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“Tourist Performances and Staged Authenticity: Taxonomy and the Cultural Archive”

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In Travel and Tourism Studies, the arts have long been lumped together within the category of "cultural" or "heritage" tourism, with no distinction between commercial theatre, non-profit professional theatre, arts festivals, and cultural shows created specifically for tourists. Only recently have scholars begun to notice the performance elements that often happen at heritage sites (or created heritage sites) as tourist draws of their own. Tourist companies increasingly offer "experiences" to cultural tourists, which allow them to feel immersed within a culture – the difference between seeing artifacts in a traditional museum and seeing them in a space presented as an "authentic" home for them. In these theories, performance is like any other indigenous craft that tourists can watch being produced – it is an "added value" to the experience as a whole. The importance to cultural tourists of these "experiences" as culturally symbolic or even abstractly metonymic contributes to the presentation and reception of the enclosed performance as "authentic," a genuine example of practiced culture. Tourist scholars like Greg Richards have noted that in the "experience economy . . . the importance of symbolic production and the role of the 'creative industries' as a major source of symbolic content for tourism [has become] more obvious."¹

Within theatre scholarship, in recent years, quite a few scholars have discussed specific cultural shows in passing as they investigate the theatrical forms they represent.² Others have

¹ Richards, Greg. "Creativity and tourism: The State of the Art," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol 38, Issue 4, October 2011, Pages 1225–1253. I should also note that the experiences discussed in this paper are different than "creative tourism," in which the tourist participates by actively creating, through workshops, the craft or art form being observed. That form of tourism is emerging and is seen as an offshoot of cultural tourism.

² See, for example, Foley, Kathy, "Burmese Marionettes: Yokthe Thay in Transition." *Asian Theatre Journal* 18:1 (2001): 69-80; Hashimoto, Hiroyuki. "Between Preservation and Tourism: Folk Performing Arts in Contemporary Japan." *Asian Folklore Studies* 62, no. 2 (January 1, 2003): 225–236; and Mackerras, Colin. "Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theatre

taken on the relationship between tourism and theatre, as well as the disdain commonly heaped on theatrical production that draws in tourists. Susan Bennett wrote about the relationship between tourists and big-budget commercial theatre in her 2005 article "Theatre/Tourism," and Diana Taylor discussed the issues of authenticity, archive, tourism, and the conceptualization of artist as artifact in her "Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage," about UNESCO's launch of their Intangible Cultural Heritage list.³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's 1998 *Destination Culture* provided much of the theory used now to discuss tourism as performance, and the incorporation of performance genres into cultural displays, either in situ or as parts of festivals⁴. But even Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's excellent work does not theoretically distinguish between the performance work of practicing professionals that is imported to a heritage site or festival and cultural shows created to be the centerpieces of tourist experiences.

With Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's discussion as a base, I'd like to further break down tourist performance into four categories and discuss the relationship of each of these to the concept of cultural archive and to theatre research. Although they are often discussed as one form in tourism studies and performance studies, they differ in their relationship to the cultural archive in both intent and efficacy. Additionally, their conflation into one form in these research fields has led to some performances (I'd argue the most popular but least concerned with performance heritage) being all but ignored by scholars. I suggest that attention to the differences in these performances

in the Last Hundred Years: In Commemoration of the Spoken Drama Centenary." *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1–23.

³ Taylor, Diana. "Performance and intangible cultural heritage." *The Cambridge companion to performance studies* (2008): 91-107; Bennett, Susan. "Theatre/Tourism." *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 3 (October 2005) 407-428.

⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimlett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, And Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 9 Apr. 2015.

will facilitate study of theatrical forms that actively contribute to highly constructed narratives of nationhood seen by millions of national and international spectators each year. I will outline each category as I see it and provide a couple of examples but will focus on the last category – spectacle tourist performance – as these performances attract the largest audiences and have thus far received the least amount of scholarly theorization.

In the broadest sense, tourist performances across the globe have several things in common: 1) they have the goals of cultural preservation and expression of national pride in addition to their artistic goals; 2) the forms are living, in that they adapt to perceived audience tastes; 3) they exist within a larger tourism package that generally includes other "cultural" experiences; 4) they reach a range of spectators not commonly seen at what we might consider professional or commercial theatre, or even at festival theatre – "cultural" or "heritage" tourists interested – to a greater or lesser extent - in experiences of culture when they travel.

I will not suggest that any of these forms of performance is any more “authentic” than any other. The discussion of staged authenticity, although easy to fall into, is not productive, and has even been abandoned in tourism studies, where MacCannell’s assertion that performances staged with tourists in mind were removed from everyday life and “morally inferior” is more frequently cited in contestation than in confirmation.⁵ My discussion here of the forms’ relationship to the cultural archive certainly dances around questions of authenticity, however. But whereas the concept of “authenticity” looks to an imagined factual and historic benchmark against which to measure performance, questions about tourist theatre and the cultural archive

⁵ My gloss of MacCannell is drawn from Jared Mackley-Crump’s “From Private Performance to the Public Stage: Reconsidering ‘Staged Authenticity’ and ‘Traditional’ Performances at the Pasifika Festival” *ANTHROPOLOGICAL FORUM* (2016) VOL. 26, NO. 2, 155–176

revolve more around reception, and how spectators and artists view the art as a legitimate repository of cultural identity and expression.

I refer to the first category of cultural performance as “cultural practice performances.” This term refers to performances of everyday activities (like Colonial Williamsburg) or sometimes special events, like rituals. These performances are often seen in museums or in heritage sites like “native villages” or historic sites. Jenny Kidd notes that “authenticity” is often seen as an impossible and pointless topic of discussion in tourism studies but avers that the conversation is essential because it is so prevalent in the minds of tourists themselves and contributes to their evaluations of tourist experiences. Tourism studies of the last thirty years have noted that seeking authenticity is a part of modern life, and that this has contributed to the rise of tourism as travelers conflate “difference” with “authenticity” and travel ever further to locate it. But they often find that there are more similarities in the modern life of other peoples than they expected. As Kidd notes, “One place ‘seekers’ turn to then is the ‘past’ and its manifestations in the heritage industry.”⁶ For that reason, even current cultural practices are framed as historic for tourists who view cultures that live differently from themselves as “living in the past.” Often, cultural practice performances are craft practices that result in material goods that can be sold to tourists, thus creating a physical archive for the spectators to go along with

⁶ Kidd, Jenny. “Performing the knowing archive: heritage performance and authenticity” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* Vol. 17, No. 1, January 2011, 25.

their inevitable digital recordings. For practitioners, the embrace of the tourism industry means a continued market and opportunities to practice an art form that might not be profitable otherwise.

The second category of cultural performance, “folkloric performance,” combines traditional performance forms into a *mélange* of short performance pieces usually adapted to western theatrical conditions and technology. The content of folkloric performances can sometimes overlap with cultural practice performance, as when folkloric performances include rituals like wedding dances, removed from their cultural context. Performance forms presented in folkloric performance might be removed from their “original” contexts in other ways as well. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, “National troupes typically perform traditions from across the land, no matter what the personal histories of the performers” (65). These types of performance, particularly, are subject to accusations of inauthenticity, especially when the tourist perspective, rather than the artist perspective, is where the power of legitimization rests. The edited nature of the performances, along with the collage format combining forms not historically performed together, and the removal from “traditional” contexts, leads to an impression of something newly created, which therefore must only be a shadow of “real” performance. Nevertheless, these performances are popular with tourists because they are usually packaged in settings in which they are comfortable, and privileges them in accommodation to what John Urry called “the tourist gaze.”⁷ Most particularly, the tourist drive to record all experience digitally is accommodated in these performances.

It would be easy to dismiss these performances as essentially unrelated to the cultural archive. In museum terms, they are in-context rather than in-situ. Forms that tourists and even

⁷ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, London: Sage, 1990.

scholars would like to think of as “traditional,” frozen, and unconnected to contemporary material existence have been changed in many ways. They might better be thought of as reminders of traditional cultures transmitted by performers who may have an authentic claim of descendance but who are exploiting the work for financial gain.⁸ However, as Aurelie Condevaux and Jared Mackley-Crump point out, the artists themselves often do not share that evaluation of their work. Folkloric performances and heritage performances (discussed below) provide opportunities for artists to rehearse and share valued traditions. The artists gain as much as the tourists as they are connected to their own histories and traditions, and as they develop their performative skills. Some performers may not have practiced, or perhaps even been intimately familiar with, the forms before they became involved in the tourist production, so, “[f]or the ‘actors’, performances function as vehicles for cultural transmission and identity creation.”⁹

Folkloric performances foreground their service to the cultural archive as part of their sales pitch to tourists. The collage of performance pieces are highlighted as representing a range of cultural ethnicities, geographical areas, and/or social roles, as the case may be. The “culture show” in Yangon, Burma provides an excellent example. Without question, the cultural performance and dinner at the Karaweik Royal Barge on Kandawgyi Lake is one of the top tourist attractions in Myanmar's largest city. In a city still new to tourists, it provides a safe, exotic look at the “other within.” The barge sits in a city lake popular with locals as a leisure retreat and is a spectacle unto itself, presenting an image of a gilded royal retreat, although it is

⁸ Who counts as “authentic” to perform in cultural performance is part of the authenticity conversation much too large to consider here. It is occasionally discussed by tourism scholars.

⁹ Mackley-Crump, p. 159.

made of concrete and was built in the 1970s, based on the ancient Pyigyimon royal barge, which is no longer in existence.

Before going inside, spectators walk across the barge and stop for pictures with the costumed men and women that greet them. Demonstrations of arts and cuisine appear in the lobby, performed by costumed employees who stop frequently to pose for photos. Upon entering one of the two main rooms, spectators choose a table and order drinks, and then hit the extensive buffet for dinner. On one side of the buffet is a costumed chef preparing meat samosas, and at the dessert station a costumed woman made dessert samosas. Both were staged for easy filming, and both were being filmed constantly. Throughout the performance spectators wandered back and forth to the buffet and walked up to the stage frequently to take photos and video. The barge books mostly through tourist agencies, and most groups there had at least eight people, some had many more.

The performance itself is a hodge-podge of dance, puppetry, singing, and instrumentals, consciously arranged to highlight Burma's several ethnic traditions. The series of perhaps 20 unrelated pieces throughout the evening highlighted unique instruments (the hsaung – the Burmese harp – is quite large and featured in several pieces), extravagant costumes (like the elaborate peacock dance costume), and physical spectacle (including the two-person elephant figure that performed acrobatics, two marionette pieces, and at least two bamboo dances). No piece lasted more than 5 or 6 minutes and the styles varied greatly. Only a few of the pieces appeared to have a story, and they were subsumed under the clever use of props, dancing, and interaction with the audience. All of the pieces present an idyllic Burma, one either of the past or of the countryside, without reference to contemporary Burmese life. Even as the performers play to the cameras and frame their art within the tourist structure, their art appears frozen and

museumized, preserved at some (non-existent) perfect moment, when the artistic expression of Burmese identity was at its height. Geok Yian Goh, writing about heritage management in Burma, points out that theatrical forms "created for the tourist market" (and specifically the Karaweik barge) have little connection to theatrical forms patronized by the Burmese, because they "emphasize fossilized traditional dances and songs highlighting Myanmar's multiethnic composition through dances of ethnic groups."¹⁰ For both tourists and artists, folkloric performances most often serve the cultural archive by creating an easily digested summary record of traditional forms "before" – before colonialism, before modernization, before urbanization, before whatever forces disrupt the nationalist narrative.

My third category of cultural performances are "heritage performances." These are performance forms that maintain an appearance closer to their developed forms, but which are marketed particularly to tourists. Rather than being excerpted as part of a variety entertainment attempting to represent a wide range of traditions or ethnicities, they generally occupy a full bill, and are presented within their traditional contexts, more or less. Heritage performances are more likely to appeal to and be marketed to, in-nation tourists as well as foreign tourists. They are used as an archive of cultural practice by their practitioners and those who market them, as well as by the government, even though significant changes may have been made to accommodate the tourist trade. These are the types of performance most likely to be on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage alongside the Cultural Performance discussed earlier, or to be striving for such recognition.

¹⁰ Goh, Geok Yian, and O'Connor, Sue. "Innovation Versus Preservation: Heritage Management and Burmese Traditional Performing Arts." In *Rethinking Cultural Resource Management in Southeast Asia: Preservation, Development, and Neglect*, 153–178. Anthem Southeast Asian Studies. London: Anthem Press, 2011, 165.

As with all other types of tourist performance, there are continual disagreements about how much a form can be edited for the tourist gaze and still be considered an “authentic” part of “traditional” culture. Discussing UNESCO's attempts to preserve live performance as Intangible Cultural Heritage, Diana Taylor notes that such performances: "are always *in situ*; their meaning comes from the context in which the actions take place. They cannot be moved without a thorough recontextualization."¹¹ Taylor is referring not only to the material context of such ICH practices as pottery skills in Tunisia, which serve a specific purpose and use local resources, but also to performative forms like the Moomba dance in Zambia, which, although they could physically move and appear the same, would lose an understanding audience and therefore their purpose for being. Nevertheless, UNESCO and anyone else interested in the cultural archive must recognize that human practices are living only if they are adaptable. Writing about the Festival of the Virgin in Peru, Taylor notes that the performances “make manifest a community’s sense of itself as stable and recognizable yet ever changing.”¹² The tourist packaging of traditional performance forms into "cultural shows" contributes to the survival of traditional art forms, but also creates something new – what Kathy Foley calls "neotraditional art."¹³

Yet even within the category performances exhibit a range of adherence to “traditional” practices while still considered important parts of the cultural archive and national identity by authority structures like governments. Kathy Foley has traced the development of Vietnamese water puppets, which have always used current events to inform their content. In the mid-20th century, the puppets were adopted by the government, which saw them as both a repository of traditional Vietnamese culture and as a tool for nationalist propaganda. As tourism in the south

¹¹ Taylor 94.

¹² Taylor, 98.

¹³ Foley, "Burmese Marionettes," 79.

of the country grew, the northern, rural-based form was transported to Saigon, where it continues to be marketed to tourists (along with those companies still in the north), as a living example of Vietnamese “traditional” values, even as most of the companies have moved indoors to climate-controlled comfortable theatres.¹⁴ But even as they embrace their role as cultural ambassadors and archive, puppet companies continue to embrace change, continuing, as they always have, to incorporate current events into their work and innovate the form. As a result, water puppets are not only an activity for international tourists, but are attended by urban and traveling Vietnamese audiences as well.

Another performance form occupying a different space from the previous categories might be called “spectacle tourist performance.” These shows are grand extravaganzas that make use of traditional performance forms but make no attempt to present them *in situ* or to preserve their formats or historical meanings for the communities in which they developed. “Traditional” skills are divorced from their earlier contexts and merged to create a spectacle-based production that forwards a nationalist narrative. The primary artistic impression is of virtuosic performance and technological spectacle, and the subtext is that the country’s most skilled performers are in service to a constructed national story designed for tourists, both local and distant. Structurally, these shows share the variety format of folkloric tourist performances, but whereas those tend to highlight a “homespun” quality, the production values of some spectacle performances rival the biggest Broadway, Las Vegas, or even Takarazuka productions. Although they are visually similar to theatrical performances at large amusement parks, spectacle tourist performances differ from those works due to their ostensive connection to the cultural archive. The genre is

¹⁴ Kathy Foley, “The Metonymy of Art: Vietnamese Water Puppetry as a Representation of Modern Vietnam.” *TDR* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 129–141.

relatively new, with all of the productions that I have researched originating in 2000 and afterwards.

One such performance is Galway, Ireland's *Trad on the Prom*. (Unlike other tourist performances discussed here, spectacle performances have titles, and like the top world commercial theatres they strive to be seen as – West End and Broadway particularly – the shows change seasonally, although the differences may not be obvious to most tourists should they see two different shows at the same venue.) *Trad* does not have a story line, but the title (“Trad” being a shortening for “traditional” that is used often in relation to Irish music) suggests the emphasis of the show. Highlighting its competition-winning dancers (from national and international competitions) and musicians from well-known bands or competitions (e.g. Eurovision and The Chieftains), marketing for the production says very little, but emphasized its “Irishness” at every turn. The website notes that the show’s home, Galway, is known as “The City of Tribes,” assures us that the show is “suitable for all ages and nationalities,” and claims to be “Ireland’s Number 1 music, song, and dance experience,” a designation apparently derived from TripAdvisor reviews.¹⁵ Reviews on TripAdvisor indicate that the show is beloved by locals as well as tourists, and, like many heritage performances, is frequently attended by Irish citizens who bring guests or family who are visiting them from other countries as a special occasion outing. Reviewers occasionally mention the stories told by the performers and often cite the “traditions” and “Celtic” instruments and songs, revealing their understanding of the performance as a repository of Irish culture. Oblique references to the show’s “authenticity” are frequent, as with the Irish reviewer who had brought visitors to the show and was asserted that the high quality was expected because “members of the group are direct descendants of the

¹⁵ <https://www.tradontheprom.com>

original members of the famous Ballinakill Ceile Band, and so were born into that wonderful tradition.”¹⁶ In an article citing the show as an example of successful cross-sector cooperation and “collaboration with other cultural and tourism providers,” *Trad*’s founder Chris Kelly is quoted as saying that the show tries to provide “a promotion on Galway as an area.”¹⁷ The show is booked by all travel tours, and has “dinner and a show” package arrangements with area restaurants. Souvenir CDs are available for purchase, and the astonishing number of videos posted to YouTube prove that the show is seen by spectators as a tourist performance suitable for archiving.

But China is without question the most advanced in the genre of spectacle performance. The country’s long history of expertise in the circus arts and the spectacle inherent in many forms of Chinese opera make its performing arts excellent vehicles for tourist performances. Many examples of the other forms of tourist performance exist throughout China. In different regions of the country you can find folkloric performances like Shu Feng Ya Yun Sichuan Opera cultural show in Chengdu, which offers a cultural sampler of Sichuan opera scenes, traditional music, acrobatics and shadow and rod puppetry. The performance takes place in a theatre painstakingly identified as a “traditional tea house,” with “traditional” tea service and snacks, and the opportunity to watch the application of makeup (a common offering of cultural shows). But the theatre also has very up-to-date technology, an extensive use of flashy lighting, costumed performers in the lobby available for pictures, a gift shop, and a museum.

¹⁶ https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g186609-d1073966-Reviews-or160-Trad_on_the_Prom-Galway_County_Galway_Western_Ireland.html

¹⁷ Mottiar, Z., Quinn, B., Ryan, T, Stacey, J. (2013). Building Collaboration Between the Arts & Culture and Tourism Sectors in the West of Ireland. Fáilte Ireland, 2013.

<https://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://scholar.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1018&context=tfschhmtrep>

The continued popularity of opera within China means that there are perhaps fewer heritage performances aimed at tourists, since most cities have theatres tourists can go to see performance that they would consider culturally different from their own. And while most opera forms are living (in that they continue to develop and incorporate contemporary technology and address modern life), many tourists, especially those from the West, are likely to feel that they are glimpsing part of China's past on the stage. Some theatres, such as the Huguang Guild Hall and the Zheng Yici Peking Opera Theatre, both in Beijing, are built in traditional spaces and often serve tea during performances. They have English supertitles and offer other tourist experiences such as photos with performers, tours of the theatres, and gift shops. In Shanghai, the Yi Fu Theatre offers mostly Peking opera marketed to both locals and tourists. Big cities, especially Shanghai, also have many acrobatics shows that are marketed to tourists and attract locals who are entertaining visitors or looking for a special occasion venue.

Spectacle tourist performances differ from these more traditional performances in many ways, although western tourists experiencing them as part of a tourist package may conflate them. Spectacle performances have been created by tourism companies as part of larger developments to draw tourists to particular locations. They exist in smaller cities and even rural areas of China that are trying to draw both national and international tourists. As a relatively new form, it has received attention only from Chinese and Australian tourism scholars. Chinese scholars writing in English call the form "Tourism performing arts." Danni Zheng, et al define the form as performance that "combine artistic performance and entertainment through original,

indigenous or innovative forms of cultural expression that are primarily intended for a tourist audience.”¹⁸

The heavy hitter in these shows is the Songcheng Performance Company. Founded in 1994 and traded on the Shenzhen stock market, Songcheng is a three-billion-dollar company that, according to their official company profile found on Reuters and elsewhere, “engages in the investment, development and operation of theme parks, tourism cultural shows, live shows, Internet shows as well as travel and leisure business. It also engages in the provision of cultural shows, ancient workshop shows, folk performances, ancient recreation reactive and cultural theme activities.”¹⁹ According to their website, they currently run about a dozen performances in eight different locations across southeast China and in Beijing, and their performances altogether have entertained more than 50 million spectators.²⁰ Their Romance Show series is their most successful. On several tourist websites (like TripAdvisor) they claim that “It is the theatre performance that has been performed in most times and has the largest audience number; along with the O Show in Las Vegas, and the Moulin Rouge in Paris, the three have been regarded as the ‘Top 3 Famous Shows in the World.’”²¹ It is unclear where they got that designation, but it is certainly true that their shows are well attended and booked almost exclusively through tourist booking agencies.

¹⁸ Danni Zheng, Brent W. Ritchie, Pierre J. Benckendorff, Jigang Bao, “Emotional responses toward Tourism Performing Arts Development: A comparison of urban and rural residents in China,” *Tourism Management* 70 (2019) p. 238).

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/finance/stocks/company-profile/300144.SZ>

²⁰ “Introduction,” http://www.songcn.com/group_en/

²¹ https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g298559-d1808113-Reviews-Hangzhou_Songcheng_Park-Hangzhou_Zhejiang.html

All of Songcheng's shows are accompanied by other tourist draws developed by Songcheng. Several are in what are called amusement parks, but are reconstructions of traditional Chinese villages, more along the lines of Main Street in Disney World than Colonial Williamsburg. The flagship of these productions is the Romance Show of Songcheng, also called Romance of the Song Dynasty, in Songcheng Village in Hangzhou, a city about two and a half hours southwest of Shanghai. Hangzhou is the capital of Zhejiang Province, has a UNESCO World Heritage Site, will be holding the 2022 Asian Games, and for many other reasons is a popular tourist destination for both national and international travelers. Songcheng Village is ostensibly a recreation of a Song Dynasty village. It features what are called "folk activities" like paper cutting, traditional dancing, tea ceremonies, as well as knife throwing, historic panoramas, two haunted houses, and lots of shops and food vendors. One TripAdvisor reviewer from North Carolina described it as having "no US equivalent but if we had a US version it would be part one of those colonial reenactment villages in Virginia, part Epcot, and part Vegas Show."²²

The Romance Show is the main draw of the park, and in fact when I attended, most of the park was not even open.

Like all of Songcheng's shows, The Romance of the Song Dynasty tells the cultural story of the people of the region. This description appears on most tourism sites:

The performance is made up of five sections: the first part is highlighted with the civilization light of Liangzhu. The local people of Hangzhou created a great prehistoric civilization. This part show based on this historic discovery is themed with the worship to sun, the primitive sacrificing dancing, picking dancing and rice-planting dancing. It is

²² https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g298559-d1808113-Reviews-or20-Hangzhou_Songcheng_Park-Hangzhou_Zhejiang.html

preparation part of the coming glory of Song Empire. The next part is mainly about the feast and dancing of imperial palaces. It is the show of the glory and power of South Song Dynasty. The third part is the warring time – shining spears and armored horses. In 1127, troop of Jin invaded Bailiang and captured Emperor Huizong and Emperor Qinzong of North Song Dynasty, and this historic event is called Jingkang Incident. Song was forced to move to south China. Zhao Gou, the ninth son of Emperor Huizong established South Song Empire in Hangzhou. And Marshal Yue Fei led his troop to fight against the north invasion in order to win back the lost land. This part is themed with the fighting experience of Yue Fei's patriotic movement. The third part is the folklores of West Lake, and it shows the romantic love story of Lady White Snake, the Butterfly Lovers and many impressive local legends. The fourth part is the classic affection beyond the time; it is the end of the whole show.²³

Without that description, and the few English titles that appear on either side of the stage, spectators who don't speak Chinese might not realize that there is a narrative of any kind in the show. The show is a series of short scenes, each of which boasts a different type of spectacle. The performers are accomplished singers, dancers, martial artists, and acrobats, but the real star of the show is the technology and high production values. State-of-the-art lighting, including multiple lasers, combine with frequent haze to make the space seem much larger than it is. Live horses charge across the stage with armed warriors aboard. An ancient temple tracks forward on the stage and then erupts with a massive waterfall. Acrobats soar over the audience and are raised and lowered from the catwalks. A bank of audience seating in the front rotates mid-show,

²³ chinatouradvisors.com

placing spectators in the middle of a water scene, where they get sprayed with water and are in the middle of the action.

As can be seen from the description above, the Songcheng productions showcase local history and ethnicities, but with little to no historical accuracy. Costumes of ancient Chinese dynasties include bikinis and Vegas-style feathered headdresses, all internal strife is removed from the narrative, and the overall message is one of minority Chinese ethnicities developing into the beautiful China of today. The romanticized history appeals to both international and Chinese tourists. This is especially true for those locations that draw tourists specifically for their cultural and historical differences. Songcheng has shows in Northern Sichuan Province, which is an area with many Tibetan migrants (The Mystery of Tibet), Zhangjiajie, a tourist draw primarily for its scenery and canyon skywalk (The Romantic Show of Zhangjiajie), and Tanhe Ancient City, a constructed tourist area in rural Hunan Province (The Romantic Show of Tanhe).

In the last few years, Songcheng has found some competition. Several locations with Songcheng shows also have other, similar shows, also purporting to present the cultural history of the area in the form of high-value, packaged entertainment. Some of these shows are outdoor productions created as part of Zhang Yimou's Impressions series. Starting in 2003, the internationally known film director and choreographer of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Ceremonies began creating large-scale outdoor musical performances across China that draw their content from the cultural history of the areas in which they appear. Zhang himself staged three, and then licensed his name to several more, who operate under the name Impression Wonders Arts Development Company. The company also operates the Encore Series, which also operate in historic areas and are in indoor theatres, showcasing local culture as the Songcheng shows do. Danjing Zhang has traced the development of the shows and their place in Chinese self-branding

in her thesis “Impressions of China: Zhang Yimou’s outdoor theme productions.” She places Zhang’s work at the center of China’s new branding as a cultural “soft power.” She asserts that Zhang’s works “meet the trend of China's self-presentation to the world as a deeply authentic, culturally rich country.”²⁴ Perhaps due to his presence in the “legitimate” arts of film and theatre, Zhang’s Impressions series has received critical attention, much of it negative for his “orientalism” and lack of authenticity.

Nevertheless, Zhang’s productions, Songcheng’s productions, and others like them, continue to draw huge audiences of both Chinese and international tourists. Tourists find cultural authenticity in them and locals find pleasing expressions of national identity. In his discussion of Zhang Yimou’s Impression Lijiang (which operates not far from Songcheng’s The Romantic Show of Lijiang), Yujie Zhu analyzes the show’s appeal for international and Chinese tourists. He says that the show, “appeals to international consumers by incorporating essential images that not only link the product with stereotypical images of Chinese culture but simultaneously offer the appeal of the exotic locale.”²⁵ For Chinese tourists, the show appeals to their search for *yuanshengtai*, or “original culture,” which Zhu notes has “captivated urban populations.”²⁶ The artists hired for these productions are highly skilled and have the opportunity to express their skills in optimal circumstances with significant aesthetic and technical support. But if they have any interest in practicing traditional Chinese performance forms, they certainly aren’t finding that in these shows, although they may be using traditional instruments and using techniques

²⁴ Danjing Zhang, “Impressions of China: Zhang Yimou’s outdoor theme productions,” p. 30.

²⁵ Yuejie Zhu, “When the Global Meets the Local in Tourism— Cultural Performances in Lijiang as Case Studies,” *Journal of China Tourism Research*, 8: 302–319, 2012, p. 312.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

developed in what we might call heritage performance forms. The narratives in the productions may bear some resemblance to the types of stories told in operas, and the sentiments expressed celebrate a vision of Chinese identity with roots in traditional art forms. The combination of modern aesthetics and “traditional” sentiment satisfies the tourist gaze, making these shows suitable as repositories of the cultural archive, albeit an archive of an invented culture of both past and present. And while the invented nature of that culture may be readily visible to only minimally critical readings, it is barely more invented than the more “anthropologically authentic” culture constructed in practiced culture, folkloric, and heritage performances, all of which may impinge on artistic freedoms in their attempts to freeze cultural products in time and space.