



**Editorial** It seems appropriate that at a time when much of the Western world is reflecting on long-held conceptions of the Middle East and Central Asia, the IAS Newsletter should illustrate some of the key issues of relevance in Afghanistan and regarding Islam. Indeed, the IAS mandate of highlighting current developments in the broad field of Asian Studies has perhaps assumed a greater resonance in North America, and Europe to a lesser extent, where citizens and politicians have been presumably “waking up” to a world beyond its borders but not beyond its impact. It is with these goals in mind that, as the new editor for this section, I have elected to change its title from Asian Art and Culture to Asian Art and Cultures.

This seemingly minor change aims to reflect the diversity that is “Asia” while, at the same time, it raises important questions about the definition of culture as a means of determining essential distinctions between groups of people. Are cultures embedded in the human mind or are they shaped by their external social conditions; can something called “culture” be extracted and interpreted from a nation-state, or from a religion? Asian culture is not a thing that can be abstractly found on a map; rather, Asian cultures are part of what constitutes identities around the world. The problems, or insights, offered by these queries point to the need to recognize that a singular culture, or even a sole conception of culture, can only artificially be applied to a geographic region such as Asia and a global population of Asians. This section will continue to explore Asian Art from a global perspective as it shapes, expresses, and offers reflection within disparate cultural conditions. The arts can also examine our dominant impressions of cultures. For instance, the label of “Asian Art” is ambiguous; does the location of the artwork or the citizenship of the artist make art “authentically” Asian? It is my desire that the articles in this section will continue to challenge and redefine notions of art and Asia, eventually destroying narrow assumptions about cultures that constrain and divide the world. Art and literature may alone have the power to expose the constructions of culture that threaten global understanding, and therefore offer us alternative visions of our reality.

Finally, I would like to invite readers and potential writers to share their comments and suggestions of themes and articles for this section and for the IAS Newsletter in general. Please e-mail me at [k.phillips@let.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:k.phillips@let.leidenuniv.nl). I look forward to our future discussions and editions of the IAS Newsletter. < (KP)

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## Empty Hands:

# Iranian Feminists Reach Out (and it's our turn to listen)

There is an unsettling assumption that seems to have taken root in the imaginations of many of us living in predominantly European-styled societies. Fueled by media representations and misinformation, many believe that women are subjugated in the Islamic religious tradition and thus come to see the veil as a symbol of this oppression. This singular focus on the veil, however, limits our vision, and thus hampers cross-cultural dialogue. “Islamic” feminists are forced to choose between engaging in a dialogue with “Western” feminists – which means a great deal of educating about Islam, its history, and practice, before getting to the issue at hand – or pursuing their own goals outside of the larger discourse. Because neither choice is optimal, feminist activists, scholars, and artists in the Islamic Republic of Iran have been exploring the space in-between these choices during recent years.



By Alisa Eimen

One particular success is *Empty Hands*, a short eight-act play performed by amateur actors and karate students this past December 2001 in the small Moulavi Theater near the campus of Tehran University. These undistinguished circumstances, however, belie the play's gravity. Written one year earlier by Fatemeh Arabshahi, with the assistance of Nasrin Pakkho, this play's message is one that transcends cultural distinctions. Not only does it challenge all of us to see beyond our differences; it also poses some noteworthy challenges to social and cultural norms.

The story follows a young girl who sells newspapers in order to augment her mother's sewing income. One day, something in the paper catches the girl's eye, sending her on a quest to understand the significance of the phrase “empty hands.” She first goes to her mother with questions, but meets resistance. The portentous lesson her mother wishes to impart seems to be that curiosity leads only to frustration, or worse, and should thus be avoided. But the phrase continues to preoccupy the girl until she walks past a sign bearing the puzzling words. The sign is for a women's karate centre named Empty Hands, where renewed curiosity drives her to spend countless hours hovering just outside the door.

Peeking in through the doorway, the newspaper girl observes a range of women, including an older, beginning karate student, an advanced student with a Western father, a strong-willed, but somewhat shortsighted teacher, and a female janitor mourning the death of her only son. As the play unfolds, each person's inner struggle comes increasingly to the fore, until all simultaneously witness an anonymous woman's public execution for speaking out about the shared suffering of women around the world. All look on and listen. For a few seconds following her stabbing by the guards, the audience shares in the disbelief – and then the complicity in her murder. No one utters a word. Finally, the women on stage begin to grieve, especially the young newspaper girl, as an apparition of her mother floats across the stage, closing the seventh act.

This is the pinnacle of the play, the point where narrative meets metaphor. On the one hand, one can infer a certain degree of criticism towards the Iranian regime's status quo. However, this play is far less culturally specific than one might initially think, despite the headscarves and covered necks of

the women on stage. Certainly the janitor's mourning for her son, when understood in its Iranian context, carries layers of references. These include, for example, the many lives lost during the eight-year war with Iraq, the emphasis the state placed on procreation during this period, and the culture's long-standing pride in the first-born son. But the execution scene denotes more than the death of one unnamed, unseen woman. It also, and more significantly, indicates the importance of questioning traditions and norms.

When we first meet the imprisoned woman in Act Five, she states, “Do not look at my ties. I was a captive as long as I was tied to my mistaken customs and beliefs. Now that I have realized it, I am free!” Her message to feminists reminds us to look deeper than specific cultural trappings, in order to avoid mistaking the accoutrements of injustice for injustice itself. The execution scene two acts later signals at least one other death – or release – worth noting. It also marks the moment when the viewer should be able to release her or himself from the confines of the narrative. The women no longer represent individual characters; rather, as their distinctions blur, one begins to see the various, often conflicting, aspects, which comprise any individual, regardless of age, class, culture, or even gender.

The play's conclusion reinforces this reading while also resolving the narrative. The women gather at the karate centre and attempt to remember what the anonymous woman said as well as the sequence of events, but cannot. It is this forgetting that compels the young girl – curious, self-possessed, and increasingly aware – finally to enter the building and relate the events. At last the women acknowledge and gather around her, listening intently and passionately. Whether one sees the young girl simply as the curious newspaper seller or as a symbol of what each denies or forgets in her or himself over the years, the message is powerful. And like many of the key moments throughout the play, the meaning is punctuated by a karate move. The women march forward, and in unison, each breaks a board with their empty hands. The lights dim. <

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