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Catch that Pepsi Spirit

November 19, 2008 in [China Annals, Xinjiang](#) by [The China Beat](#) | 12 comments

This interview was conducted over email between Kelly Hammond and Micki McCoy in parallel with McCoy's article in [Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art](#) (forthcoming January/February 2009) on the depiction of ethnic minorities in propaganda posters in the People's Republic of China made prior to the Opening and Reform. The posters can be seen as historical predecessors for contemporary official depictions of ethnic diversity such as that seen at the 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremonies. Yet this imagery is distinct from current commercial visualizations of ethnicity and nationality in the PRC, as described in the interview below regarding Hammond's participation in a Chinese Pepsi commercial.

McCoy: How were you approached to do this?

Hammond: I was approached by one of the owners of Fubar, the "foreigner bar" in Urumchi. I'd been to Fubar on numerous occasions and knew the Irish manager and part owner. I received a text message from one of the American graduate students who was also studying Uyghur at Xinjiang Normal University (新疆师范大学) alerting me that they were looking for people to participate in the ad and that the salary for two days work would easily cover my rent for a month. Essentially, the casting director from Shanghai (he was originally from Hong Kong, went to the Vancouver Film School, and is now based in Shanghai—he spoke Cantonese and English wonderfully, but very little Mandarin) got in touch with a few foreigners who were well connected to the different expat communities in the city. For instance, the casting director somehow managed to get in touch with a very well known Kazakhstani student who was studying Mandarin at Xinjiang Agricultural University (新疆农业大学) and who was connected to pretty well the entire Kazakhstani student population studying in Urumchi. He also managed to get in touch with one of the Pakistani students, who are part of a pre-med program offered in English at Xinjiang Medical University (新疆医科大学), which is specifically designed for Pakistani nationals hoping to qualify for medical school abroad. From there, the casting director left it up to these local liaisons he had recruited to spread the word within the different expat communities living in Urumchi about the Pepsi shoot.

McCoy: Who participated? What were their roles in the ad?

Hammond: In total, about 800 extras and two famous Chinese pop stars (黄晓明 and 古天乐) participated in the Pepsi shoot. There were around 400 Han Chinese high school students who volunteered (and were obviously way more excited about seeing the pop stars than the other participants. A young Uyghur I was talking with compared the stars to "Americans teenagers having the opportunity to be in an ad with the actors from Harry Potter." His metaphor might have been slightly off, but I got the point; the stars were famous.) There were also around 220 Uyghurs (who were paid 200 kuai for two complete days of work) that were recruited by a Uyghur casting director who worked the same way as the other liaisons, but to the Uyghur community. He was a young, recent university graduate and he managed to recruit not only younger university students, but also some older, Uyghur men. He also managed to recruit around 30 Tatars and a few Chinese Kazakhs. The rest of the crowd consisted of a motley crew of about 150 expats. We were all paid 1,000 kuai for two days work, taken to the location in air conditioned coaches, and were treated to a party at Fubar where the beer flowed very freely. I would estimate that the entire Nigerian community in Xinjiang was present at the shoot (approximately 25 people), as well as the majority of the Pakistani population (again, around 25 students). There were about 50 Kazakhstans at the shoot, but all were noticeably "Russian" looking Kazakhs (as opposed to the two Kazakh girls in my class who were ethnically Uyghur, but who were also Kazakh nationals). Noticeably absent were students whom I studied with from the other "stans." The remainder of the foreigners were made up of Americans, Canadians and Europeans who were in Xinjiang studying, traveling, teaching English teachers or working as missionaries (a.k.a. "cultural tourists").

McCoy: What was the ad's narrative?

Hammond: The story unfolded for us as we arrived at the sports stadium before dawn on a warm Saturday morning in May. The ad centered on a football match between a (Han) Chinese national team and an “international conglomerate” foreign team. At the beginning of the ad, the Chinese fans would be interspersed between the international fans, but losing badly to the foreigners. The roars of the international crowd silenced their cheers for the Chinese national team. Then, the two Chinese pop stars flew in (literally, with the help of two really cool stunt men from Beijing) on cue to rally the Chinese crowd with Pepsi. With the arrival of Pepsi and the very attractive Chinese pop stars (with all the usual fanfare of a recent Zhang Yimou film), the Chinese crowd simultaneously had an epiphany and collectively realized that in order to beat the evil foreigners they needed to rally together behind Pepsi. At this point, the Chinese fans pushed their way through the international crowds to form a critical mass, which was able to make their voices heard. With that, the Chinese football team was able to defeat the international conglomerate team. The entire narrative centered on the two Chinese pop stars (rather, their amazing stunt men) performing all kinds of acrobatic stunts at the cost of the dignity of the international team—such as, but not limited to jumping off the top mezzanine into the crowd of Japanese nationals (played, very begrudgingly, by Han Chinese high school students) and rebounding off the head of the Japanese drummer into a sea of Han Chinese students, who were anxiously awaiting Pepsi.

McCoy: Who was the audience for the ad?

Hammond: From my discussion with the casting director, I believe that the ad was to be broadcast on the Internet prior to the Olympics. It was also meant to air on television in China in the time leading up to the Olympics. I saw one incarnation of it at a hotel in Xinjiang in late July.

McCoy: What was the social aspect of the shoot like?

Hammond: The shoot was highly segregated in many ways. I’ll break them down for you for simplicity:

Spatially: The Han Chinese high school students were kept pretty much completely segregated from the Uyghurs and the expat crowd, who mingled freely and chatted with each other. Over the course of two days I heard active and engaged discussions between nationals from China and other countries taking place in English, French, Uyghur, Mandarin, Kazakh, Russian, Tajik (I think), Uzbek, German, Italian, Spanish, Urdu and Arabic.

The production schedule was organized so that the crew did not shoot the scene where the Chinese rose up to come together to defeat the evil foreigners until the afternoon of the last day. So, it wasn’t until then that the Han Chinese students were “mixed in” and interspersed in the “foreign” crowd. I remember being concerned that one Han Chinese girl refused to sit next to one of the Nigerians (the type of racism I’m sure they encounter on a daily basis. In his defense, he handled it much better than I would have). I also remember being very impressed by the attitude of accommodation from some of the older Uyghur men, who I had not heard speak a lick of Mandarin for the past two days. At one point, we were re-shooting a scene for the third time and everyone was extremely hot and tired. A young Han Chinese student obviously did not hear the directions from the director and this middle aged Uyghur man, who had convinced me that he could not speak Mandarin shouted with perfect intonation: “你听得懂吗？起来！” (“Don’t you understand? GET UP!”) Both the high school student and I stared at him in amazement for about two seconds, and then the three of us, exhausted from the sun and two long days, burst out laughing in unison.

I definitely felt that it was a conscious effort of the director to keep the Han Chinese segregated spatially from the rest of the group for as long as possible.

Linguistically: Linguistically, the crowd was divided and segregated on numerous levels. First of all, the entire production crew hailed from Hong Kong and in many cases my spoken Mandarin was better than theirs. On numerous occasions, the director from Hong Kong gave instructions in English, which were translated and disseminated with varying degrees of success into Uyghur, Mandarin and Russian by the expats in the crowd. Within the expat crowd, there were also varying degrees of Mandarin and Uyghur comprehension. My main observation about language was that for the most part the Pakistani

students and the American missionaries spoke very little Mandarin or Uyghur (granted the Pakistani students were in China for a limited time with no intention of returning, and some of the younger missionaries had recently arrived and were trying to learn Mandarin). The majority of the Kazakhstani students, who are learning Mandarin in order to do business with the Chinese, were able to communicate effectively in either English or Mandarin. The Nigerians and the rest of the groups communicated mostly English, but most other expat groups could move effortlessly back and forth between English and pretty flawless Mandarin when needed.

One of the things that I noticed was that the Han Chinese students were not able to speak a word of Uyghur (apart from the usual greeting of *assalam alaykum*—standard in most Muslim cultures). The young Uyghur students could move with fluidity back and forth between Uyghur and Mandarin, and in some cases, in more languages as well.

Issues of Food: Interestingly, all the expats were “treated” to KFC burgers, while anyone who was a national of China had to eat *polo* (抓饭 in Chinese) for lunch both days. This was interesting for me on numerous levels. Firstly, most “Western” expats would choose to eat *polo* over KFC any day. In fact, it was the first time (and last) time that I’d eaten KFC during my eight months in Xinjiang. The Kazakhstanis and Pakistani students rarely (if ever) eat “Chinese food” and depend heavily on fast food chains to supplement their diets while in Xinjiang. So, the assumption that the expats (which, remember, included Kazakhs, Pakistanis, Nigerians, Germans, Americans...) who all lived in Xinjiang were so disinclined to eat food that was provided to accommodate the Uyghurs, that KFC burgers had to be provided as an alternative was astonishing, but a common stereotype faced in China. Westerners are constructed by what we eat and in Xinjiang “Western” food is bread and KFC. Secondly, it indicated to me that the production crew were catering to the Muslims by serving *polo* (always presented as 清真) to the entire Chinese national crowd. It also indicates a level of acceptance and acquiescence by the Han who live in Xinjiang of what might be normally considered Chinese food. There is no doubt that for as much as the Han in Xinjiang complain about Uyghurs, they love Uyghur cuisine (who doesn’t!?!)

After the first day, many of the Uyghurs found out that the expats got KFC burgers and on the second day, we set up a barter system where we traded our KFC burgers for *polo* with some of them, as I would prefer to eat *polo* over KFC any day. I’ve always questioned the idea that KFC is considered halal (清真) in Xinjiang, and when I mentioned it to the guy I traded my chicken burger with, his answer was interesting: “Well, the Pakistanis eat the burgers, and they are Muslims too. And, the Westerners wouldn’t purposefully serve us food that was not halal like the Han would.” When I asked him how often he ate KFC, he told me, with his mouth full, that it was his second time.

McCoy: What did you wear?

Hammond: I wore a red tank top and a red fitted baseball cap that were both provided for me by the costume department. They wanted to paint my face with an American flag, but I pleaded with them and told them I would develop an allergic reaction to the face paint. They conceded.

McCoy: What were the other outfits worn?

Hammond: I think the easiest way for me to do this is to talk about the different “national” groups that the advertising executives were trying to represent and then talk about who they envisioned representing them.

But first, I think the one thing that was important about this ad and how it was conceived was that each international group had their “traditional” mechanisms for exciting a crowd (of course, all this was as envisioned by the HK director): Americans had cheerleaders; Africans had drums; the Japanese also had a pseudo-Judo/samurai drummer; Brazilians had Mardi Gras dancers; Mexicans had ponchos, sombreros and mandolins; the South Asians had cricket bats. And, the Chinese had Pepsi. I think this posits the most interesting question that was raised for me at this shoot, which deals with the continued quest for modernity in China. And, more importantly, how Chinese people who drink Pepsi envision modernity. Unlike KFC, which is decisively Western in the eyes of people I have spoken

to in China, there isn't the direct association with Pepsi and the West (ironic, since they are owned by the same company). And, this idea that the Chinese people didn't need any remnants of their traditional society—like the rest of the world—as they rallied together with the modern to overcome the international team was a theme I picked up on right away. Why did everyone else have some sort of “traditional” act to perform, whereas the Chinese only needed Pepsi? What does all this mean for scholars who work so hard to deflate this false conflation of westernization and modernization? And, where do the ethnic minorities fit into this equation? By purposefully excluding them and incorporating the minorities into the other “international” groups, I think the director sent a clear message—China is for the Han and we are modernizing without you.

The Nigerians (from my understanding, all the people from Africa living in Xinjiang hailed from the nation-state of Nigeria) were meant to represent a pan-African nation. They wore red/black/yellow and green clothing and were provided with bongo-like drums. They were also sent to make-up to get the pan-African flags painted on their cheeks. As an aside, one of the most amazing things I've ever seen in my life (and in my experience in China) took place in the downtime of this shoot with the wonderful people from Nigeria. It was about 35 degrees celsius outside and the Nigerians found a nook in the shade and started playing the drums (that they were provided with) and singing. Within ten minutes, they'd drawn a crowd of about a hundred who couldn't help do anything but dance. I asked one of the young Uyghurs dancing beside me, who was filming the entire event on his cellphone, if he's ever seen anything like it before: “Not in my life. It's incredible,” he said, in near perfect Mandarin. I found out later that he was a professional drummer.

The Americans: The Americans were represented by a mix of Chinese Kazakhs, Tatars, fair skinned Uyghurs, Canadians, Germans, Brits, and of course, Americans. The director also enlisted some of the Kazakhstani girls to wear the scant cheerleader outfits. There were two memorable anecdotes about being an American for two days. On the first day, my German classmate returned from her conversation with the casting director looking completely dejected: “Apparently I'm not German-looking enough to be a German—whatever that means. My parents would be so disappointed in me.” She couldn't hide her disappointment in being cast as an American. The second anecdote came on the last day of shooting. The director was growing frustrated with some of the older Uyghur men, who selectively chose to understand Mandarin, depending on who was speaking to them (for instance, with my limited Uyghur I was not able to convey instructions in Uyghur, so I spoke to them in Mandarin and they always understood, but when one of the production assistants would bark at them in deeply southern accented Mandarin, they would stare at her blankly and pretend not to understand). The director snapped and asked all the Chinese people (中国人) to stand up so he could address them through an interpreter. I thought the Uyghur man sitting next to me didn't understand, so I repeated this simple instruction in my basic Uyghur him. He looked at me with a coy smile and said in Mandarin: “我不是中国人，我是美国人。” (“But I'm not a Chinese person, I'm an American”). Subsequently, the director reprimanded both of us for laughing and not following his instructions.

The Pakistani medical students played the South Asians. (Aside: The Pakistani students in Urumchi are renowned for their isolation from other communities and given that most of them are only in China for a year to study and speak no Chinese, it is understandable. There is however, one fabulous benefit of having this lively student community in the city: there is an incredibly delicious Pakistani restaurant across the street from the Xinjiang Medical University.) There was a complete lack of cultural integrity on the part of the Hong Kong creatives with regards to the all-Muslim Pakistani students. The costume director tried, albeit completely unsuccessfully, to get the Pakistani students to wear turbans. Not understanding why they were resisting so vehemently (one student put on a turban and they all took photos on their phones, which they promptly sent to the student's mother as a joke. Within minutes his phone was ringing and he was explaining himself to his mother, to the amusement of his classmates). She couldn't come to an understanding with the students and finally, after some heated debate, a young woman in a full hejab noted stiffly: “The bottom line is that they won't wear them. Accept it, or we all leave.” In the end, the Pakistani students ended up wearing bright green polo shirts and sported cricket bats.

The Russians: Kazakhstani students and a few Tatars played the Russians. They wore red, blue and white outfits and some of them were dressed as members of a marching band (we never really did figure that one out). At one point, the director asked the group to sing something in Russian and they

broke out in song on cue to his complete delight. However, he was oblivious to the fact that they were proudly singing the Kazakh national anthem. The rest of us were in stitches.

The Mexicans: The Mexicans were played by Uyghurs. They all wore sombreros, ponchos and were provided with mandolins and trumpets. I heard numerous comments to the effect of: "Wow. Did you see the Mexican Uyghurs?" and "Oh my god, the Uyghurs are sooo Mexican." Someone retorted that: "...anyone with a mustache, a sombrero and a mandolin looks Mexican." I still haven't been able to rectify what all this means, and I've thought about it a lot.

The Japanese: Han Chinese grudgingly played the Japanese. They were dressed up like samurais with white headbands painted with the Japanese rising sun. A few of them also wore "Judo" outfits. One of the professional drummers hired for the shoot was dressed as a judo/samurai warrior and had a large drum, which was also painted with the rising sun. At one point, one of the Chinese superstars (rather, his stuntman) acrobatically bounded off his head in his effort to bring Pepsi to the Chinese masses waiting anxiously below.

The Brazilians: The Brazilians were also, for the most part, played by Uyghurs dressed in green and yellow soccer jerseys. The exception to this came from another gross cultural misjudgment committed by an overly blasé and extremely insensitive Hong Kong production assistant. They tried, completely unsuccessfully, to dress five young Uyghur women in Brazilian Mardi Gras costumes, which were essentially sequined bikinis with headdresses. Although none of the young women covered their heads, I can confidently say that it is completely unlikely that any of them had ever been outside their homes in a skirt that did not cover their knees or a shirt that did not cover their shoulders. And here, once again, the production assistant was at a loss to understand why they did not feel comfortable essentially wearing bikinis for two days in front of their friends and elders. Three of the Uyghur girls flat out refused, the other two were found crying in the bathroom and could not be coaxed into public in the outfits. The production assistant was not willing to make concessions and sent the girls to dress as South Asians. She started her search for other Uyghur girls who would wear the costumes. It was only after about two hours of searching that she came to the realization that none of the Uyghur girls would wear the outfits. At that point, she turned her attention "to the most Brazilian looking Kazakhs" and was able to find three girls that suited her needs from within the "more liberal" and "western" Kazakh women.

The Germans: The Germans were played by Americans, Tatars, Kazakhs and a few Uyghurs. I think they may have been going for some sort of pan-Slavic-Germanic sort of costume, but missed the mark: they wore the colors of the Deutschland—red, yellow and black—with Viking horns. I think some of them had tomahawks as well.

McCoy: How was each group handled?

Hammond: There were large discrepancies, which have been mentioned, or at least alluded to.

The largest one, of course, was salary. Some of the Uyghurs discovered that the expats were making about five times as much (as well as being "treated" to KFC, air conditioned coaches to and from the venue, and a party after the shoot) and there was almost a mutiny. I think that some arrangement was met discreetly, but I am not sure about the dynamics of this arrangement or about who was involved.

McCoy: How did you interact with others at the shoot?

Hammond: As I mentioned previously, there was little interaction between the Han Chinese and others. However, I can speak of a completely positive experience of interaction between the other groups at the shoot. In fact, I made numerous friends with Kazakh and Uyghur university students, whom I continue to keep in touch with through Skype. Regrettably, I didn't have the chance to interact with many of the Han Chinese students. We had a lot of down time at the shoot while they prepared for stunts or focused their attention on groups that didn't include all of us, so we all spent time chatting and joking around. Overall, the atmosphere was quite jovial and fun.

McCoy: What were the production staff like? How did they interact with the actors?

Hammond: The production staff was quite limited in their interaction with the extras. It was not until the second day that the director finally realized that if he spoke English, the expats in the crowd could more easily convey his meaning to their respective groups in Mandarin, Uyghur or Russian. Even the Han Chinese students had problems understanding his directions in Mandarin, so it was understandable that some of the older Uyghur men and people couldn't (or possibly, wouldn't) understand. Many of the Hong Kong staff went out of their way not to speak Mandarin and to use English, which effectively limited the contact that they had with the extras to speaking to those in the expat community.

McCoy: How do you feel the concept of identity figured in this experience?

Hammond: Tough question. I think that the whole shoot really brought into question a few notions of identity for me. The first was the concept of a national consciousness and how that is created. By this I mean that in the political rhetoric of the PRC, the people from Hong Kong, the Uyghurs from Xinjiang and the Han Chinese all belong to one nation-state, but there were obviously heavily nuanced interactions taking place rooted firmly in the simple inability of these people to communicate in the same language. Interestingly, the Tatars and Kazakhs present at the shoot all spoke great Mandarin, which is something that I had noticed before amongst the smaller, more marginalized ethnic groups, like the Mongols, who also live in Xinjiang.

The shoot also brought the concept of national identity to the foreground by questioning some of our basic assumptions about what it means to be part of a nation. If, as people noted, the Uyghurs made convincing Mexicans when they were adorned with the accoutrements of some stereotypical construction of Mexico, what does this mean for the way that we build so many of our assumptions about ethnicity ethnic minorities and the nation?

McCoy: How would you relate this ad to propaganda in the People's Republic of China?

Hammond: Interestingly, I wouldn't. I feel that the PRC is actively trying to put forth an idea of inclusiveness (all you need to do is take a look at the propaganda in Kashghar—爱党爱祖国 爱社会主义 爱喀什—love the party, love the country, love socialism, love Kashghar!) and that everyone who lives within the borders of the nation-state is an integral part in China's process to become a great nation. I see the ad more as a representative of what people in the East (Shanghai, Hong Kong) imagine China to be like. Sure, minorities are the exotic other, but until you go to a place where ethnic minorities make up a sizeable portion of the population, I think it is fair to say that most people in China don't envision places like Urumchi to be as diverse as they are. When visitors first arrive in Urumchi, there is usually a short period of shock and disbelief about the amount of diversity among the people in the city. I am not arguing that other large cities in China are homogenous, but in places on the periphery, like Urumchi, there is a certain degree of diversity that sometimes makes you ask yourself: "Wait a minute, am I in China?"

I also think that this shoot served to highlight to me that even though people from Hong Kong and people from Urumchi are technically from the same nation-state, there are more striking similarities linguistically and culturally with those who live just across the border in Kazakhstan, or even Pakistan. I think that this was the first time some of the younger Uyghurs were coming to this realization, and this is potentially politically dangerous for the rhetoric of inclusiveness expounded by the PRC.

Readers can find some related materials online (unfortunately, the commercial is not available online in its entirety):

[A video that includes clips from the commercial](#)

[Photographs from the commercial shooting](#)

[Another commercial shot \(at roughly the same time\) in Xinjiang with Huang Xiaoming and Gu Tianle](#)

Kelly Hammond recently moved to Washington D.C. to start her Ph.D. in Chinese history at Georgetown University after spending eight months traveling and studying Mandarin and Uyghur at

Xinjiang Normal University in Urumchi. Her research interests include Chinese hajjis in the late Qing and Republican Era and colonial espionage efforts that involved collaboration with Muslims.

Micki McCoy is an M.A. student at the University of California, Davis. Her research interests include cross-cultural interaction through art and artifacts of the Silk Routes. Last summer she conducted research at the Dunhuang grottoes in Gansu, and the Kizil and Bezeklik grottoes in Xinjiang.

Tags: [Pepsi](#), [Uygher](#), [Xinjiang](#)