

## KAZAKHS IN CHINA: EXPRESSING IDENTITY THROUGH THE DANCE QARA JORĜA

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### Abstract

In this article, I am going to discuss the social and political impacts evolving from the practice of Kazakh folk dance called Qara Jorĝa by Kazakh minority in China. Kazakhs residing in China constitutes the largest population of Kazakhs outside of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It is the one of the ten major ethnic groups living in China whose number of people exceeds one million among fifty six ethnic groups officially recognised by the People's Republic of China. In historical sources Qara Jorĝa is defined as a solo male dance imitating horse racing accompanied with Kazakh folk melodies such as Sal kureng or Qara Jorĝa. However, today's Qara Jorĝa involves duet, group, disco, staged performances and flash mobs performed by both men and women of all age groups. This article particularly focuses on the mass performances of Qara Jorĝa which took place in China between 2010 and 2011. The practice of Qara Jorĝa dance demonstrates how its meaning is being adjusted to the context where it is performed. My fieldwork trip in 2014 to one of the Kazakh villages located in China also showed Qara Jorĝa's contribution to the expression of Kazakh minority identity and its role in the revelation of hegemonic values existing in the state country.

### Kazakhs in China: Who Are They?

Kazakhs residing in China constitutes the largest population of Kazakhs outside of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It is the one of the ten major ethnic groups living in China whose number of people exceeds one million among fifty six ethnic groups officially recognised by the People's Republic of China (further PRC). The majority of Kazakhs are concentrated in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region, the area contiguous with the Kazakhstani border. Other Kazakhs in China live in the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai. Xinjiang occupies a sixth of China's landmass and "holds pivotal position at crossroads of six cultural and geographic regions: Russia, Central Asia (bordering the newly independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), Mongolia, the Indian sub-continent (sharing common borders with India, Pakistan and Afghanistan), Tibet, and China proper" (Becquelin, 2000:65).

Kazakhs are the second in terms of population in the region. They began to move into Xinjiang in the eighteenth century, establishing themselves on pastures in the northern and central mountain ranges in the region. One is the Tarbagatay Mountains stretching on the north and northwest of Xinjiang straddling the current border between Kazakhstan and China. The other is the Altay Mountains located along the northeastern border between Xinjiang and Mongolia. For several centuries, these mountain ranges were only accessible to the Mongol and Kazakh nomads. The abundance of pasturage and rainfall in these areas made it home for nomadic peoples (Benson & Svanberg, 1998).

Dance scholar Andriy Nahachewsky states that “people who live outside their homeland are called *diaspora communities*” (2012:113). Currently Kazakhs are a national minority in China, however the term ‘diaspora community’ seems not applicable to them. Their status is still veiled with ambiguity. On one hand, they were always historically present in Xinjiang. On the other hand, Kazakhstan is not their homeland, simply because when Kazakh nomads began to move from early eighteenth century towards Altay and Tarbagatay Mountain areas there was no such state as Kazakhstan nor was it in 1912-1914, when thousands of Kazakhs moved to Ili Valley on the Sino-Russian border because of Stolypin’s agrarian reform from 1906-1912 in Russian Central Asia (Benson and Svanberg, 1998).

North American scholars Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy in their book *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (2000) provides interesting definition to the concept of hegemony. As the basis for their explanation they use children’s story *The Runaway Bunny* written by Margaret Wise Brown (1972). The relationship between mother bunny and a little bunny was compared to the complex relationship within the society. “In simple terms, hegemony is a relationship in which one consents to the leadership on another because it is beneficial. For example, youth in general benefit from the nurturance and guidance of adult ‘hegemony’” (Artz and Murphy, 2000:5).

Thus, in China Han Chinese majority and governmental power is in benevolent control and Kazakhs depend on them. All hegemonic relations have leaderships that provide security, care, and rewards to subordinates; all subordinates are continually developing new interests, desires, and needs that challenge existing conditions (Artz and Murphy, 2000). In this kind of intricate relationship, the phenomenon of dance can play essential role in negotiating the identities of leader and subordinate. Following paragraphs of this article will discuss the mass performances of Qara Jorġa dance in China within the realms of cultural hegemony.

### **Celebration of the Nomadic Past or Propaganda for Chinese Communist Party**

The year 2009 was remarkable in China, because the state celebrated 60th anniversary of PRC and all over the country different events took place to commemorate this occasion. One of such events was organised by joint efforts of Kazakhs and other minorities residing in Xinjiang region.

On August 30, 13,228 peasants and herdsmen from 16 ethnic groups performed the Kazak [sic] traditional dance in Qinghe county, Altay prefecture in Xinjiang which has created a new Shanghai Great World Guinness World Record. The name of this traditional dance in Kazakh means “a black color [sic] horse that is running”. This traditional dance originated from a kind of simple dance which was used to imitate horses’ walking, running and jumping by Kazak. (People’s Daily Online, 2009)

However, they did not stop with single mass performance and in 2011 there was another record-breaking Qara Jorġa dancing in Altay city, Xinjiang region during the Ethnic Culture Tourism Festival. This time, apart from the record-breaking 17000 member dance parade, a 90-meter long embroidered tablecloth made by local Kazakh craftswomen was also registered as a Guinness World Record (CCTV News, 2011).



**Figure 1:** Photo from my fieldwork July, 2014. The dancers waiting for musician to start.

In popular literature, these Qara Jorğa mass performances or dance parades were interpreted by the cultural critics and public figures in Kazakhstan in many different ways. For example, Alimgazy Daulet Khan, the author of the article *Qara Jorğa byi joninde Murat dospen syrlasu* (The discussion of Qara Jorğa dance with the friend Murat) published in one of the Kazakhstani magazines in 2011 criticises the mass performances of Qara Jorğa in Xinjiang for reproducing the Chinese communist ideology. He talks about the imaginary homogeneous state where minorities melt within the majorities. According to him, minority cultures such as Kazakh are threatened because of highly ideologically loaded mass performances in Xinjiang which meant to represent pride, glorification and power of the PRC. In Qara Jorğa mass performances individual bodies merge into the dynamic unity to praise the collectivist effort. Further, he states:

The traditional art forms such as Qara Jorğa dance and *domyra*<sup>1</sup> playing which was performed by individuals in an intimate space and accordingly praised for individual creativity are now being transformed under the effect of Chinese ideology. Additionally, Kazakhstan instead of reviving and promoting a historical Qara Jorğa, is sending school pupils and university students to perform flash mobs for the sake of third rate show. (Daulet Khan, 2011:40-41)

According to Kazakhstani dance historians Abirov and Ismailov, Qara Jorğa used to be a solo male dancing which intended to show the strength of a man on a horse saddle (1984). The mass performance in Xinjiang made Qara Jorğa mixed gender collective dance performance. This sudden interest and promotion of Qara Jorğa dance of minority Kazakhs can be interpreted in two ways.

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1-Domyra is a plucked two-string traditional Kazakh music instrument.

First, PRC government attempts to compensate the damage caused by the Cultural Revolution which took place in China between 1966 and 1976. Mao Zedong, the chairman of Chinese Communist Party formally launched the Cultural Revolution at the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee in August 1966. Red Guards (radical youths) with the slogan “destroy the old, establish the new” sought to eliminate feudal and bourgeois artistic influences, and destroy the ‘four olds’ - customs, cultures, habits, and ideas (Kraus, 2012:43). Spontaneity in the arts was discouraged, making art dangerous profession. Some 1.5 million people were killed during the Cultural Revolution, and millions of others suffered imprisonment, seizure of property, torture or general humiliation (Kraus, 2012). Along with other minorities Kazakhs in Xinjiang also underwent this political cleansing, some of them were forced to destroy material artefacts such as old Kazakh manuscripts, silver horse saddles or belts (Interview with informants, 2014). However, in 1990s many Chinese scholars began to show interest in learning the minority cultures such as Kazakhs. It resulted in revival movement of some ethnic dance and music forms such as Qara Jorġa.

Secondly, ethnically diverse PRC politics intends to mark each of the minorities through their dances. Qara Jorġa was assigned to Kazakhs as the expression of their identity. The choice of Qara Jorġa was not by chance since the dance is situated in the discourse about the culture of nomadic Kazakhs where horse play an essential role. In an unforgiving climate and a seemingly endless land, horses provided transport and labor for them. They were staples of commerce and instruments of war. Therefore, riding remains a symbol of Kazakh skill. The horse has also symbolic meaning which is incorporated into immaterial culture of Kazakh people such as folk songs, fairy tales, legends, dances. They were equalled to human being, praised for their fidelity to their owners and worshipped as totemic animal. Therefore, not the Ayu bi (bear dance) or Qoyan bi (hare dance)<sup>2</sup> was chosen as the expression of Kazakh minority identity but Qara Jorġa. However, it brings plethora of issues. Apart from the change of the dance form these mass performances marginalise Kazakh folk dance forms other than the Qara Jorġa. It also leads to romanticisation and exoticisation of the Kazakhs residing in Xinjiang. The majority of whom in fact do not lead nomadic pastoralist life style anymore.

In July, 2014, I did my fieldwork in one of the Kazakh villages in Altay prefecture, Shingil county, Xinjiang region. Villages located close to the county town were leading sedentary life and the family whom I visited did not have a livestock. Instead, they were growing wheat in the backyard of their house. And the seventy-six years old man whom I interviewed was better than me in playing with his smartphone. However, he wanted me to record him in traditional clothes which he does not wear every day. As part of the traditional garment he put on a fox fur cap, which is worn during cold winter. 30 Celsius degree hot weather in July did not stop my informant from wearing it for the sake of demonstrating me the “authentic” Qara Jorġa and the essence of its nomadic identity. His actions might be interpreted as self-exoticism. Through the interview I learnt that he had a reputation of best Qara Jorġa dancer in the county and several times he was interviewed and recorded by local mass media. His actions probably would meet the expectations of Han Chinese journalists or researchers.

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1-Kazakh folk dances



**Figure 2:** Photo from fieldwork, July 9, 2014. The elders dancing Qara Jorġa.

### Heir or User? Minority or Majority?

Chinese ethnomusicologist Yang-Jiaojiao who is researching on the Qara Jorġa music in his articles also puts emphasis on the promotion of “authentic” Qara Jorġa music and highlights its importance as the heritage of ancient nomads (2013; 2014).

There are large amount of music which are related to horse among the music of nomads in our country. One of them is called “Kara Jorga” [sic] by Kazaks [sic] and there are some other versions of this music among Xibe and Mongols. They are relatively similar in original motives, even in their dancing. And “Kara Jorga” is one of the heritages of ancient nomads. (Jiaojiao, 2013:23)

Very recently in social network I came across with the video of Wang Nan Fei, young Chinese female singer’s performance.<sup>3</sup> As I have discovered later this performance brought her the first prize in China’s main song contest *Xin Guang Dy Dao*. Particular thing about this performance was the fact that in the first half of her three-minute-long performance she danced Qara Jorġa together with four male professional dancers. After that she sang Kazakh pop song *Rizamyn* from the repertoire of Kazakhstani girl band *Kesh You*.<sup>4</sup> Wang Nan Fei and the dancers were wearing traditional Kazakh style costumes. In fact, Wang Nan Fei’s costume was very much alike to the *Kesh You* singers’ costumes from their official music video. Her performance exemplifies the stylised version of Qara Jorġa. The dancers’ unison movements and acrobatic elements (high jumps, air splits) became characteristic to most of the Qara Jorġa choreographies created today.

However, Wang Nan Fei’s performance challenges the common perception about the place of the heritage, its “heirs and users” (Bakka, 2002:62). Is this a case of personal interest of Chinese woman in Kazakh culture or her choice was dictated by power celebrations in her country? Does it involve copyright issues? How does the Kazakh minority interpret her performance? Or is

3-Wang Nan Fei’s performance <https://youtu.be/FS9cDO95Fgk>

4-Kesh YOU’s official video of the song *Rizamyn* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWV-JUNPK1Y>

it an example of successful artistic space creation for Kazakh dance in the mainstream? These are only few of the questions which came to mind after watching the video. Certainly, they can be answered in many different ways. Within Gramscian analysis, ideology is understood in terms of ideas, meanings and practices while they are promoted as universal truths, are indeed meanings which support the power of particular social groups. Additionally, ideology is not separate from the practical activities of life and can be witnessed throughout people's actions and behavior (Barker, 2000). If Communist State Party or Han Chinese majority regards Kazakhs as exotic nomads it should be reflected in people's activities. The given example of my informant, his behavior and attitude as the only truth keeper of nomadic culture as well as Wang Nan Fei's performance promoting Qara Jorğa as pan-Chinese phenomenon might prove the ideologically hegemony existing in China.

### Conclusion

In terms of hegemony, I conclude that the dance Qara Jorğa is a model of compromise between supporting and challenging existing ideological values in China. On one hand, Kazakhs performing their traditional dance along with their nomadic past can be interpreted as an attempt to set boundaries of their identities. However, transition to sedentary life style, high technology, urbanization, migration had an impact on the lives of Kazakhs from Xinjiang. It seems that through the dance Qara Jorğa today Kazakhs are keen on creating "nostalgic version of their culture" (Prickett, 2013:145). On the other hand, performing Qara Jorğa to celebrate state's ideology in mass parade and allowing the majority to appropriate it on stage reveals the dependence on hegemonic powers. The omnipresence of Qara Jorğa dance performances in the public celebrations from 2009 through 2011 in China also shows the shifts in Chinese ideology methods. Traditional culture forms oppressed in Cultural Revolution in twenty first century took the central place in celebrating Chinese Communist Party's anniversary and proletariat brotherhood. The deliberate choice of Qara Jorğa dance as a Kazakh minority expression and at the same time its usage for promotion of hegemonic values of Chinese state has yet to be explored by the dance scholars.

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