


Globalization and Theater Spectacles in Asia

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**Abstract:** In her article "Globalization and Theater Spectacles in Asia" I-Chun Wang discusses how performance is an integral part of cultural discourse: in industrially advanced Asian nations governments started to examine the relationship between cultural discourse and popular culture, cultural identity and tourist attractions and artists have become prominent participants in this development in particular with regard to theater performance, an activity with old traditions in Asian cultures. With the uptake of technology and in some cases Western innovation, Asian theater performance not only became an important part of social and cultural discourse, it rejuvenated itself. Wang posits that Asian theater performance shaped cultural trends, reinterpreted theatrical arts, and provided a platform for innovation and communication with audiences from different cultural backgrounds and thus became a factor of globalization within Asia and between the West and Asia including the tourist industry, a worldwide phenomenon.

**I-Chun WANG**

## **Globalization and Theater Spectacles in Asia**

Globalization has originally been referred to the phenomenon of the increasing mobility of financial capital and growing investments across national boundaries (Fiss and Hirsch 32), but during the past three decades globalization reflects economical interdependence and cultural heterogeneity in many parts of world resulting in not just the shifts of economic power, but also blurred national identities. Current aspects of globalization include (im)migration, labor, cultural integration, and cultural and social activities. Although efforts of anti-globalization in the 1990s tended to stress negative aspects, the discourse of globalization has gradually become ubiquitous. In Pacific Asia one interesting facet of globalization is urban development and expansion along with the promotion of local cultural heritage. In other words, to deal with increasingly Western-dominated international culture, governments employ performance to represent local cultural legacy and embrace globalization. For example, in Mumbai, Beijing, or Kyoto represent the dynamism of performing traditional cultures while constructing an interface between globalization and traditional cultural heritage. Mumbai, the fourth most populous city in the world, has developed one of the largest film industries with an emphasis on the revival of the US-American musical and the representation of classical Indian dance styles and costumes. Hangzhou has been widely known for its scenic West Lake and legendary stories, but now it has become one of the sites for live scenic shows in China. As for Tokyo, a city acknowledged as a leading world metropolis, celebrates itself with Shakespeare Tokyo Globe, a reconstruction of Shakespeare's theater. In the article at hand, I explore theatrical performances in Hangzhou's Impression Series, the Tokyo Globe, Taiwan's local operatic theater, and Bali's traditional theatre and analyze how contested identities in these Asian cities become ritualized in performances and how performances integrate with the trend of globalization through intermedial practices.

The story of Madame White Snake, one of the best known stories in China, originated in the Song Dynasty and was adapted to theater and fiction during the Ming and Ching dynasties. The most acclaimed dramas developed from this folk tale and the most interesting episode includes **水漫金山寺** (*Flooding the Golden Mountain Temple*, or *Flooding Jinshan Temple*) which narrates how the Serpent Lady exerts her supernatural power transforming water creatures into powerful armies, fighting against Fa-Hai who has imprisoned her lover, and the events surrounding the Feng Lei Pagoda which relate the aftermath of her imprisonment beneath the pagoda and her son's attempt to rescue her fairy mother when he achieves a high degree of scholarship in a nationwide examination. No matter whether the script is in Kunqu, Beijing, Cantonese, or traditional Taiwan opera, White Snake's gentle temperament and pursuit of love, as well as her husband's shaky character are part of the story and this is the case also in Long Zhou's opera *Madame White Snake* performed in 2010 in Boston and that received the Pulitzer Prize in 2011.

Performed in Hangzhou in 2007 Yimou Zhang's show *Impressions of the West Lake* is a prominent example of representing the city and its embedded culture through intermediality-based performance. This operatic performance is a collaborative effort by cinematographer Zhang, stage director Chaoqe Wang, and techno-musician Kitarô (Takahashi Masanori). Zhang chose the scenic West Lake as the site of the modern version for the legendary story of Madame White Snake. Madame White Snake (Bai She Zhuan) was originally an orally transmitted legend about the love affair between Suzhen Bai — a woman in the form of a serpent — and a young scholar named Xian Xiu. The serpent lady in this Chinese folk tale is an enchantress and her love affair with Xiu is interrupted by a righteous sorcerer monk, Fa-Hai, who captures the serpent lady and stipulates that she should be transformed back to her original form since all supernatural creatures and demons should be expelled from human relations.

Zhang's *Impressions of the West Lake* is divided into five acts: Encounter, Love, Parting, Memory, and Impression. The passionate love between Madame White Snake and Xu was highlighted with a foggy atmosphere and melancholic purple color intermingled with light pink to contrast the human world and mysterious supernatural elements in this tale of seduction. The most memorable episodes in the legend include Madame White Snake who meets on a bridge across the West Lake and falls in love with Xu and marries him. The most recurrent episode in the folklore is when her husband is captured

by the sorcerer monk Fa-Hai. Madame White Snake fights bravely with the self-righteous monk and calls for aid from marine creatures to flood the temple under which she is trapped. The pagoda is a historical site excavated in 2008 and the nearby new pagoda was rebuilt in 2001. The pagoda was originally built during the Five Dynasties and was reconstructed by the municipal government of Hangzhou City, the location of which is right on Sunset Hill south of the West Lake. With partial stage immersed in the water, Zhang's performance production narrates this romantic love with a stage setting against the natural scene leaving the audience with the impression that performers move on the water surface instead of acting on a solid platform. Zhang's beautiful operatic production thus weaves the landscape of Hangzhou and local folklore into its storyline with the sound track of contemporary music, breath-taking romantic episodes and lighting, and culminating a grand spectacle.

*Impressions of the West Lake* is a cultural product as an integral part of urban culture of the city of Hangzhou and with the result of the cultural visibility of the city and its culture to visitors, local and global. Since the past twenty years of globalization China underwent tremendous changes opening up "opportunities for enterprises and local entrepreneurial bureaucrats to seek profits in the areas outside of the state-plan sector" (Lin 300). According to Jieming Zhu, pro-growth policies initiate local growth resulting in multiple attempts to fashion urban culture (534-40) and spectacles are in particular expressions which by definition exert aspects of globalization: "performative movement inspires, invents and fashions something equivalent of theater within philosophy" (Deleuze 8; see also Debord). To Gilles Deleuze, modern life confronts the most mechanical and stereotypical repetitions and theater and performance help transform city life by "adapting and relating," thus recreating something unexpected so that performances involve not only with the context of city development but also current cultural discourse. It is in this context that the promotion of popular culture has been a task for Zhang in his Impression series. An experienced film director, Zhang used intermedial techniques and dynamic interplay of different media to represent the context of local cultural traditions. In Zhang's series, *Impression Dahongpao* was staged in 2010 on Mount Wuyi in Fujian Province (the site is listed as a UNESCO cultural heritage since 1999) famous for its tea industry. Second is his series, *Impression Liu Sanjie* was performed in 2003 at Yangshuo, a tourist attraction along the river Li in Guangxi Province. The show's theme was the legend of the Zhuang tribe with their woman leader who fought against oppressive government officials. The third spectacle in the series, *Impression Lijiang* was staged in 2006 at Jade Dragon Snow Mountain of Yunnan Province: five hundred Nakhi ethnic group members participated in the show representing the ethnic minorities' experience and involvement in the preservation and rejuvenation of their traditions. Zhang's fourth spectacle, his 2009 *Impression Hainan*, combined the essence of Hainan life with its surroundings such as the ocean and flora, as well as local traditions. Zhang is now preparing for his next spectacle, *Impression Putuo* at Mount Putuo in Zhejiang Province, one of the four sacred mountains of Buddhism in China.

With his outdoor performances, Zhang's grand shows recall the productions by US-American playwright and director Paul Green (1894-1981) who pioneered outdoor dramatic performances such as *The Lost Colony* with a symphony orchestra in 1937 at Fort Raleigh. Green's other outdoor historic spectacles include *Wildness Road*, *Trumpet in the Land*, and *The Lone Star*. *Wilderness Road* exhibited characters of the people of Appalachia and the education of youth in nature, *The Lone Star* narrated the Texas struggle for independence, and *Trumpet in the Land* retold the tragic history of David Zeisberger's ninety-eight Christian Indian followers who were massacred by militiamen in 1782. *Trumpet in the Land* is claimed as Ohio's premier and longest running outdoor theater production while *Cross and Sword*, an outdoor symphony about the colonizers' bloody conflicts at St. Augustine in Florida in the sixteenth century is hailed as Florida's state play. Similar to Greene, Zhang captures the essence of local culture and history of various cities and their roles in Chinese history thus promoting local cultures and imbuing innovation with traditional costumes and legendary stories.

Among cities where performance is integrated with urban culture, Bali is one of the best known and the vitality of Balinese theater serves my discussion of performance as a now global activity in relation to the above brief introduction to Chinese spectacles. According to Michel Picard, in the 1960s the Indonesian government saw Balinese art as a way to attract foreign tourists (11-12). Balinese theater is divided into several subgenres: *wayang kulit*, a kind of shadow puppet theater which draws its plot from the Indian epic *Mahābhārata* and *wayang wong* is masked drama which deals with the

themes and motifs of the *Ramayana*. In general, dance is the core element of Balinese theater: *arja* is dance opera, *topeng* is a masked spectacle blending music, dance, and mime, and *sendratari* is a kind of dance drama with dialogue embedded in plot expressed in movement. Since Antonin Artaud, in Western culture the highly stylized performance of Balinese has drawn the attention of Gordon Craig, Pandam Guritno, Cathy Foley, Larry Reed, Richard Schechner, Ariane Mnouchkine, Bradford Clark, and Joseph Chaikin, etc. Artaud was struck by Balinese theater when in 1931 he saw a performance at the Paris World Exhibition and wrote that he was impressed by "the dazzling ensemble full of explosions, flights, secret streams, detours in every direction of both external and internal perception" culminating with "artistic sensations" and "metaphysical identity of concrete and abstract" (59). In US-American cultural anthropology Clifford Geertz was fascinated by Balinese dance drama and the public dramatization of Balinese culture and "one may say that there is no stage in Bali, or that everywhere there is a stage. For wherever there is a space to dance, to mount a play, there is the Balinese stage" (Spies and de Zoete 11). *wayang kulit* is the most popular among Balinese dance theater genres where the puppeteer (*dalang*) — the puppets are made of buffalo hide mounted on bamboo sticks — is sitting behind a screen illuminated by light and manipulates carved puppets which cast their shadows on the screen. Similar to Zhang's representation of Chinese traditional theater blending with innovated staging and legendary stories, *wayang kulit* has stories which range from heroes from Hindu myth, lovers, and animal fables.

In renovated *wayang kulit* the puppet designer is noted not only for adaptations from Hindu epics like *The Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, but also for incorporating Indian animal fables from the *Panchatantra*, in which metaphors and philosophy about life are seen through animals such as the tiger, dinosaur, ant, frog, fish, turtle, and bird besides traditional characters such as gods and demons. In the piece *Electronic Shadows of Bali: Ambrosia of Immortality* premiered 1998 in San Francisco by Reed's Shadowlight Company, a *wayang* performance collaborated by puppeteer I Wayan Wija and Larry Reed, the Hindu concept of the cosmos is elaborated on. The performance consists of a cast of nine masked shadow casters and an orchestra of five people narrating the beginning of the universe, the war between gods and demons which results in the meddling of Visnu who decries that gods of the universe must have wisdom and strength. The story is based on the *Bhagavad Gita* and retells the story that Visnu preserves and sustains the universe by suggesting the warring gods to churn the Milky Ocean to create the essence of life, that is, the ambrosia of immortality. The puppeteer collaborated also with Lee Breuer in 1992 on *MahabarANTa*, part of the Warrior Ant series. Breuer was one of the founding members for Mabou Mines, a collaborative avant-garde theater company noted for animation. Aleksandriæ Duliæ examines Wija's innovation that touches upon tiny parts of puppets, traditional temple settings, or scenic designs. Duliæ finds that in Wija's ritual performances, the puppet master not only represents philosophical issues and explores social criticism, but also includes traditional poetics and discusses contemporary ecological problems brought by industrialization thus attempting to present both ritual and entertainment purposes (123-25). Since *wayang* theater has a fixed structure and stock dramatic characters, there is a need for puppet masters to improvise and to create new situations for the show. *Arjuna's Wedding* is a popular *wayang* story about Arjuna, the greatest warrior in the *Mahābhārata*: in the adaptation of the epic the play begins with Arjuna's buffoon servant who accompanies his master to a place for meditation, hoping that they will get god Siva's favor. An arrogant king of Himantaka intends to attack gods in heaven and to win a celestial nymph's love, so that gods are in need of Arjuna's help because Arjuna has a magnificent bow. Arjuna is noted for his capability of concentration and in his meditation no one can disrupt him although several nymphs attempt to seduce him. Siva then transforms into a boar when Arjuna gets up defending himself. The play comes to a perfect ending with the arrogant king defeated and with Arjuna's wedding. Besides the ambidextrous master archer, Arjuna, the most recurrent character in *Mahābhārata* and its versions of *wayang* include Arjuna's half brother Karna who was killed by Arjuna and Gatotkaca, a naturally born half-giant.

*Wayang* theater was as an animistic rite in honor of the spirits of ancestors, Indigenous agricultural deities, and sacred places. To contemporary viewers including tourists, Bali's rituals which bring in mystic inspiration and colorful atmosphere the rituals represent the essence of Balinese culture. However, Balinese culture that has been mixed with Hindu and local culture, was fashioned in

some ways by Western influence during colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century. The official Tourist Bureau in Indonesia was established as early as 1908, but the master plan of developing tourism was implemented only in the 1970s and the economic priority on tourism brought about the construction of resorts and cultural tourism. Large-scale ceremonial spectacles sponsored by rajas were originally a means to display power, but with the decline of court patronage some smaller-scaled artistic forms appeared. Picard divides Balinese performances into two kinds: performances for the Balinese and performances for the tourists, but he confirms that although the troupes perform for both tourist market and the Balinese audience, the tourist performances focus more on spectacles which may involve two to three thousand dancers and musicians (61). Peter Dunbar-Hall terms this situation as superficial interaction where the performance is condensed and thus lacking insight and Carol Rubenstein argues that the current tourist oriented performances have lost authenticity because the traditional context of Balinese rituals have been replaced by matter that can be considered kitsch for the tourists (see also Sedana). Nevertheless, from among all Balinese artistic forms, *wayang kulit* has emerged as privileged traditional culture sponsored by the government and thus many puppet masters involve themselves with official discourse on national cultural identity.

*Wayang kulit* serves to entertain besides its religious purpose and in recent years some innovative *wayang* performances have been presented with professional actors, while in others new stories and new puppets are added. In order to reinforce traditional culture represented by the *Mahābhārata*, Nanang Hape, a *wayang* puppeteer, musician, and director developed a debate on the superiority of two heroic figures, Gatotkaca and Karna in the Indian epic through two groups of young people: one group supports Gatotkaca, a warrior with tremendous power while the other supports Karna. Hape uses *wayang* shadow puppets as the screen is set on stage while professional actors perform in front of the screen where the shadow puppets are seen. Further, puppet master Susmono Enthus created Batman and Japanese manga characters to draw younger generation to the stage and Hape included jazz in his *wayang*. Interestingly, *wayang* has also been produced with plots adapted from Western literature based on *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and even *Madama Butterfly* and *Oedipus Rex* have been adapted to *wayang kulit*. It is worth noting that in order to represent a *wayang* repertoire, music, appropriate lighting and performance are reformulated to meet demands of contemporary puppet theater in order to attract audience. It is also understandable that *wayang* as an Asian theatrical form is easy to be adapted by international artists and companies thus resulting in new forms and innovation. However, the more *wayang* is globalized for the purpose of creating spectacles, the more it is hybridized and the farther it moves away from its ritualistic and traditional form (see Stephen).

Balinese *wayang* is now performed in several metropolises in Asia because Javanese puppeteers — such as Joko Susilo and Ki Widiyanto S. Putro — collaborate(d) with festival organizers in successful performances and thus more attention has been and is paid to the genre resulting in such successes as in 2003 UNESCO designated *wayang kulit* as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Although the government of Indonesia tries to preserve traditional *wayang kulit*, there are some instances where the government's intentions — such as in the film *Wayang* directed by Malaysian writer and director Hatta Azad Khan in 2008 — exhibit the dilemma between tradition and innovation and change. One new area where *wayang* is experiencing innovation is in digital multimedia including music synthesizing: synthesizers and strobe lighting are Western in origin, but manufactured in Asia. The audience expectation of a "spectacle" has been raised by cinema and the musical acceptance of electronic wizardry by rock music. The use of this technology in *wayang*, however, is seen as being Javanese and innovative, while not disturbing the dramatic structure or underlying philosophical basis of *wayang* culture (see Byard-Jones).

Next, I discuss briefly the importance of spectacles and performance in Taiwanese culture as another example of how such activities obtain global presence: performing spectacles has been a core activity in most temple festivals in Taiwan. As Timothy Clark and Iain Mangham note, in the past twenty years theater developed owing to technology and multi-media (38-40). Traditional theater has been close to the audience, but with the development of technology stage designers appeal to the taste of audience through sensory and visual elements provided by technology and this has been the case in Taiwan, too, where industrial and technological development is advanced. Within the field of

performing arts, creating spectacles, and the rejuvenation of Taiwanese opera (*gezaixi*) are the most eminent aspects following the impact of globalization. With the lift of Martial Law in 1987 and rapid industrialization in the 1980s, Taiwan joined South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore promoting local cultures while embracing world cultures at the same time. Among theater troupes in Taiwan, Minghua Yuan, Cloud Gate Dance Theater, and Utheatre have been the most popular. In particular Minghua Yuan performed traditional Taiwanese opera with technologically supported staging and special effects. Cloud Gate enjoys acclaim because of its Western and Chinese choreographical excellence and Utheatre is renown for its Zen spirit and poetic sensation in its rhythms of drum performances. Further, Minghua Yuan is characterized by performing spectacles in Taiwanese dialects. Minghua Yuan was founded in 1929 as a traditional performance troupe. When *gezaixi* was still at its Indigenous stage, performances were presented either in villages or in front of religious temples with or without a stage, the purpose of which was to entertain on the days when there was a religious ceremony. Themes of *gezaixi* were either related to Daoist deities, Buddhist patrons and pilgrims, folk tales, or historical and legendary heroes. As the manager and the current group leader of the troupe Sheng-Fu Cheng suggested on the eightieth anniversary of Minghua Yuan, *gezaixi* differs from Beijing Opera in that "Beijing opera was performed primarily for the emperor, the wealthy and the privileged in China, but Taiwanese opera was created for commoners" (<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVTXk0byRFA>>), namely the population of Taiwan's local culture. Minghua Yuan's early performances reflected local matters in the Holo language and dramatized stories from traditional folklores; however, during the colonial period performances by Minghua Yuan were conformed to the requirements of the Japanese government and were required to blend Japanese costumes and language with Holo and such adjustments of performance by combining Japanese cultural elements and local traditions and practices was common practice (Hsieh 97). The development of Beijing Opera reached its climax from the 1960s through early 1970s when the Kuomintang government promoted traditional Chinese culture and performing arts. The transformation of Minghua Yuan into a troupe representing high stylized culture was not necessarily because of "Taiwan consciousness," a term created after the lift of Martial Law. That Minghua Yuan was introduced to National Theater by Jing-ji Wu in 1983 resulted from the promotion of Taiwanese Nativist literature that dominated Taiwan literary circles in the 1970s and this phenomenon indeed helped Minghua Yuan to develop itself as a refined theatrical art (see Lin 52-56).

During the past twenty years, the performance of Minghua Yuan not only represented Taiwanese-ness but also captured audiences of different generations: performing with the mother tongue of the majority of Taiwanese, Minghua Yuan as a major troupe in Taiwan has been largely connected with the culture and history of southeastern Chinese immigrants whose ancestors immigrated to Taiwan from China's Fujian Province across the Taiwan Strait (Wu 148-50). Beijing Opera was popular with immigrants from Mainland China before the 1990s and with the aging generation of the immigrants, *gezaixi* seems to have replaced the once popular artistic form. Although Hsiao-Mei Hsieh suggests that national cultural discourse in Taiwan has contributed to the development of *gezaixi* reinforcing locality in theatrical performances, I posit that heterogeneity has been a phenomenon in the *gezaixi* performing arts. The recently established Ho Lou Gezaixi Troupe, for example, has been drawing closer to Beijing Opera in its elegant speech, costume designing, and representation of the dialogue (Wang 111), while Minghua Yuan — acclaimed as one of the authentic representatives of *gezaixi* in the past twenty years — has evolved with modern stage technology demonstrating its public relevance, as a tourist attraction, and an example of the discourse of cultural identity in Taiwan.

Minghua Yuan's *gezaixi* version of White Snake story I discuss above was performed especially for the 21st Summer Deaflympic Games in 2009. The most discussed and adapted part of this folk lore is the episode called "Flooding the Golden Mountain Temple" in which Madame White Snake decides to stage a combat with her servant, a green snake in human form, against the obstinate monk sorcerer who has captivated her husband (Lai 51-66). When she gives her order to flood the temple on the Golden Mountain, two huge animated snakes rise behind the stage and dozens of actors in shapes of crabs and shrimps jump onto the stage with acrobatic rolling and jumps suggesting fierce fighting. Two hundred tons of water then spray and pour from above when the actors playing Madame White Snake and Green Snake hover fifty meters above the ground by means of ropes thus creating the

effect of flooding the temple with their magic power. Based on the theme of forbidden love between a young scholar and a snake who took human form, the version of traditional Beijing Opera features acting, singing, sumptuous costumes, dance, and acrobatics. However, in interaction between media and performance Minghua Yuan's show goes beyond traditional elements; to create spectacular special effects, Minghua Yuan uses new media and technology in a performance of 2011, pouring down hundreds of tons of water from the air for the scene of "Flooding the Gold Mountain Temple."

In conclusion, culture is a system of ideas, signs, associations, and ways of behaving and communicating (Gellner 6-7). Following the impact of globalization, in industrially advanced Asian nations governments started to examine the relationship between cultural discourse and popular culture, cultural identity and tourist attractions and artists have become prominent participants in this development in particular with regard to theater performance, an activity with old traditions in Asian cultures. With the uptake of technology and in some cases Western innovation, Asian theater performance not only became an important part of social and cultural discourse, it rejuvenated itself significantly as I demonstrate with the examples Zhang's Impression series and Minghua Yuan's rejuvenated *gezaixi*. Importantly, theater performance shaped cultural trends, reinterpreted theatrical arts, and provided a platform for innovation and communication with audiences from different cultural backgrounds and thus became a factor of globalization within Asia and between the West and Asia including the tourist industry, a worldwide phenomenon.

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