

RESEARCH PAPER

Cultural exploitation in Chinese politics: Reinterpreting Liu Sanjie

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ABSTRACT

Liu Sanjie is a typical Chinese legendary figure, adapted from folk custom and transformed during many historical and political stages. By comparing the musical film *Liu Sanjie* with the landscape performing art *Impression Liu Sanjie*, this paper explores how Liu Sanjie is reconstructed in the *Impression* to be in accord with contemporary demands (*shidaixing*). In the film, made during the 1960s, Liu Sanjie was promoted as a heroine fighting against the privileged classes, but in the *Impression*, her class struggle has been erased and only a harmonious and abstract legend remains. Her ethnicity is promoted by Han elites as not exclusive Zhuang, but shared equally with Han, Miao and Dong ethnicity in an imagined community to propagate a sense of ethnic harmony and unified Chineseness. Her transformation from a realistic character, full of a rebelling spirit, to an abstract and disembodied 'sense of harmony', is a complete reinterpretation of a Chinese historical legend. Utilizing a term from Wang Ban (1997), 'the sublime figure of history', which refers to an ideology aestheticized by the party state for securing its governance, this paper refers to the bold artistic treatment of Liu Sanjie for cultural exploitation as 'Liu Sanjie's sublime'. The paper explores the evolutionary progress of Liu Sanjie from class revolution to art revolution in response to political requirements. The author is a stage-trained performing artist, specialized in both Western opera and Chinese classical and folk singing and dance. He is also a critic and art consultant in the Chinese landscape performing arts industry. These professional roles have allowed privileged access to the top people in this industry.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the reinvention of Liu Sanjie, a cultural figure in China over the last 700 years. The paper examines how the Liu Sanjie in the Mao-era film, *Liu Sanjie*, is reconstructed in *Impression Liu Sanjie* in accordance with the new political requirements of the post-Mao era. The Liu Sanjie in the Mao-era film is transformed into a harmonizing legend in the *Impression*. Chinese Han elites have reinterpreted Liu Sanjie as a unifying influence in a united Chineseness.

The concept of 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) incorporates the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for novel purposes. The revival or reinvention of tradition (including ethnic culture) is often encouraged by the state, and is realized through government propaganda. Hobsbawm believes that many traditions are invented, and can thus be used by the authorities to reinforce the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), which is highly relevant to the comparatively recent historical innovation of the 'nation', with its associated phenomena – nationalism, the nation state, national symbols, histories and so forth. Governments are trying to present something as timeless, legitimate, old and powerful. In the case of the Chinese government, only certain parts of the overall culture have been selected. Politics decides what is and is not representative.

As a regional folk legend in China, Liu Sanjie has been reworked from folk custom and transformed in numerous ways through many stages of Chinese history. Tan (2017) explains that Liu Sanjie is the coalescence of a real figure of Zhuang ethnicity and a 'virtual space of culture', being an imagined lineage which contributes to the generation and continuation of tradition. Xie (2020) indicates that there are three forces (state incorporation, elitist refinement and folk transmission) which join to transform Liu Sanjie folk songs to Liu Sanjie branding. Liu (2003) finds that Chinese capitalism has dealt with Liu Sanjie as intellectual property (IP), transforming the folklore from one era to another through the changing and shaping of ethnic culture (Liang, 2009) and the creation of the intellectual class in socialist China (U, 2010). Chen Yunqian (2016) suggests that the making of the film *Liu Sanjie* was a complex process, the political pressures of the time resulting in the conversion of Liu Sanjie to a class struggle heroine. Liu Sanjie was recreated again at the start of the present millennium in *Impression Liu Sanjie*, which is an outdoor staged spectacle exploiting both the landscape and the tourism industry in performing art (Xian, 2009).

In this paper, 'Chineseness' is a term used to resonate with the concept of 'invented tradition' which takes place in an 'imagined community'. Chineseness generally appears within three main domains: Chineseness of people, Chineseness of culture and Chineseness of politics. In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched its massive ethnic classification movement (*minzu shibie*), based on Joseph Stalin's definition of the nation. Fifty-six ethnic groups were recognized (based mainly on language) to distinguish the Han majority as the dominant group, distinct from the other 55 ethnic minorities (Keyes, 2002).¹ The discourse of Chineseness is often initiated by the issue of ethnicity, building upon the view that the Han are dominant in Chineseness, a 'self' category understood through contrast with all the ethnic minority 'others'. Ethnic minorities have been turning from 'other', to 'self' as they begin to define Chineseness not in opposition to, but as part of, the Chinese self (Baranovitch, 2001; Yan and Santos, 2009).

The ethnic minorities within China's national borders cause problems for the attempt to reconcile notions of ethnicity within the national identity (Chun, 1996). 'Minorities along China's frontier may have been ethnically autonomous, but culturally they belonged to a single sinocentric universe, which, in Chinese eyes at least, "came to be transformed" (*lai-hua*)' (Chun, 1996, p.125) and had been undergoing a long process of sinicization (Wu, 1990). The restless partnership between ethnic consciousness and national culture has been engendered by the paradox that culture so often draws upon ethnic traditions for its legitimacy, while also transcending the 'primordial sentiments' associated with those same traditions (Chun, 1996). The whole concept of Chineseness is subject to overwhelming accusations and questioning. It resists a clear-cut definition, ambiguity being its main feature (He, 2012) and politicization a prominent characteristic:

On the mainland, one can find essentially the same degree of obsession with the promotion of a national consciousness constructed on a synonymity between the same kinds of cultural ingredients, namely ethnicity, language, and history, but with significant nuances. While icons such as the panda and the Great Wall serve to epitomize in superficial terms China's uniqueness and the existence of potentially strong rallying points for collective solidarity, the continual politicisation of culture reflects, more importantly, the relevance of abstract formulations of identity to state formation and national survival as a whole. (Chun, 1996, p.117)

The concept of Chineseness is used in this paper to illustrate how a Zhuang ethnic legend has been adapted, by adding values from cultural Chineseness, to promote a safe Zhuang ethnic cultural brand.

¹This ethnic classification established a linear and hierarchical framework and resulted in the creation of ethnic minority groups from the wide variety of cultural variants in China (Yang, 2008).

Methodology

The concept of ‘open texts’ (Eco, 1984), meaning that literary texts are open to later interpretations which can further inspire a range of other works, has been a central idea for literary critics since the 1970s. Instead of being obsessed by whether a text is faithful to its predecessor, critics are primarily concerned with how new texts inform and reflect socio-political, cultural, technological and aesthetic changes, and the interactions among them. Given the complex nature of the fast-changing ecologies of the tourism theatre sector, including economic, cultural and social values, and national and local policy, it is helpful to consider what Holt (2010) calls ‘new research strategies’ for live performance studies. By way of taking ‘the idea of the concert as media experience’ and in order to capture the ‘presence in the here and now’, ethnographically derived knowledge among audiences and producers becomes necessary for grounding theorizations of media and performance (Holt, 2010, p.256). The research here is also based on both a field study of the performance of the *Impression* and interviews with producers and managerial personnel in the theatre.

From a legendary Liu Sanjie to a class struggle Liu Sanjie

Impression Liu Sanjie is based on the musical film *Liu Sanjie*. Here the background of the legendary Liu Sanjie is reviewed with emphasis on how this regional folk legend was adapted for political use in the 1960s musical film, based on the Communist ideology of class struggle.

Liu Sanjie, a regional folk legend from the south of China, has many oral traditions. There is no authoritative version of her story as the mists of time have obscured her origins. We do not know her birthplace, death, social standing, ethnic identity or even whether she ever existed. Many places in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Guangdong, Hunan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces have their own local versions of her legend. Even her name tends to vary in both spoken and written traditions; for example, it can be Liu Sanmei, Liu Sanniang and Liu Sangu (Chen, 2016). What does appear to be consistent in all versions is that Liu Sanjie is a female figure highly skilled at singing. In modern times, Liu Sanjie is seen as a Zhuang ethnic minority legend by the masses, the Chinese government (Wang, 2009) and even Chinese academics (Ping, 2009; Li, 2009; Xiang and Bachimon, 2018).

The artistic format of *Liu Sanjie* was adapted from folk oral legend into written texts, stage works and eventually modern cinema. Liu Sanjie’s adaption reflects both political and social demands and has emerged from three historical contexts – feudal society (before 1912); the era of the Republic (1912–49); and the communist era (post-1949) – in which the legend of Liu Sanjie has been shaped to meet the requirements of specific epochal and political circumstances. When the Chinese communist party (CCP) was battling for power, it was strongly influenced by Yan’an policies on arts and literature.² Later, during the cultural revolution in China, ‘considerably less tolerance for minority autonomy and difference was allowed, with its accompanying campaigns such as class struggle, and struggle against local nationalism’ (Baranovitch, 2001, p.365). Writers connected with the party consciously incorporated and adapted the folk legends and songs of Liu Sanjie to renarrate the folk legend as a heroine involved in class struggle against the landlords (Mcdougall, 1984). For example, staged song dramas relating to Liu Sanjie were created during the early stages of the People’s Republic of China to propagate the ideology of class opposition. In the 1960s, Liu Sanjie’s class struggle narrative was adapted from live operatic performance to the screen as a musical.

²Mao’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an forum on literature and art’, from 1942, emphasize that ‘the life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art – they provide literature and art with an inexhaustible source, their only source’ (Mao, 1996) This policy ensured that folk culture was recognized and integrated into national mainstream culture. The culture of Zhuang song fairs, often repressed by Confucian culture and government officials, was no longer dismissed as heresy and was transformed by the state to become the setting for Liu Sanjie leading the villagers’ struggle against the landlord class (Chen, 2016).

In order to emphasize the Communist concept of class struggle, the musical film portrays Liu Sanjie as the ethnic Zhuang leader of class struggle standing against Mo, the villainous landlord. Liu Sanjie is portrayed as a clever and brave Zhuang ethnic minority singer who helps poor people vent their anger against the landlord classes by singing mountain songs. These mountain songs carry messages relating to oppression by the landlord class; they capture the innermost thoughts and feelings of the lower classes. Believing that the singing of mountain songs causes public unrest, Mo bans singing and closes off the mountains, triggering the scene where Liu Sanjie engages in a singing contest with Mo. Liu Sanjie easily defeats the team of landlord Mo. She is arrested by him, but eventually rescued by her lover, A Niu, and a band of peasants. Class opposition in the film is forcefully embodied in the dialogue and the songs' lyrics. For instance, Liu Sanjie insults landlord Mo by singing:

He does not plant the sesame but drinks its oil
 He does not tend the mulberry but wears silk
 He quenches his thirst on the blood and sweat of the poor
 He is the bandit chief . . .
 The landlord's heart is more poisonous than a snake
 The fishes in the pond die if he washes his hands in it
 The trees on the hill wilt when he passes by . . .

The idea for this musical film came from Chinese national artists. According to Chen Yunqian (2016), Zhuang ethnic culture in this film was interpreted and represented by Han elites and made consistent with the Chinese national and Han beauty aesthetic. The film absorbs local Zhuang ethnic cultural resources, such as throwing an embroidered ball and folksong fairs which reflect the culture of the Guangxi Zhuang ethnic people. The scriptwriter deliberately obscures Mo's ethnic identity (Chen, 2016). This overshadows inter-ethnic cultural tensions, allowing the local peasants to ignore ethnic identity. Instead, their class identity is awakened and they stand together against their common enemy, the ruling class.

Liu Sanjie's image was completely absorbed by the Chinese state's narrative. This local ethnic legend has been transcended to become a Chinese national symbol whose leading structure was based on communist notions of class opposition, and class struggle. Liu Sanjie is a prime example of the classic technique in incorporating and adapting localised cultural resources to serve as state ideological propaganda. (Chen, 2016, pp.148–50)

Liu Sanjie's reinvention in the film reflects the political contemporaneity.³ As the political propaganda suggests:

the artistic image of Liu Sanjie reflects the sentiments and aspirations of the masses, and working people, in a specific historical period. . . . it is the ideal incarnation of the masses and working people, resisting feudal rule and class exploitation. (Ge, 1960)

The film enjoyed great popularity in Asian nations, receiving the prestigious title of 'best mountain-song film'. It was shot in Yangshuo, a place with the best scenery in Guangxi. Whatever the real name of Liu Sanjie, her ethnicity, social class, wherever she was born and died, Yangshuo has undoubtedly been the place that has benefited most from Liu Sanjie branding. For example, a scene from the film is shot underneath a giant banyan tree in Yangshuo; the tree has been turned into a

³Contemporaneity describes the rationale of the ideology of the Chinese communist party to keep pace with the times (*yushijujin*) in changing domestic and global environments. Sun (2005) comments that the ideology of two necessities for leaders of the party in different generations is a direct response to contemporaneity. This interpretation of ideology springs from the realities the country and the party face (see Wang, 2019).

popular tourist attraction for Liu Sanjie's fans, who consider it something of a pilgrimage to visit the tree. In 2003, *Impression Liu Sanjie* premiered in Yangshuo. The performance reclaimed Liu Sanjie as a Guangxi regional symbol, which brought further social, cultural and economic benefits to Yangshuo.

Harmonious Liu Sanjie in *Impression Liu Sanjie*

When the cultural revolution ended and China entered the post-Mao era, a reform and opening-up policy was orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping. After the third plenary session in 1978, the main agenda of the government, as it related to state minorities, focused on economic development. At this time, class struggle, a core concept of Maoist ideology, was downplayed. In Hu Jintao's era, cultural development is consistent with building up a 'harmonious society' (Wang, 2017).⁴ Rediscovering the characteristics of ethnic minorities for the tourist market is occurring in both official media and popular culture (Du, 2015). This has led to a more tolerant acceptance of orthodox minority representation. That is to say, many ethnic performing arts were processed by Han elites for contemporary audience tastes and eventually staged as entertainment for Han people.

The *Impression Liu Sanjie* project was initiated in 1998. It was finished and premiered in 2003 in Yangshuo, in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. This project was launched by Mei Shuaiyuan, a Han elite dramatist who was a member of the Guangxi political consultative conference, and also the chief manager of the Guangxi Zhuang drama troupe and the vice director candidate of Guangxi agency for cultural affairs. Mei's idea was to place performing arts in an outdoor landscape using Guangxi's famous cultural icon, Liu Sanjie. With grants from the Guangxi government and later private capital injection, Mei invited Zhang Yimou and two other members of the Han elite, Wang Chao and Fan Yue, from Beijing to be directors.

The *Impression Liu Sanjie* is outdoor performing art, characterized by its fixed locality and daily performances for tourists. It occupies 1.654 square kilometers upon the Li River and, as a backdrop, uses 12 mountains, illuminated by lights (see Figure 1). The *Impression* fuses Liu Sanjie as cultural icon with ethnic music, local customs and traditions. According to the official website, the *Impression* shows the local people's 'authentic' rural way of life, with scenes of fishing, singing, traditional marriage ceremonies and so on – all presented as modern artistic expression. According to Wu (2010), it is a musical and visual feast using a modernist visionary technique, interpreting cultural symbols as an artistic performance. A characteristic of the show is that it uses 600 permanent performers; 450 of them local peasants⁵ (*nongmin*) and fishermen (*yumin*), working as peasants and fishermen by day and performing in the evening. Even more distinctive than the participation of local peasants is Zhang Yimou's directing, which carries his artistic imprint.⁶ The show contains seven main phases, using different colours as themes. These divide the scenes of the performance and are typical of Zhang Yimou in that colour is exploited as part of the narrative. His artistic style makes use of large-scale scenes, such as huge crowds, for visual impact (Chen, 2004; Sheppard, 2010).

The success of *Impression Liu Sanjie* is no less than that of *Liu Sanjie* the musical film. By 2018, according to the statistics from the theatre, it had been performed almost 7,000 times, had attracted over ten million viewers and generated receipts of over 1.6 billion RMB (£183 million). It is performed once or twice an evening, and sometimes thrice during the peak tourist season. In February 2016, the *Impression* broke its own record by being performed four times in one single

⁴Wang (2017) claims that, after 20 years of reform, the Chinese communist party's official ideology replaced class struggle with the concept of 'harmonious society'. Chinese academics refer to this as a 'de-classing' process (*qujiejihua*).

⁵'Peasant' is both a special identity and class in China, and a derogatory term.

⁶This is seen in *Hero*, *Curse of the Golden Flower* and *The Great Wall*. Sheppard (2010) comments that 'Zhang's *Curse of the Golden Flower* attempts to overwhelm the audience with the most massive sets in Chinese film history; and with an impressive number of extras in its crowd scenes'.



Figure 1. The natural stage illumined by lights

night, between 7 pm and nearly 1 am. It is said to be the most profitable Chinese show ever, and is regarded as a phenomenon by the cultural tourism industry in China (Lin, 2018). The media refer to the associated cultural business generated from *Impression Liu Sanjie* as ‘the ‘Zhuang ethnic Disneyland’ (Lin, 2004). The population of Yangshuo is 300,000: 100,000 rely directly or indirectly on the *Impression* for a living.

The characteristics of Yangshuo: ethnicity, tourism and culture

Impression Liu Sanjie is staged in the midst of the Yangshuo landscape, near Guilin city in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Guangxi has 12 ethnic groups. The Zhuang ethnic minority group is the original ethnic group in Guangxi.⁷ It remains the second largest ethnic population with over 15 million people, 33% of the total population. However, those of Han descent and immigrant Han people are in the majority at 61% (Kaup, 2000). There are also Dong, Miao and Yao, and other state-designated ethnic minorities, though they comprise only a small proportion of the Guangxi population. In Yangshuo town, Han people make up the majority at around 88% of the population. The rest of the town’s people are nearly all Zhuang (Yangshuo Annals Commission, 1988). Like most of China’s ethnic minorities, the minorities in Guangxi have been assimilated into Han culture, which means that they have been ‘modernised’ (Dabringhaus, 2018). Compared with Tibetans and Uyghurs, the Zhuang people and other ethnic minorities in the Guangxi autonomous region are integrated and assimilated into Chineseness.

Mountain songs have been popular in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region since dynastic times and have become part of people’s lives (McCormick and White, 2011). ‘In the process of the construction of the Zhuang as a southern Chinese nationality, various local song genres were generalized, and simplified, to become identified as Zhuang mountain songs’ (Lu, 2018, p.2). The Zhuang are famous for delighting in song and the area is promoted by the Chinese state as an ‘ocean of singing’. Yangshuo boasts sugarloaf mountains; ‘Guilin’s scenery is the best in the world, and Yangshuo’s scenery is the best in Guilin’ (Taunay, 2008). According to Abrahams (2014), ‘for a majority of Chinese tour groups, the local natural landscapes are part

⁷State multiculturalism is grounded in the political construction of ethnicity. Although around 400 groups applied for registration as a nationality in the ethnic identification initiated in the early 1950s, only 55 minority groups (Han as a majority is excluded) are recognized, based on the criteria established by Stalin in 1913. A prominent example is ethnic Zhuang, a product of political engineering (Kaup, 2000).

of the spectacle which they come to experience: they are consumed as exotic images' (p.49). Guilin is also an important gateway to China, and many Westerners, fond of the landscape of Yangshuo, choose to live there (Qiu, 2007). Yangshuo has become internationally famous and tourism has become the dominant industry.

Analysis of *Impression Liu Sanjie*

Liu Sanjie was a heroine who incited class struggle in the Mao era film. However, in *Impression Liu Sanjie*, she becomes an abstract character; her story is stripped of detail in order to emphasise a harmonious image, an impression. There is a quotation from Zhang Yimou, the director of the *Impression*, on the covers of the CD and DVD of *Impression Liu Sanjie*:

Impression . . . not only arouses people's past recollections from the film *Liu Sanjie* which they are familiar with. It also has something new to live up to with reference to the contemporary audience's beauty aesthetic. It is a combination of tradition and modernity. (Xian, 2009)

Liu Sanjie has been modernized to cater for the tastes of a modern audience, retaining only a little of the traditional Liu Sanjie from the film:

The show has only superficial links with the 1961 film or the story of Liu Sanjie. It is rather, at best, a loose and cavalier reinterpretation of the film. The creative team has chosen a selection of stereotypes that emphasise some of the 'cultural' symbols of Guangxi. (Xiang and Bachimon, 2018, p.11)

The reason why it is not simply called *Liu Sanjie* is that if it is just named *Liu Sanjie*, then it is local and authentic. If we add *Impression* then we add what we ourselves feel. We do not really want the story or plot of Liu Sanjie; it is our impression that we produce as artists. *Liu Sanjie* itself is a rustic thing; the merging of *Impression* and *Liu Sanjie* elevates it to high art. (Interview with Mei Shuaiyuan, producer of *Impression Liu Sanjie*, March 2018)

The introduction of the term 'impression', with all its implications, gives the sense that *Impression Liu Sanjie* is a production of Han elites, outsiders who project their own fantasy of Yangshuo and Liu Sanjie. The title announces that this Liu Sanjie is something abstract, contrasting with both the film *Liu Sanjie* and the many stories of the legendary Liu Sanjie. Liu Sanjie's modern treatment reflects the new political situation in the post-Mao era – the withdrawal of class struggle (de-classing) ideology. This will be demonstrated in some detail through analysis of the *Impression*'s content and interviews. It will show how Liu Sanjie, as a cultural symbol, has been dismembered, harmonized and reconstructed with local cultural traditions and multi-ethnic concepts to accommodate the new political agenda of promoting harmony. The analysis is structured around the seven phases of the show: Prelude – legend, Red impression – *duige*, Green impression – homeland, Golden impression – fishing lights, Blue impression – love ballads, Silvery impression – grand ceremony and Epilogue – singing to nature.

Prelude – legend

In the introductory scene of the *Impression*, Liu Sanjie is represented by the Dong ethnicity, Miao ethnicity and Han ethnicity – a complex multi-ethnic Liu Sanjie. Six performers introduce their own ethnic characteristics. In Figure 2, two local male peasants in the customary dress of local fishermen, complete with bamboo hats, an ethnic Dong girl and three Miao girls in their own ethnic fashions 'show the ethnic harmony of Guangxi' (Li, 2009, p.77). The Dong girl speaks in her Dong language, a young lady who is of Miao ethnicity then translates the speech into Mandarin for the benefit of the audience:



Figure 2. Han, Dong and Miao presenters (left to right)

She said her home is located in a small village sitting upstream of the Li River . . . People there like to be singing while climbing the mountain . . . The songs there are called Dong big songs.

Another Miao girl chips in:

We are of Miao ethnicity . . . Miao ladies like to use silver jewellery to decorate themselves . . . What I am wearing is my Miao silver costume reserved for celebrations and ceremonies.

Why did a performance about Liu Sanjie, a Zhuang ethnic cultural symbol, include performers from other ethnic minorities?

Impression Liu Sanjie represents a concept of the big Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. There is not only the Zhuang ethnicity in Guangxi, but also other ethnic minorities, such as the Dong ethnicity, who inhabit Sanjiang county and Hechi district within Guangxi. (Interview with Zhang Xiao, music composer of *Impression*, May 2018)

Impression Liu Sanjie as a place branding has been expanded, and Liu Sanjie is not promoted exclusively as a Zhuang ethnic symbol, but is shared by Han, Dong and Miao people, thus echoing ethnic harmony and national unity.

After brief speeches, a soft screen is raised from the water upon which a short clip of the musical film *Liu Sanjie* is projected, showing Yangshuo's natural landscapes and harmonious scenes of people happily labouring in the fields. When the projection ends, Liu Sanjie, dressed identically to the Liu Sanjie in the film, sails in a wooden boat towards the audience and sings Liu Sanjie's iconic song, *The Mountain Song is like a Spring Stream* (see Figures 3 and 4).⁸ This is a rare appearance of Liu Sanjie in person. So, the Zhuang legend Liu Sanjie is presented by a multi-ethnic cast to demonstrate ethnic harmony, devoid of any whiff of class struggle. Further multi-ethnic participation in this harmonious performance follows.

⁸This song is borrowed from the Caidiao opera *Liu Sanjie*, written by Qiao Yu and composed by Lei Zhenbang. It has circulated in China for over half a century. It is now well known nationally and can be safely classified as a Chinese folksong. The lyrics of the song are: 'This mountain song echoes between you and me. Like the spring stream . . . The mountain song penetrating a thousand waves while passing shoals.' The lyrics lack reference to class struggle, making Liu Sanjie's appearance safe and harmless. This is why the song could be taken directly from the Caidiao opera and dropped into *Impression Liu Sanjie*.



Figure 3. Liu Sanjie in the musical film



Figure 4. Liu Sanjie in *Impression Liu Sanjie*

Red impression – duige

The red impression is the second phase, and is dominated by the colour red. The Zhuang ethnicity is utilized in this phase by Zhuang ethnic young people presenting Zhuang mountain songs,⁹ in the form of a *duige* performance.¹⁰ In this performance, a group of girls are shouting the name, A Niu, a character in

⁹Mountain songs (*shan'ge*) are songs, mostly in free rhythm, sung loudly outdoors. The specific nature of the *shan'ge* genre is shown in several hundred examples collected from written sources and recordings (Zhang and Schaffrath, 1991). The style of singing attributed to Liu Sanjie is common to ethnic groups in many parts of China. In this style of antiphonal singing, two or more singers (often pairs singing against other pairs) 'talk' to each other in songs, mostly in contest to see which singers can out-sing the other side. The most popular songs of this sort in Guangxi are known as *shan'ge* (mountain songs) or Liu Sanjie songs. They are also known as Guangxi *qing'ge* (Guangxi love songs) (Mair, 1994). Zhuang ethnic mountain song is often performed at song fairs (*gexu*), a Zhuang singing festival.

¹⁰The Mandarin term for this style of performance is *duige* (antiphonal songs). *Duige* is a form of mountain song.



Figure 5. Zhuang ethnic minority people singing mountain songs



Figure 6. Local Han peasant performers

the film *Liu Sanjie*.¹¹ Along with a group of boys, they are all dressed in Zhuang ethnic costumes, singing Zhuang mountain songs (see Figure 5). After the *duige* performance, the local Han peasants and fishermen give a performance with giant red silk sheets laid out upon the water to represent their fishing nets (see Figure 6). Fishing is an important part of many local people's lives. This part of the show is an abstract manifestation of contemporary art which displays symbolism and conceptual themes. This spectacular red scene, full of Zhang Yimou's artistic imprint,¹² is performed by over 80 peasants. Zhang Xiao, the music composer, devised this modern means of expressing the local culture:

Using red silk has an implied meaning, that it is the mountain songs that make the spring stream red to echo Liu Sanjie's song, *The Mountain Song is like a Spring Stream*. The red silk also represents the fishing nets that for centuries have been cast into the river by local fishermen. (Interview with Zhang Xiao, May 2018)

¹¹A Niu is the starring role in the musical film *Liu Sanjie*. He is Liu Sanjie's lover.

¹²Red is Zhang Yimou's favourite colour and is prominent in his productions. Nowadays, it is widely recognized as Zhang Yimou Red. The colour red is the signature for most of Zhang Yimou's films: red sorghum (*Red Sorghum*), red silk (*Judou*), red lanterns (*Raise the Red Lantern*), red dress (*The Story of Qiuju*) and so on. All are sensuous and all are symbolic (Ye, 1999).

Green impression – homeland

In this phase, Dong ethnicity plays a prominent part. Green is the colour theme used to illuminate the local folk customs, and the rural way of life. Some 34 Dong ethnic female child performers demonstrate the most culturally representative symbol of the Dong, the Dong big song.¹³ For the sake of authenticity, they sing in the Dong language without any amplification system or musical accompaniment (Figure 7). The local people's lifestyle is shown through the Dong big songs, conveying a message that the Dong ethnic minority group is a considerable ethnicity in Guangxi province, sharing the Zhuang legend of Liu Sanjie in this imagined community. This is in line with government policy, which strives to show that China is a multi-ethnic nation with ethnic harmony.

Golden impression – fishing lights

This phase of the performance displays fishing lights on the Li River, regarded by the producers as a local characteristic. The scene also contains an original song from the film *Liu Sanjie, Bursting with Mountain Songs*. The lyrics of this song have been imported from the film *Liu Sanjie*, except for the verses relating to class struggle and conflict. For example, lines such as 'singing without fear of being decapitated . . . The wicked landlord raised his knife at night' have been removed leaving only the impression of harmony between humans and nature.

Flowers atop the mountain make fragrance in the foothills,
Water under the bridge cools the top of the bridge . . .
It reaches deep into the mountain and the old forests . . .
(Lyrics from *Bursting with Mountain Songs*)



Figure 7. Dong ethnic children singing Dong big songs

¹³These big songs are usually sung by a group of same-sex singers, and are composed of two vocal parts (one lower and one higher), unaccompanied and never conducted. The big song genre has been included on UNESCO's list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. With the rise of ethnic tourism and the heritage industry, big songs have become a symbol of the pan-Dong identity and are performed in different staged contexts, both domestically and internationally (Wu, 2016).



Figure 8. Fishing lights show

This performance of the golden fishing lights is simply an art show of golden lights fixed on fishing boats, providing the colour theme. Over a hundred boats rowed by fishermen and equipped with fishing lights sail along the river and several children play upon the stage, enjoying the fishing lights. A herdsman leads a water buffalo towards them, which creates a dreamlike and harmonious atmosphere (see Figure 8). Though Liu Sanjie is still not a physical presence in this phase, she is abstractly represented as an impression. In this phase, the only part which has something to do with Liu Sanjie is the song from the original recording of the film, but with the class struggle lyrics removed.

Blue impression – love ballads

This phase of *Impression Liu Sanjie* is filled with resplendent shades of blue. The daughter of the Li River (a fairy spirit performed by a Zhuang ethnic girl) is invented specifically for this performance by Zhang Yimou. She is clad in a flesh-coloured costume, giving her the appearance of being naked. She dances in a Chinese classical style, interwoven with modern choreographic elements for theatrical effect (see Figure 9), on a crescent moon floating on the river. This invented daughter of the Li River fully reflects Zhang Yimou's imprint of creating rituals (O'Meara, 2018).

In the next scene of this phase, 30 Zhuang ethnic girls wearing white bathrobes over their flesh-coloured costumes begin to disrobe, exhibiting a tradition of the Zhuang, the custom of taking a bath before marriage (see Figure 10). After the bathing scene comes a ritualized marriage ceremony performed by the daughter of the Li River, dressed in Zhuang ethnic costume, who acts as Liu Sanjie. Eventually, a Zhuang bridegroom approaches in a little wooden boat and invites the bride into the boat (see Figure 11). The scene relates to a Zhuang folk custom:

Many places in Guangxi are full of rivers and lakes. A long time ago there were no bridges, and brides had to take a boat when they went to get married. (Interview with Wang Jiaxian, manager of *Impression Liu Sanjie*, March 2018)

In this phase, the only thing related directly to the film *Liu Sanjie* is a ballad, *Tree Entwining Vine*, as the background song of the marriage scene. It was originally sung by Liu Sanjie at the end



Figure 9. The daughter of Li River dancing on the moon



Figure 10. Zhuang girls bathing before marriage

of the film when she became engaged to her lover, A Niu. However, for *Impression Liu Sanjie*, the music of the ballad was altered and rearranged in a pop music style by Meng Ke, a prominent Han composer. The only element untouched in this song is the romantic lyrics:

Let's get entangled, we two will be engaged for future marriage of 100 years.
Whoever dies at the age of 97, shall wait for the other at the gate of paradise for three years.

Why this love song was chosen for use in the *Impression* becomes clear through analysis of the lyrics. It is harmonious and romantic as it portrays Liu Sanjie's wedding. With the couple drifting far away in the boat, children's voices can be heard in the distance crying 'Liu Sanjie, Liu Sanjie' to summon an abstract and spiritual Liu Sanjie. The official *Impression* website reinforces this concept:

In *Impression Liu Sanjie*, you may not see the plot, figure and the scene you expect; however, what you can see is a series of impressions which are the source from the landscape, and people's life. She came from this land; she is Liu Sanjie. (*Impression Liu Sanjie*, 2016)



Figure 11. Zhuang wedding ceremony

Silvery impression – grand ceremony

This phase is dominated by the Miao, as one of the local ethnic minorities representing Liu Sanjie, and the colour silver. It is a catwalk in its simplicity, performed by over 200 Miao ethnic women adorned in traditional costume. They are decorated with numerous light-emitting diodes that can be turned on and off to give a twinkling effect (see Figure 12). The lights on the clothing are reflected on the water's surface. The performers walk hand in hand on the hidden stage built on the river, and take the shape of a lightning bolt. The entire line is then divided into many smaller subgroups by a simple but uniform act of choreography. This is another example of Zhang Yimou's style in its grandness, uniformity and symmetry:

Here we are trying to express that these girls are all Liu Sanjie; Liu Sanjie is a cultural symbol, and as such is ubiquitous, not just a fixed figure. (Interview with Zhang Xiao, May 2018)

In this choreographed walking show, the Miao performers join in the construction of the complex, harmonious and all-embracing Liu Sanjie. A Zhuang legend, Liu Sanjie is again dissolved in context by being shared by the Miao ethnic group in this imagined community.

Epilogue: singing to nature

In the final phase, all the performers (Han, Zhuang, Dong and Miao) come to the stage and acknowledge the applause. Peasants from five local Han villages float by on bamboo rafts and wave their village flags (Figure 13). Liu Sanjie's song, *Thanks Very Much*, has been adapted from the film to be sung in unison during this phase. In the film, Liu Sanjie sings this song to express her gratitude to people who have come to learn her rebellious mountain songs. The original lyrics also include a complaint about the ruthless exploitation by the tyrant landlord, so they convey a sense of class revolution. In the *Impression Liu Sanjie* version of the song, the lyrics have been altered. Figure 14 shows the contrast between verses kept and verses erased:



Figure 12. Miao costume walking show



Figure 13. Han peasants representing their own villages

Liu Sanjie's Chineseness: the landscape and state–minority relations

To discover why Liu Sanjie has undergone such revolutionary reinvention, the issue of Chineseness embedded in sensitive state–minority relations needs to be considered. New emphasis on ethnic nationalism overseas is reflected in the strengthening of ethnic consciousness in China. This has involved a marked increase in productions showing ethnic culture in China (Du, 2015). At the same time, tourism has given minorities new opportunities to present their ethnic identity, which can lead to a local ethnic nationalism that is still considered a possible source of separatism (Sautman, 2014). Zhuang people and other ethnic minorities in Guangxi are more integrated and assimilated into Chineseness than other ethnic groups, such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans: ‘a small movement involved some Zhuang activists asserting themselves in the hope of seceding to form an independent state by proudly asserting their nationality’ (Kaup, 2000, p.4). As a consequence, post-Mao

Thanks very much

Friends from far and wide

There is no wining and dining

But this mountain-song conveys my love...

~~Good thing in the world which we have no share in~~

~~But the only one thing that we poor can lay claim to is the mountain-song~~

~~Do not say we are poor~~

See you again

The mountain-song can fill up the vast sea...

Figure 14. The altered lyrics of *Thanks Very Much* in *Impression Liu Sanjie*

leaders have adopted a strategy of promoting ethnic and regional diversity in the service of maintaining national unity (Guo, 2008).

Impression Liu Sanjie uses local ethnic minorities as the performers; it was rare at the beginning of the twenty-first century for ethnic minority people to display their ethnicity on such a large scale. In the pre-reform era, minority representations were predominantly political. Even two decades ago, commodification of ethnic cultures remained limited (Du, 2015). Before the *Impression*, there was no regular, large-scale event which asserted ethnicity as a selling point. This was quite simply because it was feared that the display of local cultural identity would cause national disintegration (Ryabinin, 2017). The change mirrors the requirements of China's reforms at the turn of the century.

The Chinese communist party often makes use of the term 'contemporaneity' to comment on ethnic cultural and artistic works which are under, or consistent with, the guidance of the government. Liu Sanjie is no exception; the term often appears in the official media's reports of works related to the interpretation of Liu Sanjie, suggesting that Liu Sanjie's recreation is consistent with current epochal characteristics. The official state-run press agency, Xinhua News, has reported that the landscape of Guilin and Liu Sanjie's folksongs, coupled with Zhang Yimou and other artists' creations, endow it with a direct response to contemporaneity (Ding, 2018). The Party's official outlet, the *People's Daily*, commented:

[*Impression Liu Sanjie*] responds to the trend of 'contemporaneity', and shows the concentrated reflection of the mutual flourishing and development of Guangxi's multi-ethnic culture. They are of open, inclusive, progressive Guangxi ethnic groups that feature unity and mutual aid . . . making contributions to maintain national unity and solidarity, and the social stability of the border area . . . to build up Guangxi into our model of maintaining national solidarity, model of maintaining unity, and model of maintaining stability, which is the lively embodiment of the Chinese nation's strong cohesion . . . (Wang, 2009)

'Chineseness' has been constantly challenged by Chun (1996): 'the usage of ethnicity as a marker of culture, which thus, in turn, serves as a marker of identity, is found to be highly problematic' (p.131). Additionally, Chow (1998) considers that the very idea of Chineseness as 'a monolithic given bound ultimately to mainland China' is a problem. As Han Chineseness is the dominant Chineseness,

the appropriation of minority cultures is an integral part of asserting Chineseness. This involves a substantial reinforcement of both the cultural and the political treatment of ethnicity, especially as this is compatible with Xi Jinping's 'mainstream theme' (*zhuxuanlv*). The aim is to strengthen a cohesive and collective sense of Chineseness in order to achieve 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (i.e., the China dream). Therefore, Chineseness is associated with a focus on the power relations manifest in the state-Han elite reinvention of ethnic minority culture. Reinvention or innovation is generally seen as a 'good thing', but it is also both risky and troublesome, as shown by the controversy surrounding *Impression Liu Sanjie*. When the *Impression* premiered, the local populace was antagonistic; many local travel agencies tried to boycott the performance and refused to sell tickets:

From the very beginning, the controversy was already there. The audiences expect to see Liu Sanjie and her plot in the film which was made in the 1960s. People asked: What the fuck is this? When I invited the local tour agencies to watch it, they said: Why do you not use a superstar? Who will pay for a show performed by a flock of peasants? Even the comment from culture and art circles was negative: Where is the story? What is it trying to tell? (Interview with Mei Shuaiyuan, producer of *Impression Liu Sanjie*, March 2018)

While Liu Sanjie continues to serve as a cultural symbol to characterize Yangshuo and the entire Guangxi region, she is nevertheless still reinterpreted by Han Chinese artists. They present ethnic culture through their idea of Chineseness as a display for the spectators – mostly domestic Han tourists. This is a form of appropriation. The modern narrative of Liu Sanjie has to deal with two conflicting issues in production and content. Production must be more Han, it must conform to state policies and modern Han aesthetics where ethnic culture relies on Han elites for improvement. But content must be contra-Han in order to be more ethnic, pastoral, poetic, feminine and harmonious. The trade-off is to have just enough difference and exoticness to be ethnic, but not enough to seem backward. The local Guangxi culture was therefore reconstructed somewhere in between the modern and the traditional, and in between local and national.

Furthermore, cultural and aesthetic Chineseness is also highly inscribed in this ethnic-cultural production. The success of this stage performance indicates a critical turn from watching films in regular cinemas to the mass consumption of visual and audio outdoor spectacles, and has allowed the rise of visual mountain-water aesthetics. Landscape performances take place in a dozen of China's most iconic tourist spots, and are collectively named the *Impression* series. Thus, to combine tourism and artistic performance, a special kind of mountain-water theatre (*shanshui juchang*) was created. In order to stamp mountain-water on Liu Sanjie, the producer of *Impression Liu Sanjie* draws a distinction between China and the West by connecting *Impression Liu Sanjie* with the beauty aesthetic of traditional Chinese *xieyi* painting:¹⁴

As Chinese, we embrace nature more. Our old scholars' mountain-water painting contains what the scholars and sages said about abandonment to mountain water. If you look at Chinese traditional painting, it is *xieyi*, their emotions expressed in nature, so it is opposite to Western realism and not as realistic as landscape paintings in the West. . . . This mountain water is not a physical mountain and water, but instead is people's internal emotion and exploration into the state of harmony between humans and nature. (Interview with Mei Shuaiyuan, producer of *Impression Liu Sanjie*, March 2018)

The creators of *Impression Liu Sanjie* have mobilized a quintessential Chinese spirit, scene, essence and tradition to use mountain-water culture 'as a safe representational tactic' (Chao, 2019, p.321). They are trying to evoke the relationship between this real landscape and the imagined landscape familiar to every Chinese, as well as non-Chinese. In modern Chinese culture, anything worthy of the name 'aesthetic experience' has in one way or another been infected by politics

¹⁴*Xieyi* is a form of traditional Chinese painting, often translated as imaginative or suggestive (Quah, 2004).

(Wang, 1997; Wang and Meng, 2008). The landscape is linked to state politics in terms of policy and ideology to promote ethnic diversity, and also to add Chinese national characteristics as a means of expressing nationhood. The negative effect of the entanglement between aesthetics and politics is to consolidate the established power of an authoritarian regime (Wang and Meng, 2008). Harmony between humans and nature resonates with the state's ideology of building a harmonious society – the harmonies between humans and nature, between ethnic minorities and the Han-dominated state, and between China and the world all become entwined.

Impression Liu Sanjie also shows that the state will accept diversity if ethnic differences are marketized, embedded rhetorically and made visually prominent and abstract. This is safe ethnic identity, ethnic identity reduced to a spectacle. It strikes a balance by obscuring the potential tensions between local ethnic identity and Chinese national identity: just enough difference and exoticism to attract tourists, but not enough to kindle and ignite separatism. In other words, when this Liu Sanjie is performed by the local ethnic minority people, and is consumed by Han Chinese and international tourists, *Impression Liu Sanjie* is promoted as not only a Guangxi brand, but also a Chinese national brand: 'An advertisement [for *Impression Liu Sanjie*] appears on the Nasdaq's headquarters in Times Square, New York, which exhibits China's mountain-water culture to the world' (Yang, 2013). In this form, *Impression Liu Sanjie* can be exploited as Chinese soft power to increase Chinese cultural pride through the agency of both Chinese and global media.

Zhang Yimou's background as a government-designated director and a Chinese cultural ambassador projecting Chineseness globally is one reason why he was chosen to produce the 'Beijing Olympic extravaganza, presenting a unified Chineseness' (Lee and Yoon, 2017). Zhang's image appears ostentatiously in the performance of *Impression Liu Sanjie* not only to increase brand value in the tourist market, but also to demonstrate a united Chineseness. So it is with Zhang Yimou's signature colour effects, spectacular scenes and uniformity in the performers' movements, which can be deemed very Chinese. There is considerable popular interest in the majesty and grandeur that marks classical Chinese aesthetics, particularly when these relate to the huge sway and spectacular array of political rule (Li and Liu, 1987; Wang, 1997).

The Chineseness of *Impression Liu Sanjie* is also embodied in its uniform choreography – a communist collectivism. The image of numerous people in collective unison, and the Confucian ideal of harmony between people and authority are valued by many authoritarian regimes. Lee and Yoon (2017) have compared the Olympic opening ceremonies of Beijing 2008 and London 2012:

Chineseness, as devised by the authorities in Beijing 2008 is a linear and orderly progress, a well-disciplined mass performance and collective self-effacement. Britishness, as reflected in London 2012, is a chaotic expression, a free and individual expression. (Lee and Yoon, 2017, p.964)

Disciplining of troops or bringing minorities into line is evident in such large-scale displays. This is where we locate Chineseness as 'stateness', which in turn translates into nationalism. Such magnificent visual impact is also woven into the Liu Sanjie narrative to create a final section focusing on the sublime.

Visual spectacle: Liu Sanjie's sublime

The sublime is often related to the spectacle (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Redmond, 2017). It produces visual images, sounds and movements so powerful that they captivate our senses and overwhelm our intellect and rational faculty (Deleuze and Guattari, 1997).¹⁵ To a large extent, *Impression Liu Sanjie* is an art entertainment characterized by visual and auditory experiences punctuated by state-of-the-art special effects.

¹⁵I am indebted to Jenifer Chao for this idea.

Impression Liu Sanjie is no more than a ‘dazzling sound and lighting show; this form of creative technique is of course very reductive and produces an illusion, that of a spirit of place, which in turn produces an instant and ephemeral aesthetic impression’ (Xiang and Bachimon, 2018, pp.11–14). Zhang Yimou calls the *Impression* ‘a creation which completely breaks the traditional form’ (Li, 2009, p.86). The erasure of the Liu Sanjie plot is also consistent with Zhang Yimou’s artistic style, often criticized for allowing the form to outweigh content. According to Chen (2004), his later films are visually and aesthetically beautiful, and spectacular, but the plot is weak. The other director, Wang Chaoge, considered one of the most innovative stage directors in China, is also willing to abandon the Liu Sanjie storyline:

I request my work be innovative and every minute and second has to be overturned. (Wang Chaoge as quoted in Ding, 2018)

Impression Liu Sanjie is not meant to just follow the style of a traditional performance; I do not want to have something already existing. (Wang Chaoge as quoted in Hu, 2012)

The *Impression* relies more on music, dance, and song than on acting ability:

When you hear about Liu Sanjie, you must have thought that the performance should have had A Niu and lord Mo; and how evil it was of lord Mo to treat Liu Sanjie so cruelly, and also how the love between A Niu and Liu Sanjie is romantic. However, I do not portray the story as a narrative. All you will see is two buffaloes walking around, a group of minority people singing, and the fishers with lights on their fishing boats. There is no bad man, and it is not about the story; it is about a poetic feeling and a gasp in admiration. (Zhang, 2016)

It is only natural to anticipate the image and plot of Liu Sanjie from the film, but the expectation confuses the *Impression Liu Sanjie* audience. Most interviewees were certainly confused:

I do not understand art, this kind of thing. One hundred percent of my clients who are tourists say they are confused about what *Impression Liu Sanjie* is trying to show. (Yangshou taxi driver, March 2018)

Impression Liu Sanjie is no more than visual entertainment ‘largely dependent on mountain water, . . . letting the audiences feel and experience by themselves’ (Mei Shuaiyuan as quoted in Hu, 2012). When tourists visit the mountain-water scenes of rural China, they inevitably experience a sense of the sublime; the beauty and majesty of the scene (perception and bodily experiences) overwhelms their rational thinking (mind and intellect). In *Impression Liu Sanjie*, the scenes provide a strong visual shock. This is how spectacles work – on the level of effect and not always on the level of logic and understanding.

The reframing of the peasants, a class identity often associated with raw, barbaric iconology, also deserves consideration. The peasants are orchestrated in the landscape, part of a grand narrative of mountain-water, which seems to suggest a dissonance. However, the juxtaposition fulfils the producer’s boldness and creativity. This is evident in her claim that the *Impression* is advanced art: ‘I put peasants on the river, and I let them perform their own culture; I call this art’ (Wang, 2015).

The ‘sublime’ is also related to aesthetic issues within the ideological framework constructed by the Chinese communist party.

The sublime embodies the abstract telos of history, feeding the people with daunting and awe-inspiring figures to legitimise its political rule and ideological hegemony. Thus, the party state needs to recruit faithful subjects to forge a national and political identity. (Wang, 1997)

China’s sublime is typically regarded as masculine – such lofty activities as revolution and nation-building require the feminine to be sublimated. (Kraus, 1999, p.546)

Yet, the subject cannot always remain snug within an established identity:

From a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country to a strong industrialized nation state, the party state needs subjects unafraid of destroying their old identity to forge a new one in order to produce more and more heroes of revolution and subjects of the state . . . Aesthetic sublime in particular justifies and legitimates the state. (Wang, 1997, pp.191–2)

The mythical figure of Liu Sanjie reflects such a sublime; it is, in Wang's words, the aestheticization of the communist party's ideology of history as an inevitable and irresistible dialectical progression from communism to socialism with Chinese characteristics. Liu Sanjie, as depicted in the *Impression*, is still conceived within a political framework, though there is no hint of Mao-era class opposition, and there is less political messaging than was seen in the film *Liu Sanjie*. The class struggle heroine with her rebellious songs has been tamed and harmonized in the *Impression*. She becomes a spiritual bond in Yangshuo's mountain-water scenery where different ethnic groups live together harmoniously. Without any well-defined plot, she is just an image, a revolutionary interpretation of Liu Sanjie, from an artistic perspective. The *Impression* indicates that the Chinese communist party, which once incited class revolution, has been transformed into a party that safeguards stability by building a unified, stable and harmonious society.

None of China's legendary figures (such as Mulan, Monkey King and Nezha) have been reinvented to the extent that Liu Sanjie has been. The earlier versions of Liu Sanjie (in folk oral transmission and literature) at least have a storyline. Liu Sanjie, in ethereal and abstract form in the *Impression*, blended into landscape, space and time, is less recognizable than any former adaptation. This demonstrates the extravagant political exploitation of culture. The abstract, impressionistic and invisible Liu Sanjie suits contemporary requirements.

This contemporary way of presenting Liu Sanjie can also be observed in the film *A Singing Fairy* (literally translated as *Searching for Liu Sanjie*), made in 2010, which is a cooperation between a state-owned film enterprise and Guangxi's local government. This romantic film tells a story about a Chinese-American musician named Wei (acted by famous Taiwanese actor Su Youpeng), who went to Guangxi to search for Liu Sanjie. In his pilgrimage, he encounters and falls in love with a tour guide named Tiantian Liu (acted by Chinese mainland actress Huang Shengyi), who leads him to Zhuang, Yao, Miao, Dong and Jing ethnic villages in Guangxi to search for his Liu Sanjie. Liu Sanjie never appears, but instead is transformed into displays of ethnic folk customs, singing and dance traditions performed by these ethnic groups which welcome Wei as a distinguished guest. Again, Liu Sanjie is not a physical figure, but is diffused in Guangxi's cultural ecology, ingrained in the multi-ethnic peoples of Guangxi. That the mainland government appointed a Taiwanese actor to search for Liu Sanjie also has political connotations, promoting pan-Chineseness to gloss over geopolitical tensions over Taiwan.

Liu Sanjie is rooted in folk culture, closely tied to the beauty aesthetic and lives of the people, while containing vitality for politicized literary work (Chen, 2016). Indeed, in 2018, Liu Sanjie was revised in the Western opera format and performed in Beijing under the slogan 'transmission of traditions, re-construction of classics' (Tang, 2018). This operatic narrative of Liu Sanjie is designed to interact with Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign. In the Zhuang legend, Liu Sanjie was faced with the conspiracy of the landlord and corrupt local government. This time, however, she is rescued by a historical character, the king of Jingjiang (*jingjiangwang*), who punished the evil lord Mo. There is also a stage drama called the *New Liu Sanjie*, created by the Guangxi theatre and engaging with Xi Jinping's political campaign, the 'fight against poverty by 2020'. In this performance, Liu Sanjie is cast as a wealthy online celebrity (*wanghong*¹⁶), running many businesses and inspiring the rural people to strive for a comfortable life.

The 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) contrasts with what Beiner (2007) calls 'the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions'. Beiner proposes a more accurate term, the

¹⁶The *wanghong* economy is the nascent Chinese digital economy based on influencer marketing in social media (Qian, 2016). *Wanghong* ('internet fame') is the Chinese term for an internet celebrity.

‘reinvention of tradition’. By asserting that ‘invention entails assemblage, supplementation, and rearrangement of cultural practices so that traditions can be preserved, invented, and reconstructed’, Beiner (2007, p.272) argues that reinvention of tradition signifies ‘a creative process involving renewal, reinterpretation and revision’. Though China no longer needs class revolution, Liu Sanjie, acting as a reinvention of tradition, is adaptable to the prevailing political contemporaneity, thus making her a constantly reinvented classical icon.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the new version of Liu Sanjie, which has evolved and been adapted to political and socio-economic changes. It serves the state’s governance requirements, specifically to facilitate the imagined community through promoting harmony among ethnic groups and a united Chineseness. The main strategy is to erase the class discourse in the new version of the cultural performance. The erasure of the class struggle discourse has been practised since the 1980s and is illustrated in various adaptations of the red classics (Gong, 2017). The idea of ethnic harmony has been high on the agenda of the Chinese communist party since the early days of the regime.

Impression Liu Sanjie is about the spectacularization of a landscape, not just any landscape, but the quintessential Chinese landscape. The interposition of the mountain-water concept, based on Confucian harmony between human and nature, also makes the *Impression* a complex case. The mountain-water genre, theme and aesthetics are intimately linked to Chineseness (however one defines it) and Chinese national traditions. The beauty aesthetic of Chineseness serves as a political instrument to moderate ethnic minority differences while retaining its hierarchical structure between state-Han elites and ethnic minority groups through formative performance.

This paper focuses on state–minority relations. From the musical film, *Liu Sanjie*, to the landscape performing art, *Impression Liu Sanjie*, state-Han domination is evident. This has reinvented a Zhuang ethnic tradition, the classical Liu Sanjie. Liu Sanjie has thus been recreated between the traditional and modern, classical and contemporary, as well as the local and national genres. *Impression Liu Sanjie* does not promote merely Chinese nationalism but also ethnic cultural pride. The Chinese communist party must allow just enough difference and exoticism to attract tourists, but not enough to kindle and enflame separatism. Liu Sanjie has allowed both the nation state and the ethnic locality to promote their own versions of cultural branding, which is a very safe form of ethnic identity.

In *Impression Liu Sanjie*, Liu Sanjie sings her song in the boat and wafts gently from the dark of the river towards the audience; then, after her wedding, the performers loudly call her name. At the end of the show, she is somewhere among the hundreds of Miao women. At this point, Liu Sanjie represents everybody, whether Zhuang, Miao, Han or Dong. Such a deliberate interpretation of Liu Sanjie carries the implication that Liu Sanjie is omnipresent. In other words, Liu Sanjie, though rooted in the native cultural ecology, represents a much larger, imagined community, a shared culture of the entire Guangxi region where Han and ethnic minorities peacefully cohabit. Liu Sanjie has metamorphosed from the physical figure of the Liu Sanjie film of the 1960s into a metaphysical concept dissolved in Guangxi’s cultural diversity to propagate a united and harmonious Chineseness.

The *Impression* is performed by ethnic groups to supplement their income. The show is also core to a vibrant tourist economy. Thus, the interpretation of Liu Sanjie takes place within a political economy in which tourism is an essential part of the strategy for China’s market-oriented reform. Milking the myth for political purposes and commercial ventures is not unknown in the adaptation of artworks (Macdonald, 2016). It is common for a timeless legend to be adapted to suit the timeliness of the era. What is surprising here is the abstract nature of the adaptation, which is not just a rewrite of the 1960s film. Rather, it compounds bold artistic, ethnic, nationalistic, commercial and tourist enterprise themes. This is a more complete and innovative breakthrough than has been seen

with other reinterpreted Chinese historical legends, which is why the paper refers to Liu Sanjie's sublime, manifesting in drama the cultural exploitation in Chinese politics. Though China is not in the tumultuous era of pan-politicization seen under Mao, Liu Sanjie can still be ideologically aestheticized to serve as a 'sublime figure of history' (Wang, 1997). Consequently, we see Liu Sanjie as a reinvented tradition, transiting from a class revolution to an art revolution which continues to demonstrate China's contemporaneity.

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