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## Culture Paves the Way, Economics Comes to Sing the Opera The Rhetoric of Chinese Folk Duets and Global Joint Ventures

After economic decentralization policies were introduced in China during the late 1970s, the promotion of provincial cultural identities became a means to compete for comparative advantage to attract investment. Local cultural practices, often framed as uniquely Chinese, were sometimes portrayed as “windows” and “bridges” that would bring global attention to a locality. This article examines northern Shaanxi Province’s use of song and dance to facilitate a joint project between the largest coal company in China and The Dow Chemical Company. Focusing on rhetoric surrounding a 2008 performance by the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe at a “Far East Meets West” event in Dow’s global headquarters in Midland, Michigan, and reciprocal, Dow-funded performances by the U.S. National Symphony Orchestra the following year in China, I explore the symbolic role of reciprocal performances amid the forging of relationships between different localities in a global age.

KEYWORDS: folk songs—northern Shaanxi—Chineseness—cultural exchange—*guanxi*—gift exchange—provincial identity

**I**N AN ERA of global capitalism, negotiations between localities, multinational corporations, regions, and countries involve contact between distant places and peoples, and one way of bringing them together is through cultural exchange.\* This article looks at the rhetoric leading up to and surrounding an exchange of performances in the U.S. and China during negotiations for a joint venture between the Shenhua Group,<sup>1</sup> China's largest coal company, and The Dow Chemical Company, a U.S.-based multinational chemical corporation. In 2008, the site of the proposed venture, Yulin Prefecture, Shaanxi Province, sent the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe to perform at a "Far East Meets West" event in Midland, Michigan, Dow's global headquarters. Dow later reciprocated by funding the U.S. National Symphony Orchestra's 2009 Asia Tour, with performances in key cities in China. This exchange of performances amid the development of an economic partnership in many ways paralleled the use of gift exchange in the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. At the same time, the rhetoric surrounding the gift—a *regional* song and dance troupe's performance was described as offering an authentic *Chineseness*—ties in to recent trends in provincial self-promotion that blur the line between the local and the national.

In Marcel Mauss's classic work *The Gift*, he suggests that suggests that individuals develop relationships via three interlocking obligations: "to give," "to receive," and "to repay" (MAUSS 1966, 10–11). In the Chinese context, the reciprocal performances examined here can be thought of as "ritual object[s]"—Mayfair Yang's literal translation of the Chinese word for "gift" (*liwu* 礼物)—through which "one enacts a 'ritualized relationship'" (YANG 1994, 70). Yang suggests that "the ethics of gift-giving are extended to all human relationships," since gifts "require reciprocity, and so do relationships" (YANG 1994, 70). In the cultural exchange discussed here, the entities exchanging gifts were not individuals, but rather localities, governments, and corporations. Seen through the lens of Mauss and Yang, the presentation of a song and dance troupe performance from one place to another could be thought of as an attempt to establish a relationship between the two. At the same time, the receiving of the performance by the second locality and the arrangement of a reciprocal performance at a later date could be understood—like reciprocated gifts—as expressing a sense of mutual goodwill and a desire to affirm and strengthen that relationship.

When viewed as "ritual objects" (that is, gifts) in the negotiation of relations, these reciprocal performances bear certain similarities to "ritual objects" found

in another type of social “ritual” discussed by Mayfair Yang—banquets (YANG 1994, 70). In Eric Shepherd’s study on Shandong banquet culture, he suggests that in “the banquet context, *performance* reduces the gaps that exist between participants by integrating them into the group at the same time that it differentiates individual performers—when they perform, individuals contribute to the group atmosphere while displaying their unique styles and abilities” (SHEPHERD 2005, 28–29, emphasis added). It seems that a similar sort of dual objective—fusing together group integration with the display of unique individuality—was at play in the 2008 Midland and 2009 Asia Tour performances. While the goal of the exchange was to bring together “groups” at various levels—sharing “Chinese” culture with midwesterners and “American” culture with residents of Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi’an; bringing together Shenhua and Dow, Yulin and Midland, China and the U.S.—at the same time, the uniqueness of Yulin and Dow were emphasized through the performances and the rhetoric surrounding them. Just as the banquet participants in Shepherd’s study perform songs, jokes, and poems to show devotion to the group through the vulnerability of performance while at the same time expressing their uniqueness in that group, the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe’s Midland performance offered a cross-cultural presentation of “Chinese” tradition that simultaneously highlighted the unique individuality of Yulin within the larger group atmosphere. Thus, I suggest, through performances and the narratives that surround them, both individuals at a banquet and localities arranging a joint venture attempt to negotiate and renegotiate their relationships and assert themselves as unique members of new mergers.

In what follows, I begin by looking at some of the thinking behind Yulin Prefecture’s decision to use culture to pave the way for economic development, as related by one of the region’s star performers.<sup>2</sup> This sets the stage for my discussion of rhetoric surrounding the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe’s performance in Midland, Michigan, in 2008 and the reciprocal set of performances by the U.S. National Symphony Orchestra in China in 2009. While the overall purpose of these reciprocal performances was to establish relations between the parties involved, given the size of the joint venture being negotiated, multiple players felt compelled to comment on the events, and each comment reveals distinct attempts by those players to position themselves in relation to the cultural exchange as a whole.

Although the case study discussed in this article relates to one locality in China, the rhetoric involved—using the exchange of “Chinese” culture to facilitate economic relationships—echoes many recent efforts by regions in China to advertise themselves both nationally and globally. My discussion will focus less on the events themselves, and more on how the various parties involved talked about those events. While it is beyond the scope of this article to show a direct connection between these cultural performances and the economic success enjoyed by Yulin in the following years, I argue that several recent events staged for the promotion of Yulin seem to have been driven by such rhetoric. Furthermore, Yulin’s later economic success—it became known as “China’s Kuwait” at one point—was used by some to validate the narrative of culture paving the way for economics (XINHUA 2012).



FIGURE I. Wang Xiangrong, “King of Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs.” Photo by author.

#### CULTURE PAVES THE WAY

After economic decentralization policies were introduced along with market reform in China during the late 1970s, each province began to compete for comparative advantage to attract investment, and individual provinces found the need to promote provincial cultural identities (GOODMAN 1994, 4–5, 17; OAKES 2000, 674). With the expansion of global capitalism, the presentation of unique local cultures played a key role in bolstering provincial images (OAKES 2000). During the early 1980s, Yulin Prefecture, located in northern Shaanxi Province, decided to use folk culture to advertise itself through the establishment of the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe (*Yulin minjian yishu tuan* 榆林民间艺术团).<sup>3</sup> One of its star performers, the professional folk singer now known as the “Folk Song King of Western China” and the “King of Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs,” Wang Xiangrong 王向荣 (b. 1952) (FIGURE I), described Yulin’s use of northern Shaanxi folk songs as a “window” (*chuangkou* 窗口) through which other places could become familiar with the region.<sup>4</sup>

According to Wang,

First, you would become familiar with northern Shaanxi folk songs. Through a means of culture, [the people promoting Yulin] would first get close to you and set up an exchange. Then, they would get you to learn more about Yulin, and finally about Yulin’s economy. The slogan at the time was “culture paves the way, economics comes to sing the opera” (*wenhua pulu, jingji changxi*). That means that culture first paves the road nice and good, and then the people who

get things done, that is, the economic ... it means that culture serves as a kind of medium, yes, a weapon for exchange. First, it would be through song and dance. We would go to your Shanghai or your Xi'an, or Yunnan or Beijing. In order to advertise the region of Yulin, first we would bring songs and dances from Yulin. After that ... things from Yulin would gradually become more familiar and known by people in society, and the initial stages of this market would be set up.

先了解陕北民歌，先通过文化和你接近交流，然后让你了解榆林，然后了解榆林的经济，然后，当时的口号就说“文化铺路，经济唱戏”。唉，就是说文化把路铺好，然后真正搞事的，就是经济 ... 等于是文化作为一个媒体，嗯，作为一个交流的一个武器。嗯，首先就是通过歌呀舞呀，到你上海，或者是到你西安，或者到这个云南，到北京，就说为了宣传榆林这块儿地，那么，首先带着这个榆林的歌和舞。那么，这样以后 ... 等于榆林的东西在社会上在逐步被人们所了解和认识啦，才有了这个初步的市场。

The phrase “culture paves the way, economics comes to sing the opera” resonates with similar slogans popular across China, such as “trade (or economy) performing on a stage built by culture (*wenhua datai, jingmao changxi*)” (LI 2013, 86). Certain provinces have particular versions of this type of slogan based on local industries. For example, Guizhou Province, which relies more heavily on tourism, has used the phrase “trade performing on a stage built by tourism” (*lüyou datai, jingji changxi* 旅游搭台, 经济唱戏; OAKES 2000, 680). In addition, Wang’s use of the term “window” (*chuangkou*) to describe the capacity of folk songs to place his region on the world’s mental map is not unique. The use of terms like “window” and “bridge” are found elsewhere in recent discourse: initial joint ventures in areas of interior China have been referred to as “window enterprises,” in that they highlight investment possibilities in a local area and may attract additional business ventures in the future (OAKES 1999, 45). A martial arts novel by the famous writer Jin Yong set in Dali 大理, Yunnan Province, has been described as a “bridge” bringing outside interest to that city, one that eventually led to the transformation of the place itself (NOTAR 2006, 4). Beth Notar cites a Chinese scholar who compared the novel “to a *spatial and temporal bridge*, between Dali and the outside, the local and the global, the underdeveloped and the economically developed,” saying that this “literary text would allow the place and people of Dali to cross over into prosperity” (NOTAR 2006, 4, emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

Like Yulin, many places in China have established song and dance troupes in order to advertise their localities.<sup>6</sup> The use of cultural performances to represent places naturally involves choices in repertoire, which are tied, in turn, to how the performing group wishes to present itself to a particular audience—be it in China or abroad.<sup>7</sup> When the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe performs in China, it presents a region-representing repertoire of songs that tie its locality to the national landscape.<sup>8</sup> In China, Wang Xiangrong performs pieces such as “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” (“Tianxia huanghe jiushijiu dao wan” 天下黄河九十九道湾) and “The East Is Red” (“Dongfang hong” 东方红), which evoke a sense of Chinese history and nationalism, while at the same time highlighting northern Shaanxi Province within that broader appeal to tradition (FIGURE 2).

However, when performing abroad, Wang said that he avoids singing songs with nationalistic symbols that might drive away foreign audiences, since the



FIGURE 2. Wang Xiangrong performing “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” at a televised Chinese New Year gala in central Shaanxi Province, 2012 (photo by author).

goal of such artistic exchanges is to bring people together. Instead, he often uses songs related to the theme of love—something that he views as fundamental to all cultures. In particular, he likes to perform songs from the “two-person opera” (*errentai* 二人台) genre popular at local temple fairs in his youth—songs that he characterizes as pure and folksy in their representation of love between men and women. Thus, in the 2008 Midland concert discussed below, Wang chose to perform a folk operatic duet called “The Flowers Bloom in May” (“Wuyue sanhua” 五月散花).<sup>9</sup> Featuring riddles about the types of flower that bloom in each month, Wang described this song as both locally authentic and imbued with the universally relatable theme of love.<sup>10</sup> One might add that an antiphonal song about love and courtship between a man and woman offered interesting parallels with the “courtship” of the joint venture at hand.

#### CULTURE AS A BRIDGE: YULIN, DOW, AND THE “HUMAN ELEMENT”

In early 2008, during the process of setting up a joint coal-to-chemicals project with the Shenhua Group in Yulin Prefecture, The Dow Chemical Company funded a four-month celebration of China’s rich cultural heritage in Midland, Michigan—Dow’s global headquarters—entitled “*A Celebration of China: Far East Meets West*.<sup>11</sup> This included several performances and an exhibit of two terra-cotta warriors and other ancient relics on loan from Shaanxi Province. The exhibit, entitled “Timeless Warriors and Relics: 1500 Years of Ancient China” in English and “Yellow River Culture” (*Huanghe wenhua* 黄河文化) in Chinese, was put on display at the Alden B. Dow Museum of Science and Art, located at the Midland

Center for the Arts, from 20 January 2008 to 13 April 2008 (Dow 2008a). Dow's CEO Andrew Liveris and his wife Paula hosted the opening celebration for the exhibit, with the deputy director of the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau, Zhang Wen, as their honored guest (Dow 2008c). The exhibition of Chinese relics was sponsored by the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau, the Museum of Emperor Qin Shihuang's Terracotta Warriors and Horses, the Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, the Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Promotion Center, The Dow Chemical Company, Northwest Airlines, Dow Corning Corporation, McKay Press, and local television and media (MCFTA 2008b). Northwest Airlines funded transportation costs for the forty-member Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, co-sponsoring the festival with its key corporate client, Dow Chemical (Dow 2008c).<sup>12</sup>

The festival's performance series included both Chinese and Western works. The Midland Symphony Orchestra held a concert of Verdi, Mozart, and Dvorak featuring two Chinese pianists, Angela Cheng and Alvin Chow (Dow 2008b). The Yulin Folk Arts Troupe performed at several regional public schools, leading up to "a special ticketed public performance" on 26 March 2008 (MCFTA 2008b). The various descriptions of the festival—the advertisement for the final performance, a speech given by a Yulin official during the closing ceremony, and articles produced by Dow—all pointed to the theme of culture as a bridge that brings people together, while at the same time emphasizing the unique resources that Yulin and Dow each brought to the table.

The final performance, entitled "Reflections of the Yellow River" in English and "Winds of the Yellow River: Sentiments of the Yellow Earth" (Ch. "Huanghe feng: Huangtu qing" 黄河风 • 黄土情),<sup>13</sup> was advertised on the venue's website as follows: "The Yulin Folk Art Troupe from the Chinese Province of Shaanxi will transport you to a land of beauty and enchantment through 'Reflections of the Yellow River,' a series of traditional Chinese performances featuring dance, acrobatics, and music" (MCFTA 2008a, emphasis added). Here, the performance was characterized as a bridge to the exotic, one that would "transport you to a land of beauty and enchantment"—it would take you to "China." Though performed by a *regional* song and dance troupe, the troupe's performances were billed as both "traditional" and "Chinese," suggesting that they were nationally representative and rooted in a long history of Chinese culture. Such notions of "Chineseness" and "tradition" are broad, familiar-sounding terms perhaps intended to facilitate audience engagement, since most Midwesterners would be unfamiliar with place names like Yulin and Shaanxi. While set in the context of bringing people together through cultural exchange, this advertisement also presented Chinese culture as a unique resource that the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe could provide.

This type of claim to Chineseness ties into the history of provincial attempts at self-promotion. According to Tim Oakes, "promoting Chineseness is part of a strategy whereby local elites attempt to promote a cultural identity attractive to the 'flexible accumulation' of global capitalism" (OAKES 2000, 669). Oakes suggests that this phenomenon of local claims to Chineseness is especially common in provinces "located in China's interior, ... relatively poor, with economies primarily dependent on agriculture and natural resource extraction" (OAKES 2000,

675, emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> He also suggests that the “identity-constructions offered ... in each of these provinces claim a foundation on ancient, unique, and attractive regional cultures that, at the same time, can be called upon to spur a dynamic, innovative entrepreneurialism and sense of self-confidence” (OAKES 2000, 675). This rhetoric of an “ancient, unique, and attractive regional culture” serving as a resource for “dynamic, innovative entrepreneurialism” was particularly evident in a speech given by the party secretary of the Yulin Municipal Party Committee and director of the Yulin Municipal People’s Congress Standing Committee, Li Jinzhu 李金柱, during the Yulin Folk Art Troupe’s performance in Midland.

With officials from Dow and Northwest Airlines in attendance, Li framed the Midland performance within the long history of U.S.-China relations—suggesting that the performance was representative of China—at the same time that he focused attention on Yulin’s unique cultural and natural resources and its aspirations to use the relationship with Dow as a springboard for future collaborations with the American business community. Here is an excerpt of the speech, translated from an article in the *Yulin Daily*:

China and the U.S.A. are separated by vast oceans and have completely different historical backgrounds and social systems. However, for a long time, the people of these two countries have held deep feelings of mutual interest and friendship. *Yulin is situated in the northern part of Shaanxi. In addition to having a long history and a deep-seated culture, it also possesses abundant mineral products, energy sources, tourism and human resources, and is a national-level energy and chemical engineering base.* Our collaboration with The Dow Chemical Company has already drawn back the curtain, and we look forward to having more interest and participation from American businesses. At the same time, we also hope to develop a wide-ranging exchange with all walks of life in the U.S.

...[C]ulture is a *window* that reflects a nation’s historical heritage and inner, spiritual world. It is also the best *bridge* for promoting mutual understanding between different peoples and communicating the heart and soul of the people. Our presentation today for everyone, “Winds of the Yellow River: Sentiments of the Yellow Earth,” is an artistic performance with rich, local color. Simple and unadorned, straightforward and uninhibited, bold and powerful—this is the folk song and dance of the plateaus in the northern part of Shaanxi province, which amply reflects the northern Shaanxi people’s attitude of exerting oneself. The graceful, traditional ethnic music reflects the long-term accumulation of northern Shaanxi’s long history and culture. This evening performance will help the American people to gain a deeper understanding of China, and promote exchange and collaboration between the two great nations of China and America.

中美两国远隔重洋，有着完全不同的历史背景和社会制度。但是，长期以来，中美两国人民一直相互抱有浓厚的兴趣和友好的感情。榆林位于陕西北部，历史悠久，文化底蕴深厚，并拥有丰富的矿产、能源、旅游和人力资源，是国家级能源化工基地。我们与陶氏化学公司的合作已经拉开帷幕，并期待着有更多的美国企业的关注和参与。同时也希望与美国各界开展广泛的交流。

……文化是反映一个民族历史文化和精神世界的窗口，文化也是增进不同民族相互了解和沟通人民心灵的最好的桥梁。今天为大家呈现的《黄河风·黄土情》文艺演

出，是一台具有浓郁地方特色的文艺演出，质朴、粗犷和豪放的陕西北部高原的民间歌舞，充分反映了陕北人民奋发向上的精神面貌，优美传统的民族乐曲反映了陕北深厚的历史文化积淀。这台晚会将有助于美国人民加深对中国的了解，促进中美两个伟大民族的交流与合作。  
 (WANG 2008c, emphasis added)<sup>15</sup>

After beginning with the long history of “mutual interest and friendship” between China and the U.S., Li immediately focused on the specific area of Yulin, situating it within China and outlining its history, culture, and natural and human resources. His statement that the “collaboration with The Dow Chemical Company has already drawn back the curtain” for “more interest and participation from American businesses” echoed Oakes’ characterization of “window enterprises” with their potential to attract further future investments to a region (OAKES 1999, 45). It appears that Li Jinzhu was already attempting to put this idea into action—according to *Yulin Daily*, before Li’s speech in Midland on 26 March 2008, he had just finished spending two days leading a delegation from Yulin on a “good-will mission” to establish sister city relations with Baytown, Texas, the home of ExxonMobil and Chevron Phillips (WANG 2008a; 2008b). Interestingly, in Li’s speech to the Midland audience, he did not mention the Shenhua Group, the coal company with which Dow was planning to collaborate, but instead framed his address in terms of China’s relationship with the U.S., Yulin’s relationship with Dow, and Yulin’s potential relationships with other American corporations.

While Li Jinzhu’s speech highlighted the unique resources that Yulin brought to the cultural exchange, articles produced by Dow emphasized Dow’s role as a powerful force in facilitating cultural exchange, pointing to the positive impact that economics can bring to local culture. Like Yulin, Dow foregrounded the potential for such exchanges to increase understanding between nations, but here, the focus was on Dow’s ability to bring *Chinese* culture to the area surrounding its global headquarters. In a public relations article posted on its website, subtitled “Dow Contributes to Cultural Exchange Between U.S. and China,” Dow was introduced as “a diversified chemical company that combines the power of science and technology with the ‘Human Element’ to constantly improve what is essential to human progress” (Dow 2008a). While briefly mentioning additional support for the event from the Shaanxi Provincial People’s Government, the article made no mention whatsoever of Yulin, the Shenhua Group, or the potential coal-to-chemical joint venture. Although it briefly mentioned “a business forum” as one component of the celebration, this appeared as almost an afterthought to the “series of cultural activities” that preceded it (Dow 2008a). Instead, the article focused on portraying Chinese culture as a scarce commodity—one the Dow was able to bring to the Midwest. The article began:

Two authentic Chinese terracotta warriors have arrived in Midland, Michigan, the global headquarters of The Dow Chemical Company, as the centerpiece of a four-month celebration of the rich heritage of China. The 2,200-year-old warriors will spend their first Chinese New Year in the U.S., and will be cultural ambassadors, sharing stories of the rich history of China. (Dow 2008a)

Framing the terracotta warriors as “one of the greatest archaeological discov-

eries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” and a link to “the ancient culture of China,” the article suggested that by seeing them, visitors from all over the Midwest would have a chance “to come and learn about the mysterious Chinese culture first hand” (Dow 2008a). The terms “ancient” and “mysterious” point to a rare, exotic factor echoing the suggestion that the Yulin Folk Art Troupe’s performance would “transport you to a land of beauty and enchantment” (MCFTA 2008a). At the same time, both the terracotta warriors and the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe were characterized in terms of their “authenticity” and “Chineseness.” The terracotta warriors were referred to as “authentic” and “ancient treasures,” while the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe performance was described as “an authentic Chinese art performance” (Dow 2008a; 2008c).

While presenting itself as a broker of cultural exchange, Dow described the benefits of that exchange differently depending on the audience. In the public relations article mentioned above, it stressed the benefits for the public at large, while another article in Dow’s corporate newsletter pointed to the benefits that the cultural exchange would bring to Dow’s business. In the former PR piece, “Terracotta Warriors to Spend Chinese New Year in the U.S.: Dow Contributes to Cultural Exchange Between U.S. and China,” Dow CEO and Chairman, Andrew Liveris, was quoted as saying, “As a global company with growing operations in China, east is meeting west in many exciting ways. ... We are pleased to be able to sponsor this cultural exchange as a way to share some of China’s important heritage with the people of this region” (Dow 2008a). In the latter article published in *Around Dow*, entitled “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China,” Liveris was quoted emphasizing the beneficial business relationship that the exchange would foster: “Building a strong relationship with China is a top priority for Dow, and the benefits of this relationship can’t be measured. ... That relationship is built as we share our strengths with each other. *This kind of cultural exchange, based on trust and goodwill, lays the groundwork for a valuable, long-term relationship*” (Dow 2008c, emphasis added). The former article pointed to the benefits to the public good that economics could bring to culture, while the latter article outlined the other side of the coin—how cultural exchange benefits business. While both Li Jinzhu and Andrew Liveris described the cultural exchange as bringing together the U.S. and China, just as Li’s speech used that broader context to promote Yulin’s direct relationship with the American business community, the subtitle of Dow’s corporate newsletter article—“Dow Celebrates Relationship with China”—rhetorically placed the multinational corporation in direct connection with the People’s Republic of China. This was different from its more “public” role as a facilitator of cultural exchange between the two countries, as evidenced by the subtitle of the PR article—“Dow Contributes to Cultural Exchange Between U.S. and China.”

The Dow corporate newsletter article also included a photo of Li Jinzhu and a former Dow executive vice president shaking hands, with a terracotta warrior standing between them in the background (FIGURE 3). During Li’s speech, he presented the Midland Center for the Arts with two full-size terracotta warrior replicas to “serve as a reminder of the unique cultural exchange that enriched Midland



FIGURE 3. "Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China," p. 6 (courtesy of The Dow Chemical Company).

in 2008" (Dow 2008c). I would suggest that this highly stylized photo could be read in several ways.

To begin with, the handshake, while broadly signaling the beginning of a beneficial relationship between localities, corporations, and nations, could also be read as a symbol of specific relational aspirations between any of the players involved—Yulin and the American business community, Dow and China, Shenhua and Dow, and/or Yulin and Midland. At the same time, regardless of one's particular reading of the handshake, we have the lone terracotta warrior standing behind, looking on in approval—culture as a bridge. The Dow newsletter article concluded by discussing the next step in the budding relationship between Dow and Yulin: "The end of the Chinese festival actually marks the beginning of another cultural exchange. Party Secretary Li invited Dow to Shaanxi Province in 2009, to share U.S. culture with our Asian counterparts. It is too soon to say what that effort will be, but employees can be sure it will represent the company and the United States in true Dow fashion" (Dow 2008c).

Eventually, Dow decided to share U.S. culture with their Chinese counterparts by sponsoring the 2009 Asia Tour of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, based in Washington, D.C. (KENNEDY CENTER 2012b). While funded by Dow partly in reciprocation for Yulin and Shaanxi's Midland performance and exhibit, the NSO tour was imbued with multiple levels of meaning as it gave concerts in Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai, Macau, and South Korea (KENNEDY CENTER 2012b). While the 2008 Midland event had been *rhetorically* placed within the context of Sino-U.S. relations, the NSO's 2009 Asia Tour was given a more prominent *official* dimension—it was formally invited by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the P.R.C.

and the U.S. and “to further Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations” (KENNEDY CENTER 2009). The Asia Tour also marked the ten-year anniversary of the NSO’s first tour to China in 1999, when Jiang Zemin had invited it after hearing the NSO perform during his visit to Washington, D.C., in 1997 (KENNEDY CENTER 2009). The NSO has a strong history of being associated with U.S. national affairs, including presidential inaugurations and diplomatic goodwill missions, and its Asia Tour was treated as a significant event by both China and the U.S. (KENNEDY CENTER 2009). The presidents of both nations sent congratulatory messages, with Hu Jintao pointing to music’s ability to “promote communication between people’s hearts of different countries” and to “enhance the mutual understanding between the two peoples,” and Barack Obama describing music as “a common language of the world that builds up intercultural bridges, pushes forward relations among peoples and nations, strengthens our understanding of history and tradition, and enriches our lives and communities” (CHINA EMBASSY 2009).

Andrew Liveris, in speaking of the tour, pointed to Dow’s important role in the relations between the two countries, saying, “This year not only marks the historic anniversary of engaged and positive Sino-U.S. relations, but also the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dow’s operations in Mainland China. As a global company and as a long-standing member of the Chinese business community, Dow is pleased to be a supporter of this tour to showcase the strong cultural ties and increased understanding between China and the United States” (Dow 2009). While Shaanxi, Yulin, Shenhua, and the joint venture were not explicitly mentioned, the tour’s destination cities included the capital of Shaanxi province, Xi’an. An article posted on a Shaanxi news site highlighted the business overtones of the NSO’s Xi’an performance on 14 June 2009, citing numerous Shaanxi provincial officials who attended the performance and noting that earlier in the day, a member of the Provincial Party Standing Committee met with a delegation of Dow executives for its Asia Pacific, Middle East, and Africa regions, where the Shenhua-Dow Coal-to-Chemicals Project was described as a signature project for Shaanxi’s energy and chemical engineering base, with all of the preparatory work moving along at a rapid pace (ZHANG 2009).<sup>16</sup>

Though Dow’s sponsorship of the NSO’s 2009 Asia Tour appears to have been inspired by Li Jinzhu’s request for Dow to reciprocate for the Midland performance by sharing U.S. culture with Shaanxi Province, the official rhetoric surrounding the tour focused attention mainly on the music of the NSO and its ability to serve as a bridge between nations. Even the article from the Shaanxi news site discussed earlier focused primarily on the Xi’an concert, while relating the business dealings to the artistic event. It is interesting to note that the NSO has a history of performances used to facilitate relations: its first international tour in 1959 to “19 Latin and South American countries” was “undertaken as part of President Eisenhower’s Program for Cultural Presentations, a project of the U.S. State Department, for the purpose of building goodwill throughout the region” (KENNEDY CENTER 2012a). The foregrounding of cultural events as a means of shifting public attention amid negotiations has been referred to in Chinese as the “artifying of politics” (*zhengzhi yishuhua* 政治艺术化), a term that Jing Li suggests “brings ‘art’

to the foreground on stage and endows ‘art’ with a seemingly apolitical position that officials hope will ease the crossing of boundaries and be identified with by all” (LI 2013, 88–89).<sup>17</sup> A similar idea is found in Danielle Fosler-Lussier’s discussion of U.S. State Department-funded cultural exchanges involving musicians, where she cites a musician-turned-diplomat who suggests that the goals of such exchanges are to “create the conditions for understanding” (FOSLER-LUSSIER 2010, 62). One is reminded of Wang Xiangrong’s description of the power of northern Shaanxi folk songs to help Yulin “gradually become more familiar and known by people in society.” Wang, Li, and Fosler-Lussier all point to culture’s ability to bridge gaps. They hint at the liminal space created by cultural exchanges—a liminality that offers the potential for a realignment of relations and public opinion—not unlike the liminality experienced in banquets when participants are able to align and realign their relationships with each other (TURNER 1969; SHEPHERD 2005; SCHECHNER 1988).<sup>18</sup>

#### RHETORIC PAVES THE WAY

The slogan “culture paves the way” appears to have been a driving factor in Yulin’s self-promotion during recent years, with several large-scale events highlighting folk songs and folk singers as key cultural attractions for the region. In 2006, Yulin held an international conference and fieldwork project on northern Shaanxi folk music in conjunction with CHIME, the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research, followed by two televised singing contests (2006 and 2010) in search of the “Ten Greatest Northern Shaanxi Folk Singers” (HE 2006; ZHANG 2010). In 2007, the Second Yulin International Folk Songs Festival showcased northern Shaanxi folk songs as one of three major world song traditions, along with Russian and African American folk songs (CHEN 2007).<sup>19</sup> More recently, in 2009, northern Shaanxi folk songs were declared a national-level item of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and Wang Xiangrong was chosen as one of two national-level “representative transmitters” (*daibiaoxing chuanchengren* 代表性传承人) of the tradition.<sup>20</sup>

As for Dow, since its sponsorship of the NSO’s 2009 Asia Tour, it has continued to fund NSO performances amid negotiations with various countries. Apparently pleased with the results that cultural exchange can bring to business, Dow sponsored another NSO tour in 2012 to Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Argentina, Uruguay, and Rio de Janeiro (KENNEDY CENTER 2012a). According to Andrew Liveris, “After the resounding success of the Asia Tour, Dow is pleased to continue our partnership with the NSO for the Americas Tour.... It is an honor to collaborate with Whirlpool to bring one of the great national treasures of the United States—the National Symphony Orchestra—to our employees, customers, and other community members throughout this region” (KENNEDY CENTER 2012a).

While it is difficult to gauge whether and to what degree Yulin’s cultural exchanges contributed to its economic growth in the years following the Midland and Xi’an performances, by 2012 Yulin had become known as “China’s Kuwait” and was “a major energy and chemical industry base with the exploitation of coal,

oil and natural gas" (XINHUA 2012). On 24 May 2012, the chairman of the Shenhua Group, Dr. Zhang Xiwu, was appointed chairman of the World Coal Association (WCA)—the first time in almost thirty years that the WCA would be led by a Chinese coal producer (WORLD COAL ASSOCIATION 2012). Later that year, the mayor of Yulin presided over a meeting where it was announced that students "in Yulin ... [would] enjoy totally free education from preschool through high school starting in 2013" (CHINESE BUSINESS VIEW 2012). Though Yulin's economy slowed soon after, its massive growth at the time seemed to play into the narrative that culture paves the way for economics.<sup>21</sup>

During my fieldwork in 2011 and 2012 while Yulin's economy was still going strong, Wang Xiangrong would frequently incorporate the narrative of Yulin's economic rise into his onstage banter and tie that rise to the attraction of local culture. When speaking to his fellow classmates at a 2012 elementary school reunion in his hometown area of Fugu County (located in Yulin), Wang said, "What is greatness? What is uniqueness? The more local something is, the closer it is to the people, the more it belongs to the entire world.... I am a Fugu person. I only want to take my Fugu things and use them so that outsiders can get to know Fugu, to see our northern Shaanxi." Like others in northern Shaanxi, Wang saw the potential for local folk songs to become internationally recognized, bringing additional visibility to the region.<sup>22</sup> As I traveled with Wang from performance to performance, he would often introduce me onstage and have me sing a song or two I had learned from him, suggesting to the crowd that my fascination with these local songs *was compelling evidence for* their attraction to a global audience. Wang's elevation of the local to global status—sometimes speculating that Fugu songs would become "global songs" (*qingu* 球歌)—paralleled the assertion that culture had paved the way for Yulin's economic rise. After all, it seemed, not only had northern Shaanxi folk songs attracted investments to Yulin—now they were beginning to attract foreign PhD students.

As this article has shown, Yulin's exchange of performances with Dow and Midland and the discourse surrounding that exchange attempted to forge relationships between the local and the global, while at the same time defining the parties involved in relation to one another (MAUSS 1966; YANG 1994; SHEPHERD 2005). The gifts of "Chinese" and "American" culture facilitated by Yulin and Dow provided a symbolic bridge connecting localities, corporations, and peoples. Within this exchange, the liminality of performance offered a space in which feelings, opinions, and representational images could be affected and transformed, and the rhetoric surrounding those performances attempted to seize upon the power of that liminality. When Yulin presented its regional song and dance troupe's Midland performance as representative of "Chineseness," it offered a "rare" and "unique" commodity—traditional "Chinese" culture—in the hopes of establishing and deepening a web of relations, while simultaneously focusing attention on Yulin's unique qualities. As Wang Xiangrong's discussion of repertoire has shown, such representations of "Chineseness" are carefully chosen in consideration of the audience at hand. When the performance is for a *national* audience, songs with nationalistic overtones tied to Chinese history and culture are used that simultaneously

elevate northern Shaanxi's place on the national stage. On the other hand, when the goal of the performance is to build rapport with *international* audiences, a "simple" folk duet about love fuses "localness" and "Chineseness" into a rhetorical bridge that connects Yulin to a globalized world—culture paves the way.

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#### NOTES

\* A slightly altered version of this article will appear as a chapter in the author's forthcoming book to be published in the University of Hawai'i Press's Music and Performing Arts of Asia and the Pacific series, edited by Frederick Lau. See GIBBS forthcoming.

1. More specifically, its subsidiary, China Shenhua Coal Liquefaction Corporation Limited, also referred to as China Shenhua Coal to Liquid and Chemical Company Limited.

2. The interviews with Wang Xiangrong, the "King of Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs," were conducted during my fieldwork with the singer from 2011 to 2012.

3. For a brief history of the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, see SHANG (1996); see also JONES (2009).

4. While my research and Wang's comments focus on the role of folk song performance in the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, the troupe's dance performances deserve to be studied as well.

5. In addition to a bridge, the Chinese scholar also compared Jin Yong's novel "to a traditional matchmaker who arranges a marriage between locals and tourists" (NOTAR 2006, 4).

6. For a description of the growth of professional troupes, focusing especially on ethnic minority groups in China, see MACKERRAS (1984, 212–17). For a more recent study of tourism and musical performing arts in China, see MACKERRAS (2011).

7. Arif Dirlik notes a progression from earlier representations of the local in terms of "its contrast to the national" to later cases where "the local derives its meaning from its juxtaposition to the global" (DIRLIK 1999, 152).

8. This often involves building up such a repertoire from local sources. In Yulin, Wang Xiangrong remembered noting an initial lack of such representative pieces worthy of the big stage when he began working in the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe in the early 1980s, and having to adapt such pieces from local tunes.

9. The *errentai* genre is popular in parts of Yulin Prefecture as well as neighboring Shanxi Province and Inner Mongolia, but not so popular in other parts of northern Shaanxi, such as Yan'an. While described here as local, it is not exclusively local to Wang's home area.

10. For the lyrics and melody to a version of this song sung by Wang Xiangrong and Guo Yunqin 郭云琴, see HUO (2005, 32–33).

11. Andrew Watson, Yang Xueyi, and Jiao Xingguo note, "Shaanxi forms part of the Shanxi—Shaanxi—Inner Mongolia coal field, which holds over 50 percent of China's total coal reserves. The emphasis on the energy sector adopted as part of the revision of national industrial strategy in 1994 was seen as a significant gain for the province, and especially as an avenue of development for the poor north" (WATSON et al. 1999, 80). For background on the history of China's coal industry, see WRIGHT (2012).

12. According to Northwest Airlines's corporate newsletter, "Northwest co-sponsored the festival with key corporate customer Dow Chemical, investing in the communities we jointly serve" (NWA 2008). The newsletter also noted that demonstrating, "Northwest's support of this cultural exhibit, Steve Sear, vice president sales and customer care, attended 'Reflections of the Yellow River,' a program of traditional Chinese performances" (NWA 2008).

13. In Chinese, the characters *feng* 风 ("wind") and *qing* 情 ("feelings/sentiments"), when combined into the word *fengqing* 风情, can mean both "local conditions and customs" and "fine taste" or "refined feelings."

14. OAKES (2000) provides examples from Shanxi, Anhui, and Guizhou.

15. This article was entitled “The Yulin Folk Arts Troupe Attends the ‘Chinese Music and Culture Festival’ in the U.S.: Li Jinzhu Gives a Speech at the Closing Ceremony” (WANG 2008c). Another article with similar content, attributed to the same editor, and also in *Yulin ribao* (Yulin Daily), was entitled “Northern Shaanxi Culture in America” (WANG 2008b).

16. Early estimates suggested that the coal-chemical complex at Yulin could be operational by 2016, and it eventually achieved this goal, beginning production in December 2015 (ICIS NEWS 2009; SUN 2016).

17. In her article on minority folk song and dance performances from Yunnan Province at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C., Jing LI (2013) notes that she heard the term “artifying of politics” (*zhengzhi yishuhua*) used by a cultural official from the Yunnan delegation.

18. While TURNER (1969) is discussing the liminal aspects of rites of passage and how they allow individuals to move from one social category to another (thus realigning their relationships with other people), I am suggesting that the liminal space of these cultural performances allows audiences to realign their impressions of and perceived relationships with the cultures represented onstage.

19. The “African American folk songs” section was represented by the American blues and R&B singer Bobby Rush.

20. The other “representative transmitter” for northern Shaanxi folk songs was He Yutang 贺玉堂 (1949–2013), who appeared in CHEN Kaige’s film, *Yellow Earth* (1984). For an excellent description of China’s efforts to preserve Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), see REES (2012).

21. Reports suggest that a slowing down of the coal industry that began in late 2012 contributed to a decline in Yulin’s overall economy in recent years (LIU 2015; WONG 2016). Dow reportedly withdrew from the joint venture in 2013, although Shenhua and the local government decided to proceed with the coal-chemical project (ICIS NEWS 2014; XINHUA FINANCE AGENCY 2015). The Yulin plant began producing “coal-based low-density polyethylene” in December 2015, churning out an estimated 220,000 metric tons in 2016 (CCFGROUP 2016; SUN 2016).

22. Two academic conferences were held in 2009 and 2011 concerning the translation of northern Shaanxi folk song lyrics into languages including English, French, Arabic, Korean, German, and Italian (ZHONGGONG SHAANXI SHENGWEI XUANCHUANBU 2009).

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