Dancing with Lions: The Assertion and Transformation of Chinese Community and Identity in Belfast

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In this article I show why the southern-Chinese cultural form of the Lion Dance has become popular within the Chinese community in Belfast. I explain the ways that the Lion Dance offers an assertion of identity for Chinese migrants in Belfast, while creating a community of practice that socializes non-Chinese participants into Chinese ways of acting and interacting. Finally, I show how within this community of practice in Belfast, Chinese identities are not only expressed, but transformed.

Introduction
In post-conflict Northern Ireland, public space is dominated by the competing identities of Protestant and Catholic, British and Irish. Ramsey (2011), in his research on loyalist marching bands, has described how these identities are embodied in cultural practices, such as parading and music-making. However, Protestant and Catholic are not the only cultural identities in Northern Ireland: large numbers of migrants have been attracted since the peace process began. As the largest ethnic minority in Belfast, the Chinese community has been a significant cultural presence in the city since the 1970s. The most visible cultural expression of this community is the Lion Dance. This article will draw upon Hobsbawm’s (1983) notion of ‘the (re)invention of tradition’ and Wenger’s (1998) theory of ‘Communities of Practice’, to explain how the Lion Dance has developed in Belfast, and in so doing, illuminate those processes of community-building, identity formation and transformation that

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may be relevant in a wide range of political and cultural contexts.

Why Lion Dance?
The Lion Dance originated in southern China and is an important element of the Spring Festival celebrations there, where it is believed to bring material prosperity (Success Dragon and Lion Dance Association, n.d.). Lion Dances are centred on two performers dressed in an elaborate Lion costume, and traditionally include a number of other participants who dance, play trumpets, gongs, drums, firecrackers and other percussion instruments (Zheng & Chen 2006). Why has the Lion Dance, rather than other Chinese dances, achieved popularity in Belfast? My fieldwork suggests two reasons. Firstly, originating from southern China, Lion Dance was instantly recognizable by the Hong Kong descended immigrants who formed the majority of the Chinese community in Belfast. The second reason is that the Lion Dance provides a spectacular presence and the movements are easy to learn, while the Lion costume hides facial expressions and any mis-steps, enabling a wide range of people to participate, including old and young, those from southern China and those from other regions of the country, and even non-Chinese people in Belfast.

Asserting Chinese Identity: Reinvention of Tradition in Belfast
In interviews and conversations with Chinese immigrant Lion Dancers, it became clear that many saw participation in the Lion Dance as an escape from social exclusion caused by language and psychological barriers, and a stressful daily life under immigrant-specific circumstances. Their quest for identity through Chinese dance can be seen as part of the overall search for cultural identity as a result of displacement. Anna, for example, said: “I feel the Chinese people around me when I dance Lion Dance which makes me no longer feel lonely”. According to Betty, “I never think Lion Dance is a professional dance which needs special skill, in my eyes, it is like the Chinese take-away, the dragon, the color red images which stand for China and give me a feeling of safety during my long time away from my hometown.” By contrast, in China the Lion Dance is not seen as a marker of national identity, but rather as a regional form of celebration. The contexts within which the Lion Dance is performed vary between China and Belfast. In China, the dance is
primarily associated with the Spring Festival, celebrating the Lunar New Year. Whilst the Lion Dance is an important component of the Spring Festival celebrations in Belfast, it is also performed at the Dragon Boat Festival (in China, the Lion Dance would not be included), as well as other officially sponsored ‘multi-cultural’ events such as the city’s St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, and the ‘Mela’ organized by Belfast’s Indian community.

Hobsbawm (1984: 4), speaking of the reinvention of traditions, observed that “Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes”. In this novel context, the Lion Dance takes on a new function specific to migrants. In the multi-ethnic milieu of Belfast’s Dragon Boat Festival, for example, the Lion Dance represents the privileged identity of the Chinese community in a situation where that community acts as host to other ethnic groups and civic dignitaries. The identity enacted by the Lion Dance at the Dragon Boat Festival, then, is both a social identity and an assertive Chinese political identity. The loud, percussive music and vivid costumes create a visual and aural presence representing a Chinese community determined not to be overlooked by the Catholic and Protestant cultural blocs which dominate Belfast. As Betty put it, “I am not in the performance for money, just to enjoy the sense of belonging and to know I stand for the Chinese community in Belfast”. However, in reinventing the tradition, the Lion Dance has attracted new participants, with different agendas to the migrants who started the group.

Lion Dancers in Belfast come from diverse backgrounds: not all are of Chinese ethnicity, and many of those who are may not have participated in a Lion Dance in China. Dancers include Chinese students at Queen’s University Belfast, young people of Chinese ethnicity who have grown up in Belfast, elderly people who have been in Belfast for decades, and several non-Chinese participants whose interest in Chinese culture has often developed in relation to martial arts. ² Whilst for immigrant

² Lion Dance incorporates many martial arts movements, and in China is considered a martial art rather than a dance (Zheng & Chen 2006).
participants, the dance group is more a source of communal activity and social identity than an art form or skill, other participants have different reasons for involvement. Qin, a teenager who had migrated to Belfast as a child, said that the Lion Dance was the only thing he could do in Belfast that related to China. Wong, a second generation Chinese immigrant with a Belfast mother, felt confused about his different appearance in high school; a difference that has inspired him, with the support of his family, to learn more about Chinese culture. For these younger members of the migrant community, the Lion Dance serves as a source of Chinese identity. There are also non-Chinese members of the group. Sean became interested in Chinese skills and culture through martial arts, as did James. James’ girlfriend, Fiona, was a gymnast who felt she could use her skills in the dance, while Tom had been attracted to the style of movement after seeing the dance at the previous Chinese New Year celebrations. These non-Chinese participants show more interest in the specific skills and movements of the Lion Dance, and place less emphasis on its social aspects. How then, is this diverse range of people with very different agendas able to work together in mutually satisfying ways? I will draw upon Wenger’s (1998) theory of ‘communities of practice’ to understand this process.

A Community of Practice: Reinvention of Tradition and Transformation of Identity

Wenger (1998) has linked the concepts of community, identity and practice, asserting that community is produced through mutual engagement in shared practices; that such practices embody those skills and competences constitutive of identity. Wenger emphasises that not all in a community share the same identity; yet identity is inseparable from community, because communities define which skills and competences are recognised. Such skills and competences may range from ways of standing, speaking or eating, to particular kinds of performance. Wenger’s conception of identity as competence is closely related to Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of ‘habitus’; indeed, in his influential work Paths Toward a Clearing, Jackson (1989: 119) brings identity and habits together, declaring that “we are our habits”. The Belfast Lion
Dance group constitutes a community of practice where individuals can engage in the shared practices constitutive of identity. Because of this, the Lion Dance is more than an expression of a pre-existing Chinese identity. For many of those who participate (both Chinese and non-Chinese), the Lion Dance is a new practice, rather than a traditional one. By engaging with each other to acquire the necessary skills of manipulating the lion costume: walking, running, holding the head; moving the tail; controlling the mouth and eyes, dancing or playing instruments in support; all those involved create places for themselves within this community of practice, bringing forth simultaneously identities as both Lion Dancers and members of the Chinese community. Xian emphasises the importance of participation:

*It is like a kind of participation – whenever Belfast has some Chinese celebration I would like to be a part of it – I do not mind (repeating the performance), there are many Chinese people, I enjoy the feeling. Even if I do not play the lion’s head, I still want to participate in the performance, display the banner or hit the drum.*

While Chinese dancers were usually more interested in creating community through participation, non-Chinese dancers tended to be more focused on skills. However, with the passage of time, I found that non-Chinese dancers began to change their initial focus on skill towards the participation favoured by Chinese participants. For example, when I saw Tom perform four months after I had interviewed him at the Spring Festival he told me that now the skill is not as important as the feeling of participation in the dance group and Chinese community. Moreover, non-Chinese dancers became interested in participating in other forms of Chinese culture, such as communal meals, parties and weddings. As dancers became more competent and skills became embodied (requiring less concentration) they receded in importance in the minds of dancers. Potter (1997: 461) speaks of “The daily struggle to understand why their physical bodies move in certain ways and how they might learn to master other ways of moving that at present feel awkward or unfamiliar”. During a later performance, Tom observed: “I feel my body is more natural and energetic after eight month in certain ways Chinese people invite me to their activities, like their
wedding”. There is lots of co-operation under the Lion Dance costume, contributing to a sense of participation and belonging. Participants like Tom move from cultural outsider – purposefully learning specific skills – to a partial insider, embodying skills more naturally and coming to share some of the values of the Chinese cultural community.

Downey (2005: 57), who showed how Capoeira was transformed from a regional tradition to an element of Brazilian national identity, notes that learning dance can change the way dancers walk, breathe, stand and carry their bodies. It can affect their emotional lives, social interactions and perceptions. Moreover, everyday life and social interaction can be affected by skills and style of acting. I suggest that as they come to embody Chinese skills and values, the longer established members of the Lion Dance group become, in some ways, more Chinese: “cultural distinctiveness inheres not only in behavioral patterns and cognitive inheres not only in on can be affected by skills and style of acting” (Downey 2005: 57). Dancers who train together may comprise a distinct cultural grouping. Participation in the Lion Dance entails a negotiation of ways of being a person in that context, amounting to more than a mastering of a dance skill. The change in the perceptions of non-Chinese dancers may be related to Bowman & Powell’s (2007: 13) work on ‘The Body in a State of Music’, emphasising the co-ordination of bodily rhythms as a source of common perception:

...because participants share common time values not just in terms of ‘real’ time but also the shared perception of ‘quasi-simultaneity’ or a mutual sharing of inner-time where participants perceive themselves to be in sync with each other through rhythm and movement ... This constitutes the experiential sense of ‘we’ the collective relationship that is the very foundation of communication.

To paraphrase Bowman & Powell, in a dance context, living together through the same rhythm infuses a sense of cultural identity. The co-operative movements of the dance, shared facial expressions, rhythm, movement and gesture, create a common
experience. To participate in Chinese dance performance gives Tom a feeling of Chinese identity. According to Kockel (1999: 104), “identification with a specific community is a major source of individual identity, with Chinese identity offering an interpretative frame-work of imagined stability in time and space within a continuously changing social context”. However, it is not only non-Chinese dancers for whom participation leads to new forms of identity. Many migrant Chinese, particularly those not from the southern regions, neither took part in the Lion Dance nor saw it as an important component of Chinese identity when they lived in China. For these migrants, the Lion Dance has also provided new practices, a new form of community and a new form of Chinese identity. Even dancers such as Guo, who are from Hong Kong where Lion Dance originated, have participated in changing the nature and significance of the community by including migrants from other regions of China (as well as non-Chinese). As Lion Dancers in Belfast have reinvented the tradition within a new context, they have reinvented themselves.

Conclusion

The Lion Dance serves a variety of purposes for different people in Belfast: a shelter for the lonely and displaced, an assertion of political identity in a new home, and a site for building a community for both Chinese and non-Chinese Belfast residents. This article has shown how the Lion Dance forms a community of practice in which Chinese identity is not only expressed, but transformed. The incorporation of non-Chinese participants into the Chinese community, to the point that they play significant roles in the public performance of Chinese identity in Belfast, is particularly interesting. It also raises questions as to where the limits of a community of practice lie. Sean, Tom and Fiona may, through participation in the Lion Dance, be seen as members of the Chinese community in Belfast, but they still lack many other skills (such as language), which may enable them to be seen as fully ‘Chinese’. Even were they to acquire these skills, could visibly ‘European’ people be considered Chinese? It is a question relevant to the cultural integration of not only Belfast or China, but a range of other contexts and places.
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