigon!"<sup>60</sup> Lion dances are able to perform within certain scripts that seek to treat these cultural practices as commodities, pulling them into the folds of marketplace multicultural agendas.

When thinking about relationships between these political policies and Vietnamese Americans, Lieu argues that "it is vital to think about the Vietnamese American communities formation within the greater context of Cold War anticommunism and Reagan era conservatism."<sup>61</sup> Heavily promoting

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<sup>58</sup> Aguilar-San Juan, "Marketplace Multiculturalism," 348.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>61</sup> Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 27.

anticommunist thought along with unfettered free market capitalism, the Reagan era brought forth an economic value system that endorsed material excess in ways that the Vietnamese refugee community desired but could rarely achieve.<sup>62</sup> As Vietnamese American immigrants settled into their lives in the U.S., Reagan's neoliberal ideologies begin to cement. Lieu states that "the Reagan era not only influenced the ways in which the refugee community and its most vocal members enacted anticommunist politics but also fostered the communities' faith in capitalism's promise of freedom and self-improvement as the focus moved from the collective to the individual."<sup>63</sup> What began as a promise has done relatively little to advance the economic prosperity of the area. When the economy becomes privatized as in the case of neoliberalism, underserved populations are expected to help themselves climb the economic ladder with little support from the government. In other words, it becomes the responsibility of individual actors to work their way up an uneven system. Those within Little Saigon, for example, are required to use their own culture as a means of economic stability.

In meeting with many of the lion dancers, I discover that their parents have advanced economically through sustained hard work and individual drive. More than a couple of those I interviewed had parents who worked in relatively low-paying nail salons or as beauty estheticians but have managed to create a secure income. While the dancers gain a little bit of a profit for their

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 28.

performances, especially during the holidays, many of them have second jobs. All of them report that they will not stay lion dancers long term but will eventually give it up in search of “stable” jobs in education, computer technology, and other fields. In other words, lion dancing is not considered a permanent source of income, but rather a side activity to be done while one is still in their youth.

Considering the economic gains accrued by business owners and the mall itself, it is noteworthy that lion dancers cannot cover the basic costs of their performance—costumes, gas, food, let alone health care needed in the event of injury. Yet, this situation, whereby non-white citizens must perform within the system of free market capitalism to gain very little, can be seen in the narrative arch and especially the climax of the lion dance within the choreography of the getting of the greens. Understandably, business owners are requesting cultural performances because they provide an air of authenticity and marketable exoticism that helps to sell other products to those both within and outside the Vietnamese community. Vietnamese American business leaders and politicians have recognized that mainstream society sees the enclave through an Orientalist lens and purposefully capitalized on appealing to this fetishization of Asian culture. Left with little choice in a difficult climate, Vietnamese American community leaders and organizers necessarily draw from cultural practices to increase business in the community. The getting of the greens, while appearing to be a valiant struggle for monetary success through hard work, actually reveals true inequalities faced by cultural performers within “ethnic” spaces. Dancers

receiving very low wages for their labor, merely appear to be climbing the economic ladder through their work ethic and individual, technical prowess. Vietnamese American dancers face unique challenges as they navigate the ambiguous place between being included into the national framework through their successful performance of multicultural discourses and simultaneous estrangement from mainstream U.S. society.

### **Hear the Lions Roar: Bodies as Weapons**

Although lion dancers are tied into a system that does not compensate for their labor as cultural workers, lion dancers simultaneously challenge the systems of power within which they are implicated. While I hope to not overromanticize the notion of resistance, I argue that the dancing bodies of lion dance performers work to counter a purely economic reading of this form. Lion dancers challenge dominant power structures through a strategic preservation of Vietnamese culture, the reinforcement of community, the fostering of Vietnamese subjectivity, the claiming of space, a performance of masculinity that counters stereotypes against Asian American men, and the cultivation of the body as a weapon. In the following section, I trace each of these modes of resistance to unpack the benefits of the lion dancer's laboring bodies.

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.<sup>64</sup> One of the major reasons for performing lion dances in the Vietnamese diaspora stems from a desire to preserve an awareness of culture for future generations. This theme of cultural maintenance and connections between older and younger generations appeared frequently in my interviews with lion dancers. One dancer reported:

My parents go along with us [to the performances]. They open their houses the night of the performance and we all hang out there. Our parents like this because it helps them tie their past to their kids. The lion dance is one thing parents see their kids enjoying and it connects the kids to our culture. They like that we enjoy cultural things.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, Aguilar-San Juan found that a major goal of the Vietnamese community is to preserve an awareness of Vietnamese culture and history with a political aim. She writes, “Having been displaced forever from their homeland, this group is particularly driven to assert their hatred and anger toward the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> Performing cultural works provides a direct counterpoint to the cultural erasure that happened at the hands of the Socialist government in Vietnam. In essence, the accentuation and promotion of cultural forms such as lion dances provided a clear mode of resistance against the political conditions that refugees fled.

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<sup>64</sup> Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (Oxford UP, 2014), 143.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with lion dancer, October 16, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*, 63.

The preservation of cultural forms is also deployed as a means of gaining visibility in a mainstream U.S. culture that seeks to render minority cultures invisible. Therefore, a significant aspect of the Vietnamese American “community-building and place-making involves wrestling with the past to produce and construct memory and history so that Vietnamese people in this country—as refugees, immigrants, and Americans—may be materially and discursively recognized.<sup>67</sup> The Anê Thành Company achieved a high level of visibility in February 2015 when they performed in the opening for *Paris by Night*, a popular Vietnamese variety show shown worldwide. One dancer described being dancing for the show: “Performing there was a lot of pride. We got a lot of exposure and it was a cool experience. It was so cool ‘cause our parents grew up seeing it and being around Vietnamese stars. We got to hang out with them and perform. Our parents still talk about it.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to performing at *Paris by Night*, Anê Thành has performed all over Southern California in a variety of spaces from hotels to weddings and larger-scale stage shows. The work of this company and other lion dance troupes encourages a broader recognition of Vietnamese cultural forms.

In addition to promoting visibility, lion dances and the communities built around them, work to develop a sense of shared identity. A lion dancer shares his insights: “New years and things like this in general brings the community

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with lion dancer, October 16, 2014.

together especially around here with the huge Asian population. Its something everyone can relate to it and connect to it. and feel the love for heritage and culture. It ties them to the heritage and the past—the history from Vietnam.” In addition to bolstering identity within the larger community, the rehearsal process of the dancers builds an internal sense of community that is important to the dancers themselves. The social space of lion dance practices outside of performances allowed for identities to be re-formulated. I found similar statements in my own interviews. A Tiger Crane Company member from the University of California, Riverside detailed his experiences of dancing in a college lion dance group: “I guess I just fell in love the small team feel and the teammates sort of became family. It’s where I feel like I can let loose and act like myself. We are all really close now.”<sup>69</sup> Lion dance performances and life-styles develop a sense of community that exists in relationship to greater society.

Through use of the lion as a symbol of masculinity and through the movement itself as strong, hard, and agile, to name a few, the lion dance performs a masculinity that resists conceptions of the Vietnamese American male Orientalized body as effeminate, passive, soft, and neutered. In the following section, I argue that Vietnamese American men find resistance to hegemonic masculinity through a strategy of repudiation, one that ignores claims of dominant masculinity as superior and instead repositions desired masculinity

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with a lion dancer, November 8, 2014.

in the Asian male body. I claim that martial arts and subsequently performances of the lion dance are ways in which these strategies are enacted.

Lion dances through their basis in kung-fu training integrate the idea of the individual body as a weapon and the practice of martial arts as a form of technology. Jachinson Chan suggests that martial arts cultivates a martial body, remade through a process of self-discipline and mastery—a process Foucault labeled “a technology of the self” and thus the martial arts body refuses external violence and cultivates inner strength.<sup>70</sup> Through mastery of kung-fu practices and the strenuous lifts of lion dance choreographies, the body becomes trained as a weapon—an individualized fighting mechanism. When practiced by nonwhites, the martial arts come to symbolize a potential challenge to the violence held by white men as the predominant holders of state power.<sup>71</sup> The body as weapon provides a way of viewing lion dance training practices as a direct resistive force to the Asian American body as an easily assimilable model subject incorporating agility and corporeal self-control in the face of exploitation.

Many of my fellow lion dancers at Colorado College recognized this power. Many of the dancers were international students and those who came from non-dominant backgrounds. There was a sense that training the body through fighting techniques provided a way to set oneself apart from more traditional, mainstream dance activities such as ballet or modern dance. Lion

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<sup>70</sup> Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge), 2001.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

dance training provided a space for those who didn't fit into those departmental favorites but it was also a location for establishing opposition to those forms. In comparison to other dance styles, the aggression felt enlivening. Yet, any overt sense of the dance being seen as dangerous was tempered by the fact that this was dance and we wore what amounted to a cute, animal costume. Essentially, what felt empowering, as a practice was palatable enough to present to a wider public and be sanctioned by the college community.

This same sense of the lion dancing body as weapon can be seen in the histories of lion dance practices in the U.S. By the 1970s the function of lion dances changed drastically, becoming imbued with radically new meanings. Lion dances became increasingly complex working-class cultural productions geared toward an opposition to racial inequality. Chiou-ling Yeh writes about how the New Years parades within Chinatown morphed in the early 1970s. She claims “violence became an everyday reality through which youth performed their manhood and formulated their identity.”<sup>72</sup> Street fighting was enacted as a means of directly resisting racism as underprivileged minority youths often considered violence and riots the only means to change structural racism and they used violence as a vehicle for re-masculinization and were motivated to identify with virile and primitive masculinities. Unfortunately, the radical social movements of the 1970s geared toward re-masculinizing the Asian male body often came at the exclusion of Asian-American women. However, with more and more women

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<sup>72</sup> Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Berkeley: U of California, 2008, 96.

practicing the lion dance, the martial arts trained body can be increasingly seen as a means of embodied resistance for both men and women practicing the form.

## **Conclusion**

Lion dance discourses seem to suggest that businesses hire dancers to purify their spaces through traditional ritual. In exploring this statement, some of the deeper ideologies beneath this claim become increasingly apparent. Lion dances certainly bring solidarity and cement cultural memories for the Vietnamese community and they also perform the exotic to stimulate feelings of passion, fantasy, and Orientalism. For non-Vietnamese tourists, this seemingly authentic performance-watching experience most likely leads to a desire to buy more Vietnamese products within the mall. Lion dances stimulate an economy of passion and successfully lend themselves to the marketplace multicultural agenda of promoting diversity to sell culture. Through their seeming flexibility as pan-Asian performances, they are often assumed to be easily interchangeable performances whereby if one company cannot perform, another can simply fill in their spot. Moreover, lion dance performers, as cultural laborers, are paid very little for their participation within the economic environment of culturally significant spaces such as the Asian Garden Mall. Lion dances not only have the ability to respond to economic shifts, they actively create new meanings by performing in ways to challenge model minority docility and re-incorporate the form as a cultural practice for the Asian American community itself rather than as

a spectacle designed to please tourists. The cultivation of a martial arts body through lion dance training practices encompasses the potential to see the body as a weapon of resistance.

In many ways lion dances remind us of the significance of the body and movement as a site of struggle toward new ends. These dances indicate the possibility of change and the transformational potential of movement, mobilization and community. Dancer's knowledge of assembling space and of creating a social logic that moves across different times and places is useful to constructing meaning in times of transition. Dancers could be viewed as ideal ambassadors of change due to an abundance of creativity, flexibility, and dedication. Moreover, dance is a key site where bodies and movement create value in ways that cast light on ways that this new sociality could emerge. Lion dances have the potential to help us in a new crafting of ideological symbols. Through new choreographies, we might be prompted to aggressively and proactively imagine new economic and political frameworks within the social spaces we construct.

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