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From Ritual to Spectacle: Nomadic Wedding Dances and the Politics of Cultural Transformation in China

Manfang Lyu[1]*, Hongjia Guo[2]

1.Tianjin College of Media and Arts, Tianjin, 301925, China

2.Tianjin Art Vocational College, Tianjin, 300181, China

Corresponding author: Manfang Lyu, 1318918105@qq .com

Abstract: This article offers a critical analysis of Mongolian and Kazakh wedding dances in contemporary China, treating these ritual performances not as vestiges of folk culture but as choreographed sites of semiotic labor, identity negotiation, and cultural regulation. Drawing on ethnographic case studies, movement analysis, and critical cultural theory, the study traces how kinship-centered ceremonies have been transformed into performative spectacles under the pressures of state-led heritage discourse, tourism economies, and visual nationalism.

Through a comparative reading of Ordos and Kazakh choreographies, the paper reveals how ritual sequences encode distinct logics of gender, kinship, and authority, while being repackaged for external legibility. Rather than expressing cultural continuity, these dances increasingly serve as instruments of aesthetic governance—legible, marketable, and politically managed. Concepts such as the aesthetic contract of recognition, ritual opacity, and choreographic authorship are mobilized to interrogate the shifting boundaries between embodied belief and curated display.

Engaging frameworks by Hall, Habermas, and de Certeau, the study shows that the modernization of wedding dance renders it both more visible and more vulnerable—visible to the nation, but estranged from community meaning. The article contributes to ongoing debates in performance studies, heritage politics, and affect theory by advocating for a more reflexive, community-centered approach to intangible cultural heritage—one that honors not only what can be shown, but what must be lived, misremembered, and remade.

Keywords: Intangible Heritage; Ethnic Performance; Semiotic Labor; Ritual Aestheticization; Cultural Politics in China

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1.Introduction

In contemporary China, where ethnic identity is both curated and contested, the dancing body has become a key terrain of cultural inscription. Among the Ordos Mongolian and Kazakh communities, wedding dances—once intimate, kinship-bound rituals—are now routinely staged for audiences far beyond the family: tourists, cultural officials, heritage institutions, and television cameras. What appears to be tradition is often choreographed for visibility; what claims authenticity frequently reflects the aesthetics of recognition rather than ritual necessity.

This paper takes these dances seriously, not as vestiges of folk heritage, but as semiotic performances that organize relations, affect, and political legibility. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997), we understand culture not as a

mirror of identity, but as a site where meaning is actively produced, circulated, and contested. Jürgen Habermas's account of the public sphere (1989) enables us to interrogate how wedding rituals—once embedded in private kinship logics—are refashioned into spectacles within the circuits of state discourse and market tourism. Meanwhile, Judith Butler's notion of performativity (1993) and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies (2004) guide our reading of the dancing body as both a surface of regulation and a medium of emotional labor. These frameworks are not analytical backdrops; they are conceptual engines for thinking the politics of movement.

Focusing on the Ordos and Kazakh communities is not simply a regional choice—it is a critical intervention. These two groups, while historically nomadic and culturally distinct, share a trajectory in which ritual practice has been transformed into performative heritage under the dual pressures of ethnic policy and cultural commercialization. Yet this transformation is uneven, contested, and full of symbolic ambiguity. As wedding dances migrate from yurts to national stages, they do not merely shift venues—they shift meaning, authority, and agency.

The chapters that follow trace this transformation through three analytic movements. First, we examine how kinship and hierarchy are embodied through ritualized gesture, showing how weddings choreograph not only family ties but social structures. Second, we interpret the symbolic codes embedded in movement and costume, asking how identity is rendered legible through aesthetic form. Third, we analyze how these dances are repackaged as staged heritage and consumable spectacle, arguing that preservation often entails a subtle violence—the recoding of belief into choreography, of belonging into display.

What emerges is a paradox: the more visible a tradition becomes, the more it risks dislocating from the very relations it once sustained. This study insists that cultural continuity cannot be measured by visibility alone, and that safeguarding heritage demands not only recognition, but a critical attention to the politics of who performs, for whom, and under what conditions.

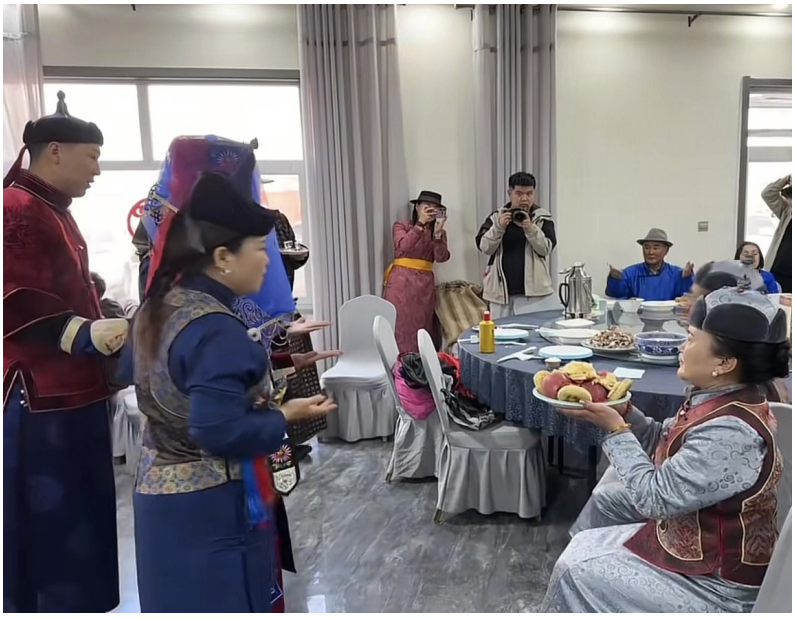
2.Embodied Rituals and the Grammar of Nomadic Kinship

2.1 Ritual as Cultural Syntax: Choreographing Kinship through Movement

In nomadic communities such as the Ordos Mongolians and the Kazakhs, wedding ceremonies operate not merely as rites of passage, but as embodied cartographies of kinship and authority. Far from being festive embellishments or symbolic ornamentation, these choreographed sequences produce and regulate social order through disciplined movement. Gestures—bowing, unveiling, kneeling, circling—do not express culture; they enact its internal grammar, composing what Victor Turner (2017) might call the liminal scripts of social reproduction.

Figure 1: Tea Offering and Veiled Posture in an Ordos Wedding Ceremony

Source:Image captured by the author during fieldwork at a traditional Mongolian wedding in Ordos, Inner Mongolia. Used with the consent of local participants for academic research purposes.



Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation, we read these rituals not as reflections of tradition but as signifying systems that actively produce belonging (Hall, 2024). The dancing body is not neutral; it is encoded with social directionality and symbolic weight.As Judith Butler (1997) contends, identity does not precede performance—it is constituted through iterative acts of bodily citation, which, though seemingly natural, are governed by social norms and power structures. Thus, gestures in wedding rituals are not decorative but disciplinary inscriptions, choreographed to anchor the subject within relational hierarchies.

In the Ordos context, wedding rituals—often spanning three days and enacted across multiple domestic and ceremonial sites—begin with the bride's formal arrival at the groom's gate. This threshold, heavily ritualized, is not merely spatial but cosmological: it marks a passage from natal to affinal kinship, from private to public womanhood, and from familial intimacy to patriarchal incorporation. The bodily choreography that follows—bowing, gifting, veiling—functions as a script of submission and absorption, rendering the bride's body an interface of symbolic labor. The sequential unfolding—lamb presentation, tea offering, veil lifting—maps kinship relations through space and affect, reaffirming patrilineal continuity and collective memory(Cai,2021) .

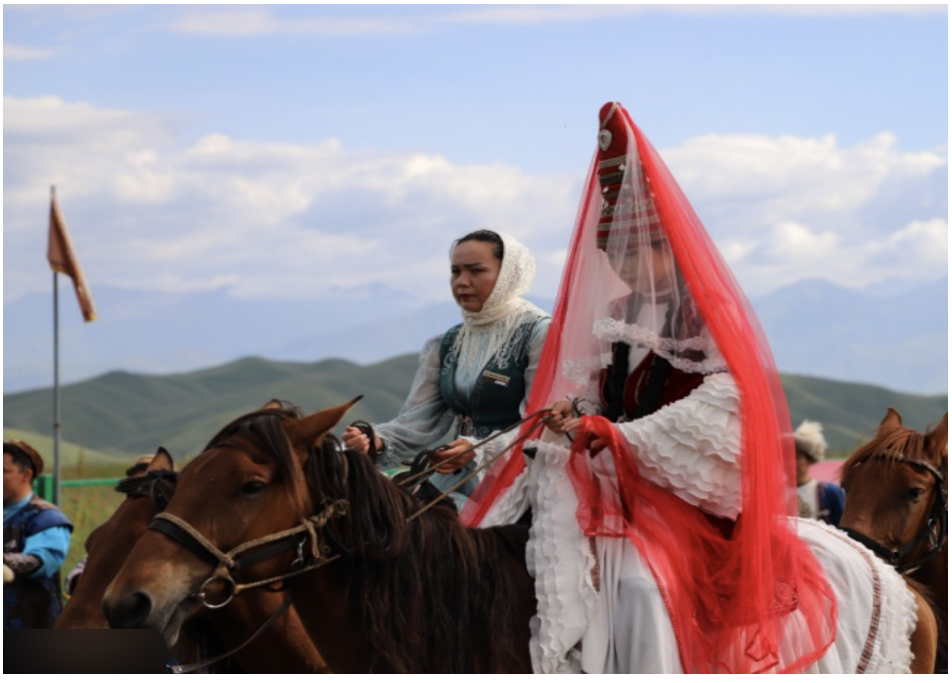
The Kazakh Betashar ceremony—literally, "face unveiling"—performs similar affective and semiotic labor, though through distinct sonic and gestural codes. The akyn (poet-singer) invokes the groom's genealogy through sung verse, while the bride, veiled and mute, bows rhythmically to each named ancestor. This act of deference is not passive submission but, following Sara Ahmed (2004), a performative distribution of affect: emotions move through bodies, attach to signs, and materialize social obligation. The lifting of the veil, timed to the closure of the song, becomes a moment of ontological reordering—the bride becomes visible only when fully encoded into her husband's lineage.

These rituals are not static traditions, nor are they cultural fossils preserved against modernity. They are iterative choreographies, reconstituted under shifting political, economic, and familial conditions. Yet their formal coherence—the phases of approach, greeting, submission, blessing, and release—suggests what André Lepecki (2013) terms a choreopolitics of kinship: a politics enacted through movement, where the body is both the medium and the message of cultural inscription. Here, movement is not freedom but regulation, and dance is not celebration but structure.

In this sense, the nomadic wedding is not simply an occasion for joy—it is a pedagogical performance of order, wherein subjects are taught, through gesture, how to feel, where to stand, and whom to obey. It is a ritual where bodies become legible to their community, and where intimacy and governance intersect through movement.

Figure 2: Mounted Entry and Veiled Transition in a Kazakh Wedding Procession

Source:https://www.wxrb.com/doc/2022/07/27/189301.shtml



2.2 The Ritual Economy of Gender and Power

The gendered distribution of gestures within nomadic wedding rituals is not incidental. It is the very architecture through which social reproduction is naturalized. As Butler (2011) argues, gender is not a stable identity but a "stylized repetition of acts," and within these rituals we witness precisely such repetition. In both Ordos and Kazakh traditions, the bride's body is not her own—it is rendered a symbolic medium through which respect, continuity, and honor are displayed and exchanged. Her silence, her veiling, her kneeling, and her eventual unveiling are all choreographed enactments of deference and transformation.

In Ordos practice, the bride serves tea to the groom's parents in a kneeling posture—an act that communicates gratitude but also institutionalizes a relational asymmetry. The tea, warm and fragrant, is less a refreshment than an epistemic device. It marks the bride as both guest and subject, someone whose bodily movement signals respect and surrender. Meanwhile, male kin on both sides perform toasting and lamb-slaughtering, enacting authority and sacrificial power. The gendered opposition—female offering, male initiation—mirrors a cosmology of power in which bodily gestures legitimate social order.

Kazakh Betashar rituals reflect similar logics. Here, the bride's repeated bows are publicly surveilled; each gesture of reverence is performed under the gaze of a singer who names the elders. The akyn becomes not only a narrator but a sovereign of movement, directing the bride's body as she is symbolically absorbed into the husband's clan. While some readings of the akyn role celebrate its performative artistry, a critical lens reveals it as a mediator of patriarchal transition—a voice that disciplines the bride into submission through poetic enumeration.

Moreover, these rituals encode not just gendered roles but gendered affect. The bride's modesty and restraint are not only behavioral expectations but also affective ones. She must feel and perform submission—her tears at farewell, her bowed head at praise, her silence under the veil are all affective signs of propriety. In Ahmed's terms, emotions here are not internal states but "cultural practices"—they "do things" (Ahmed, 2013). They bind the bride to her role and the audience to its legitimacy. The affective economy of the wedding thus underwrites the political economy of gender.

But while the rituals appear rigid, they are also sites of improvisation, tension, and even resistance. In Ordos weddings, some contemporary brides now choose to lift their own veil, to speak or sing during the tea offering. In urban Kazakh ceremonies, brides may forego the full Betashar ritual or have female akyns narrate a different genealogy. These small deviations, though seemingly minor, constitute what James Scott (1990) would call "infrapolitics"—the everyday acts through which subalterns negotiate authority without overt rebellion. They remind us that even in the most coded ritual, the body retains agency.

Table 1: Ritual Choreographies of Kinship, Gender, and Authority in Ordos and Kazakh Wedding Ceremonies

Ritual Phase	Ordos Mongolian	Kazakh (Betashar)
Threshold Crossing	Bride arrives at groom's gate; ceremonial bow between families	Bride enters space veiled; awaits akyn's invocation to begin her visible transition
Kinship Invocation	Blessings from elders, toasts, and symbolic offerings (sheep, tea, fire)	Akyn sings lineage; bride bows to each name; ritual of ancestral submission
Affective Discipline	Bride serves tea kneeling; red veil conceals facial affect	Bride maintains silence and modesty until veil is lifted by male narrator
Gendered Authority	Male kin toast and perform slaughter; female kin escort bride, control veil lifting	Male narrator directs ritual; bride responds through movement, not speech
Climactic Unveiling	Groom lifts veil; couple drinks tea from same cup (symbol of union and reciprocity)	Akyn unveils bride; coin and sweet shower mark fertility and social integration
Communal Release	Folk dances performed (e.g., chopsticks dance); community joins in rhythmic festivity	Female and male dances after Betashar; celebration of resilience and honor

2.3 Scoring Diversity

If we approach these wedding rituals not as folkloric residues but as structured ensembles of signification and power, a deeper epistemological function comes into view. Within nomadic cultures, wedding dances are not cultural relics—they are non-retroactive modalities of inscription: choreographic technologies that teach bodies how to belong, how to feel, and how to

signify kinship.

These performances do not express identity; they compose it. As Stuart Hall (2011) contends, identity is not a reflection of pre-given essence but a strategic articulation—a contingent linkage among social positions, affective investments, and institutional codes. In the Gramscian sense, these articulations stabilize difference into legible forms. Wedding rituals thus operate not as affirmations of cultural coherence, but as sites of discursive convergence, where gender, lineage, emotion, and sovereignty are synchronized into fleeting unity.

The dancing body, in this context, is not simply a medium but a temporal interface. It functions as both archive and mechanism: it stores the sedimented grammar of kinship, yet it also enacts its renewal under shifting material and symbolic regimes. This tension—between repetition and improvisation, submission and semiotic excess—is where the ritual derives its cultural productivity.

To read diversity here is not to celebrate variation or pluralism, but to trace how difference is choreographed, how power is scored into bodily technique. The wedding dance becomes a score—not for aesthetic pleasure—but for the regulated enactment of cultural legitimacy. It encodes what is allowed to appear, what must remain veiled, and what gestures are required to secure one's place within a community's moral and ontological map.

3.Symbolic Choreographies and the Semiotics of Identity

3.1 The Politics of Gesture: Reading Identity through the Dancing Body

In both Ordos Mongolian and Kazakh wedding traditions, dance is not simply a moment of festivity—it is a form of semiotic labor. Movements, formations, spatial orientations, and the use of props operate as signs within a broader system of cultural coding. These signs do not reflect identity as a pre-existing essence; rather, they produce identity performatively, embedding subjects into relations of kinship, gender, and collective memory through gesture.

Wedding dances, especially within post-nomadic and minority contexts, function as what Homi Bhabha (2012) might describe as pedagogical performances—ritualized stagings where ethnic identity is not only displayed but repeatedly disciplined into public legibility. These gestures are never neutral. They choreograph belonging and rehearse the politics of difference within asymmetric cultural and institutional gazes.

Take, for instance, the Ordos chopstick dance, performed with rhythmic percussive strikes—across the thighs, chest, and arms—by circular formations surrounding a brazier. While seemingly communal and festive, the dance encodes a corporeal historiography: its sonic repetition evokes pastoral labor, ancestral fortitude, and intergenerational rhythm. In this ritual repetition, we see not simply a celebration of cultural vitality, but a ritual re-signification of embodied memory—where wood on flesh reanimates the cosmology of survival.

Kazakh wedding choreography, by contrast, privileges a more hierarchical and gendered semiotics. In the Betashar, the bride's sustained bowed posture is not merely respectful—it is a codified performance of submission. The repeated bowing, directed by the akyn's invocation of the groom's genealogy, renders the bride's body a canvas of narrative inscription. Her movements are not self-determined but orchestrated by male voice, sanctioned by lineage, and authenticated through public observation. As Shilling (2012) argues, bodily practice is not incidental but foundational to the organization of social identity and symbolic distinction.

Yet this structure of regulation does not erase agency. As Brennan (2004) suggests, affect is not an interior possession but a transmissible force—it moves between bodies, becomes contagious, and organizes recognition. The bride's bowed head is not merely an index of emotion; it is a performative vector, a gesture that solicits response and circulates meaning. What matters is not whether she feels modest, but whether her posture becomes legible as modesty within the shared affective economy of the ritual.

Such readings challenge essentialist notions of wedding dance as a transparent expression of cultural authenticity. Instead, these rituals act as choreographic containers of symbolic order—structures through which identity is produced, regulated, and made intelligible. To dance the wedding is not to display who one is, but to demonstrate one's capacity to inhabit the codes—gesture, costume, rhythm, silence—that constitute social recognizability within both the community and the gaze of the state, the tourist, or the ethnographer.

3.2 Costume, Props, and the Semiotic Architecture of Cultural Display

The semiotic architecture of nomadic wedding dance extends far beyond gesture. Costume and props do not merely embellish the body—they amplify it. They serve as material semiotic devices, encoding cultural scripts into texture, color, movement, and sound. These are not accessories to performance, but infrastructures of meaning. In this logic, fabric becomes grammar, and objects become speech acts.

In Ordos weddings, red silk veils, silver-threaded robes, and ornate headpieces do not simply denote festivity; they articulate cosmologies. Red is not just auspicious—it is chthonic: tethered to fire, blood, and life force. The veil—worn until the moment of ceremonial unveiling—functions as a threshold device, both concealing and preparing the bride for her social rebirth. The act of unveiling by the groom is not romantic; it is juridical. It announces a shift in social visibility: the bride enters a new code of kinship intelligibility.

Props carry similarly coded intensity. The chopsticks in Ordos wedding dances, striking thigh, chest, and arm in percussive cadence, evoke ancestral labor—both pastoral and martial. The sticks are held at prescribed angles, becoming instruments of mnemonic rhythm, not mere musical tools. Likewise, the embroidered cloth passed between bride and female kin is not just an object of exchange, but a tactile archive: a carrier of generational memory, stitched affect, and social tethering (Liu, 2022).

In Kazakh rituals, musical instruments—particularly the dombyra, a two-stringed lute—anchor the sonic spine of the ceremony. Its plucked rhythm structures collective movement and emotional tempo, orchestrating both harmony and submission. Among male performers, dombyra-accompanied mimicry of animal motion—rams, stallions—enacts a cosmology of strength, fertility, and tribal protection. For female dancers, slow, contained arm gestures, performed in heavily embroidered kamzol, materialize grace and regulated emotion. The fabric does not flow freely—it contains. It performs propriety.

These embodied and object-mediated codes do not express ethnicity; they construct it, in interaction with specific audiences and regimes of visibility. Props and costumes are choreographic notations in material form—stand-ins for gesture, condensation of ideology. They anchor identity not in essence, but in citational form: textile as trace, wood as metronome, silence as grammar. The logic is neither decorative nor folkloric. It is political.

Table2:Comparative Symbolism in Wedding Rituals — Material Culture and Affective Codes in Ordos and Kazakh Traditions

Symbolic Element	Ordos Mongolian Wedding	Kazakh Wedding (Betashar)
Red Veil (Bride)	Conceals bride's face; lifted by groom as ritual of visibility, purification, and familial claim	Bride veiled until unveiled by akyn; marks transition from natal to affinal identity
Bowing/Kneeling	Performed by bride in tea-offering; signifies submission and gratitude to groom's family	Bride bows to named ancestors as sung by akyn; encodes genealogical deference and public emotional labor
Chopstick Dance	Performed by kin and guests; striking limbs with sticks symbolizes labor, rhythm, and communal strength	N/A (no direct equivalent)
Tea Offering	Bride serves tea kneeling; enacts intergenerational respect and initiates integration	N/A; coins and sweets thrown post-unveiling serve as blessings (economic and affective surplus)
Dombyra Accompaniment	N/A	Central to wedding musical structure; shapes dancer's tempo and frames performance as cultural ownership
Embroidered Cloth	Gifted by bride as symbolic link to maternal home; often handmade, tactile, and intimate	Less common; some brides wear embroidered kamzol, signifying honor and modesty
Circular Dance Formations	Guests encircle couple in final celebration, forming kinship ring and ecological metaphor (grassland harmony)	Group dances follow Betashar, emphasizing balance, gender roles, and clan unity

3.3 The Dancing Body as Interface: Between Internal Code and External Gaze

Wedding dances in nomadic contexts do not merely internalize cultural values—they also project them outward, toward increasingly fragmented audiences: elders and kin, yes, but also tourists, cultural officials, documentary cameras, and algorithms. These performances operate under a dual imperative: to feel authentic within the community and to appear authentic to the outside world. This tension produces what might be termed a semiotic compromise—a choreography that must be emotionally resonant for insiders while remaining visually legible within dominant regimes of heritage display.

Here, the dancing body functions as an interface between internal code and external gaze. As Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) suggests, performance is never a closed loop between performer and ritual—it is co-constituted by its spectatorship. A bride's bodily comportment—how low she bows, how slowly she walks, how silently she veils—is read not only by kin but by cameras, cultural curators, and national discourses. Deviations from choreographic convention—such as interpolating balletic turns or accelerating rhythmic sequences—may be read as aesthetic contamination or ethnic betrayal.

Yet this highly codified space is not devoid of agency. Some brides choreograph hybrid routines that blend folk gestures with contemporary movement vocabularies; others intentionally slow or elongate ritual segments, injecting temporal friction into an otherwise rehearsed script. In touristic performances, dancers may exaggerate certain motions—not as parody, but as a form of affective labor that ensures cultural legibility and economic survival. As Deborah Wong (2004) argues in her study of ethnic performance, to perform for others is never simply to translate—it is to negotiate one's visibility under power.

Diana Taylor's (2025) concept of the "repertoire" offers a final analytic entry point: performance does not merely archive identity; it reanimates and reshapes it. In this view, wedding dances are not passive expressions of heritage, but dynamic technologies of becoming—ritualized yet revisable, coded yet porous. They tell stories not of what a people are, but of how they are continually being reassembled under—and sometimes in spite of—the gaze.

To interpret these wedding choreographies as expressions of cultural continuity is not incorrect, but it is insufficient. They are not merely expressions; they are machineries of signification, operating across generations to stage identity, negotiate recognition, and reconfigure what counts as belonging.

4.Heritage on Display — Globalization and the Aestheticization of Ritual

4.1 From Kinship Ritual to Spectacular Commodity: The Politics of Representation

The transformation of nomadic wedding dances in contemporary China cannot be understood apart from the political economy of cultural display. Once embedded in kinship temporality and spiritual cosmology, these rituals have been dislocated and reassembled into aesthetic commodities—circulating through theaters, festivals, and televised spectacles. Their displacement is not incidental. It is structurally induced by cultural policy, heritage economies, and the visual imperatives of nation branding.

A pivotal moment occurred in 1979, when the Ulan Muqir of Otog Banner adapted the traditional Ordos wedding into a stage performance—a symbolic inaugural move that marked the transition from familial ritual to choreographed representation. Since then, the wedding dance has increasingly operated within what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2014) terms "heritage as metaculture"—a regime in which lived traditions are abstracted, aestheticized, and made legible to external regimes of value.

In the Ordos context, the spectacularization reached its apex with the 2005 stage production《Ordos Wedding》, a ninety-minute dance drama that condensed a multi-day ritual into choreographic tableaux optimized for stage lighting and cinematic angles. The bride's red veil becomes a halo under spotlights; chopstick dances synchronize under strobe pulses. Kinship has been replaced by composition; mourning by mise-en-scène. The audience is not the family—it is the nation, the tourist, the cultural bureaucrat.

This aesthetic reframing is legitimized through the language of "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH), which purports to preserve endangered tradition but often repackages it for curated visibility. As Mumford(2016) argues, the commodification of culture under late capitalism transforms authenticity into spectacle, rendering communities as suppliers of sensorial experiences rather than autonomous bearers of tradition.

Kazakh wedding rituals, particularly the Betashar, follow a parallel arc. A rite once confined to familial intimacy is now rendered for broadcast: the akyn's genealogical chant is shortened or replaced with recorded audio; the bride's bowed posture

is choreographed for camera symmetry. What was once a ritual of submission is now an image of heritage—a performative proof of inclusion within the national imaginary.

This transition is not neutral. As Lauren Berlant (2006) notes, affective performance in public culture is not about freedom of expression but about legibility under power. The question is not merely what is shown, but who gets to define what counts as tradition. What gestures are considered "authentic"? What styles are marketable? Whose memory is choreographed, and whose is edited out?

These are not academic abstractions. They are questions of authorship, access, and agency. The transformation of wedding dance into heritage display demands that we attend not only to form and function, but to the politics of visibility—where identity is not preserved but produced, not expressed but curated for circulation.

4.2 Authenticity as Spectacle: Watching the Wedding, Forgetting the Ritual

The spectacle of the ethnic wedding rests on a powerful fantasy: that what is seen is real. However, as Rendall (1984) famously argued, the spectacle is not the real—it is that which conceals the processes of its own fabrication. What is seen in heritage festivals, televised rituals, and cultural diplomacy events is not the wedding but its image, formatted and polished for consumption as culture and endorsement as legitimacy.

This conversion of ritual into performance is governed by what might be called an aesthetic contract of recognition—a tacit agreement among performers, state institutions, and spectators that tradition must be beautiful, legible, and unthreatening. For the wedding dance to be valued, it must comply with visual conventions: choreographed for symmetry, timed for broadcast, cleansed of conflict, and rehearsed into affective smoothness. In this process, what disappears is not just spontaneity but ritual opacity—the pauses, tensions, and unspeakable residues that mark lived belief.

Rather than expressing feeling, these performances distribute affect through calibrated signs. As Sianne Ngai (2004) argues, contemporary aesthetics operates through pre-structured affective responses—the performance does not ask us to understand, but to feel on cue. A staged Betashar moves audiences not because they apprehend its ritual depth, but because its visual lexicon—golden embroidery, veiled humility, symmetrical formations—triggers affective recognizability. It is not fidelity to the ancestral that secures legitimacy, but perceptual fluency within dominant semiotic systems.

And thus, the irony deepens: the more performative the ritual, the more real it appears. This is what Jean Baudrillard would term "simulacral authenticity"—a copy untethered from origin, whose authority increases with repetition. Audiences are not deceived; they are complicit. They demand the "real," but only if it conforms to the aesthetic code of the ethnic: vibrant, harmonious, joyful, and conveniently de-politicized.

The effects of this expectation echo back into community life. In many regions, wedding practices have bifurcated: a minimal familial rite for intimacy, and a maximal staged version for documentation and spectatorship. In Ordos, couples hire event consultants to engineer "authentic weddings"—complete with costume rentals, choreographers, and theatrical lighting. In Kazakh areas, Betashar can be outsourced to cultural troupes for display at banquets or hotels. Tradition becomes rentable; kinship becomes choreography.

Yet resistance persists—not as open defiance, but as what Michel de Certeau (1985) called "tactics": creative deviations that work within dominant structures. Some elders insist on ancestral scripts, even when the akyn is a performer-for-hire. Brides embed private gestures that only close kin will understand. Certain communities restrict filming altogether, protecting ritual temporality from visual extraction. These interruptions reassert the wedding as lived time, not display time.

Still, the dominant logic holds: to be preserved, a tradition must be performable; to be performable, it must be aestheticized. And once aestheticized, it risks forgetting itself. The dance remains, but the grammar shifts—from lineage to lighting, from submission to spectacle, from communal cosmology to cultural commodity.

Conclusion

This study has traced the transformation of Mongolian and Kazakh wedding dances in China—from kinship-bound ceremonies to publicly staged performances embedded within the visual economy of multicultural nationalism. Once situated within the intimate chronologies of clan, cosmology, and emotional labor, these dances are now increasingly curated for heritage platforms, tourism circuits, and televised nation-building rituals.

Through the lens of semiotic labor, we have examined how gestures, costumes, props, and choreographies do not merely reflect identity but reproduce it under state-sanctioned frameworks of recognizability. Within the discursive apparatus of "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH), these ritual practices have been aestheticized into spectacles of ethnic legibility, aligning cultural visibility with national unity and market consumption.

In the Chinese context, where minority representation often oscillates between exotic celebration and political containment, the wedding dance becomes a choreographed symbol of loyalty—a visual narrative that upholds harmony while displacing the ritual's original opacity, fluidity, and unpredictability. What was once a private rite of passage is now often staged for external audiences: tourists, government officials, UNESCO evaluators, and social media publics.

This process is not benign. The standardization of "ethnic tradition" within China's heritage economy has created dual structures of ritual: one for kin, and one for the nation. In places like Ordos and Yili, families may now host parallel ceremonies—a minimal, affectively dense rite for relatives, and a spectacular, photogenic performance for institutional documentation. Cultural continuity is no longer anchored in ancestral time but increasingly brokered through staged authenticity.

Yet, as this study has shown, acts of refusal and improvisation persist: brides reclaim ancestral scripts; elders resist televisual format; communities reject the tourist version. These small tactics matter. They refuse to let ritual be reduced to choreography, or memory to mise-en-scène.

To safeguard intangible cultural heritage in China requires more than funding or recognition. It demands a politics of cultural transmission that centers community agency, protects ritual ambiguity, and allows room for imperfection, silence, and change. It means honoring not only the visible but the vulnerable—not only what can be performed, but what must be lived.

In the end, the wedding dance is not merely a symbol of ethnic continuity—it is a battleground of representation, affect, and historical authorship. What is at stake is not only how culture is remembered, but who is allowed to remember, and under what conditions.

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