

# Commercialization of Traditional Performing Arts in Mainland China: A Case Study of Deyunshe

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## Abstract

China celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding in 2019, and this has triggered heightened imagination towards traditional Chinese arts and culture. In the same year, its Ministry of Culture and Tourism rolled out a comprehensive plan to conserve traditional artforms by promoting active revitalization. This exploratory research investigates the possible strategies, as well as areas of contention, in commercializing traditional performing arts, specifically, Chinese crosstalk. An in-depth case study of well-known Chinese crosstalk company, Deyunshe, is carried out. Case study involves in-depth investigations and the eventual understanding of real-world situations and phenomena. Deyunshe is one of the very few established Chinese crosstalk companies in China dedicated to revitalizing the art form. Research outcomes show that Deyunshe has been successful in revitalizing and commercializing Chinese crosstalk with its effective product, place, price, people, and physical evidence strategies. This in turn creates a viable model for traditional performing arts in China, crosstalk or otherwise, to be revitalized and made marketable. Nevertheless, the over-revitalization/commercialization of traditional performing arts may also result in the subordination of the artistic values of the artforms.

**Keywords:** Traditional performing arts, Chinese crosstalk, Performing arts market, Deyunshe, Marketing mix.

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, traditional Chinese performing arts have received heightened attention from the Chinese government, particularly Chinese opera. The country celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding in 2019, and this has triggered heightened imagination towards traditional Chinese arts and culture. In that same year, 389 million RMB (US\$54.8 million) was dedicated to touring approximately 80,000 Chinese opera performances to poor rural communities (Lee, 2019). China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism also rolled out a comprehensive plan to conserve traditional artforms by promoting active revitalization and the injection of modern approaches.

Despite the efforts, western performing arts, whether locally produced or imported, continue to dominate the performing arts market in China. Traditional performing arts account for less than 6% of total box office (Yu, in-progress). This exploratory research investigates the possible strategies, as well as areas of contention, in commercializing traditional performing arts, specifically, Chinese crosstalk. An in-depth case study of well-known Chinese crosstalk company, Beijing Deyunshe Culture Communication Co. Ltd, or Deyunshe, is carried out.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Performing Arts Market in China**

According to Yu (in-progress), revenue for the performing arts in Mainland China exceeded 50 billion RMB for the first time in 2018, standing at 51.4 billion RMB (US\$7.24 billion). Revenue, in this case, refers to ticket sales, government sponsorships, intellectual property income, variety shows income, and rural performances income. The revenue increased by 4.9% between 2017 and 2018, and 4.5% between 2016 and 2017. Ticket sales is the largest contributor to total revenue, accounting for 35.4% of total revenue in 2018, or 18.2 billion RMB (US\$2.57 billion). The revenue supported over 17,000 performing arts organizations, producing 3.12 million performances to 1.38 billion audiences, and employing 416,374 people.

The Chinese government contributed 13.6 billion RMB (US\$1.92 billion) to the total revenue for the performing arts. These public monies are used as grants, subsidies for ticket prices, and direct commission or purchase of performances, mainly for state-own or affiliated performing arts organizations. As of December 2018, there are a total of 2478 theaters in China, culminating in 1.9 million seats. From the statistics, it is surmised to say that the performing arts market in China is huge and has seen continued growth.

While generating economic impacts, the performing arts also play a crucial role in enhancing the cultural and social values of the Chinese society and its people (Lim, 2017). The Belt and Road Initiative, which was one of President Xi Jinping's maiden projects, has seen China's major economic contributions in Asia, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe through mega infrastructure investments. In the name of cultural exchange, the Chinese government has

supported performances to tour countries under the Belt and Road Initiative, and at the same time, bring performances from these countries into China.

Beyond the initiative, touring performances from North American and Western Europe are also brought into Mainland China regularly by performance venues, and/or via agents. These international performances are usually staged in tier-one cities, namely, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Some non-tier-one cities have also identified opportunities to boost tourism by incorporating performing arts with existing cultural attractions (Zheng, Ritchie, & Benckendorff, 2020). One such example is Impression Lijiang, a large-scale daily performance with Jade Dragon Snow Mountain as its setting. The show comprises mainly songs and dances featuring the Dongba culture of the Naxi people in Lijiang.

Apart from cultural exchanges and synergies with tourism, China's performing arts have also been mediated by the nation's massive digital transformation in recent years. Major theatres around the country are equipped with the latest locally made state-of-the-art audiovisual technologies, including large LED screens on stage (Guo, 2016). The incorporation of augmented and virtual realities in performances is also gaining foothold.

## **2.2 Evolution of Chinese Crosstalk as a Traditional Performing Art Form**

In Asia, traditional performing arts have existed for centuries, with religious theatre in India dating back close to 3000 years (Pizzato, 2019). Chinese opera has its roots in the 7<sup>th</sup> century during the Tang Dynasty (Miller, 2008), while in Southeast Asia, Balinese dance could be traced back to as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Brandon & Banham, 1997). The performing arts, being labor-intensive, have always been subjected to some forms of management (Pick, 1986), and in the case of Asia, traditional performances were put up by troupes, managed and led by troupe leaders (Banham & Brandon, 1995).

In China, western performing arts took root and flourished during the late Qing dynasty and the Republican Era. Western classical music was first introduced to China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the early years of the 1900s, the Shanghai Municipal Symphony Orchestra was established (Huang, 2011). At around the same time, a group of Chinese students pursuing education in Japan brought western spoken drama (*huaju*) into China (Conceison, 2001). Similarly, ballet was introduced to China in the 1910s and 1920s by white Russians who fled to China, as well as returning Chinese students from Japan in the 1920s and 1930s (Banes, 2007).

Western performing arts took a major turn in China after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the eventual cultural revolution in the 1960s. Although western classics were banned, western-style music, ballet and *huaju* were revolutionized to depict the communist ideals (Mackerras, 2008; Kraus, 1989). In fact, Peking opera was also banned (but eventually revolutionized) due to its subscription to superstitious, feudalistic, and

bourgeoisie ideas (Lu, 2004). The end of the cultural revolution and the subsequent opening up of the nation in the late 1970s ignited the interest of western performing arts in China once again.

Born in the old society and growing in the new, Chinese crosstalk is a folk art native to China. Its malleable origins are long, but there are few historical accounts to prove it. Currently, Chinese crosstalk is generally considered to have a history of about 100 years (Lam, 2004). In the early days of its existence, the status of crosstalk was low, and was even not recognized as an artform despite its prevalence among the civilian class (Shikongzhan, 2007).

The emergence and popularity of crosstalk in the late Qing Dynasty was closely related to the social background. Due to the harsh political, economic, and social realities of the time, the declining feudal rulers of the upper class were extravagant, while the lower-class lived in hardship. Then, crosstalk performances not only masked the fear of life brought on by a lethargic ruler, but also helped the people forget that life was hard momentarily (Guo, 2007).

On the whole, crosstalk was not valued before the liberation of China and only developed rapidly after. Throughout the development of Chinese crosstalk, its audience has expanded from the civilian class to a variety of classes, and its popular territory has grown from individual cities in the Northern region to almost the entire country. It is a kind of artform that is "known and appreciated by women, children and suits all classes" (Hou, Xue, Li, & Wang, 1980, p. 23).

Early Chinese crosstalk performances culminated at Beijing Bridge (*tianqiao*), where merchants from the South would gather to do business in the North (Lam, 2004). Crosstalks that originated in *tianqiao* were known as *liaodi*, which refers to the practice of finding open spaces to perform without paying any rent. Similar to the current day concept of busking, crosstalk artists then were rewarded for putting up a good show by bystanders. At that time, anyone, rich and poor, could come to the *tianqiao* to watch entertainers perform without concerns of their perceived status. Therefore, *tianqiao* became a cradle for folkloric artists to acquire fame. In the late 1920s, the busking type of crosstalk performances became less frequent, and crosstalk artists began to perform in teahouses or areas surrounded by sheds.

After the liberation of China, the value of crosstalk was officially recognized. Hence, crosstalk gradually moved from the private sphere to an official narrative. Crosstalk was incorporated into the state-planned economy. Moreover, crosstalk's propagandic and educational value attracted the government's attention, becoming a megaphone for various cultural movements and institutions, while its commercial interests were ignored (Geng, 2010b).

In the famous crosstalk 'Night Journey', which was recorded by the PRC and broadcasted in 1956, uncivilized values such as running red lights, jumping the queue, and smoking in theatres were used as materials to promote the idea of civilization. Furthermore, Chinese crosstalk

changed dramatically in content and form during this period. For one, swearing words and profanities were removed from the language of traditional crosstalk (Nie & Xiong, 2017).

The famous crosstalk actor Hou Baolin dedicated himself to purifying crosstalk language, and in an interview, Hou reiterated that there were usually dirty words used in crosstalk, but he eliminated obscene language from his performance, and referred his versions as civilized crosstalk (Lam, 2004). In Hou's time, crosstalk morphed from *liaodi* to a kind of art that is universally appreciated by all (Shikongzhan, 2007).

In the 1980s and 1990s, famous crosstalk actors from the state-planned system began to go out for private performances, highlighting the commercial possibilities of Chinese crosstalk. With the advancement of media technology and the development of the performing arts industry in China, there are more diverse ways of presenting and broadcasting crosstalk performances. Shows such as Stage crosstalk, radio and television crosstalk, and evening party crosstalk were active in the mainstream media until the 1990s.

During that time, crosstalk performances were paid by the state (Geng, 2010a). It was also during then that the audience for crosstalk spread geographically from the North to the whole country. Then, authorities have given a strategic cultural boost to the development of crosstalk. Actions such as the implementation of crosstalk museums and MBA classes have led to the inclusion of Chinese crosstalk as a symbol of national planning.

The calls to bring crosstalk back to the theatre were heard in the 1990s. At the same time, crosstalk also began to merge with television sketches and sitcoms (Geng, 2010a). The establishment of Deyunshe in the early 2000s by Guo Degang has ushered in a new era of commercialization of Chinese crosstalk. Since then, Deyunshe successfully brought crosstalk worldwide through commercial touring, branding and other commercial strategies.

### **3. Research Method and Theoretical Framework**

The chosen case study, Deyunshe, was founded by the famous Chinese crosstalk actor Guo Degang and his friends as Beijing Crosstalk conference in 1998 and was renamed to its current name in 2003. Case study, as a research method, involves in-depth investigations, usually over a period of time, and the eventual understanding of real-world situations and phenomena (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017).

Unlike most other methods, case study can be qualitative and/or quantitative. Indeed, when investigating a real-world phenomenon, a series of other methodologies, such as observations, secondary research, archival research, textual analysis, surveys, content analysis etc. are often incorporated (Starman, 2013). The case study method is sometimes criticized for being statistically insignificant, especially when the data sets are small, and at times, only a single case is considered (Adolphus, 2011). However, the chosen case for this exploratory research,

Deyunshe, is one of the very few established Chinese crosstalk companies in China dedicated to revitalizing the art form.

To investigate the commercial potential of crosstalk, news and interviews involving Deyunshe and its artists such as Guo Degang and Hou Baolin as well as existing texts, such as documentaries, performance videos, and company reports were reviewed. The research draws references from the marketing mix as the conceptual framework, which includes McCarthy's (1960) marketing mix and Booms and Bitner's (1981) extended marketing mix.

#### **4. Outcomes and Discussions**

The definition of arts marketing has evolved over the past thirty years, from its earlier focus on matching arts creations with appropriate audiences, to the more recent discussions on developing long-term and meaningful relationships with the audiences (Hill, O'Sullivan, O'Sullivan, & Whitehead, 2018). Marketing the arts has always been subjected to debates. The product strategy of the marketing mix suggests that products should ultimately meet the requirements and needs of the consumers.

Some artists, therefore, consider the process of marketing as *selling their souls*, and that marketing is a major threat to artistic integrity. It is common for many artist-led nonprofit arts organizations to downplay the importance of marketing, sometimes reducing marketing to mere promotions of their artistic offerings. Furthermore, subsidized arts organizations are often expected to devote their funding mainly to artistic creations, while allocating marketing a modest fraction. Yet, it does not mean that commercial arts organizations are single-mindedly focused on sales and marketing so much so that the artistic excellence is compromised.

Using the case study of the English Chamber Orchestra (ECO) in the UK, Chong (2010) reiterated that profit companies need to produce good art and make a profit. According to ECO's founding chairman, Rothschild, the orchestra depended on market demand for its music excellence. This brings forth the idea that the product strategy in the arts is fundamental in the marketing mix.

The preeminent product of Deyunshe is Chinese crosstalk, otherwise also known as DeYun show. According to Guo (2007, cited by Xin), a think tank is responsible for developing the materials, as well as digging up and reorganising traditional programs to ensure high quality of creations. The performances are mostly based on old crosstalk jokes that have been off the scene for a period of time. After synergizing with contemporary trends, the old jokes were given a new life on DeYun stage.

Apart from creating good content, Deyunshe also pays special attention to training artists, apprentices and in-house actors. Since 2006, Guo has been recruiting apprentices from social associations and providing traditional crosstalk training classes to them. Guo believes that

apprentices have to learn and practice crosstalk for three years before they could go on stage (Yin, 2019). In a way, this guarantees the professionalism of actors and the quality of the performances.

According to Feng (2019), traditional crosstalk could be performed in a variety of ways, which include opera singing, storytelling, Chinese rap and clapper talk. Nevertheless, after 1949, the Chinese government paid more attention to the language art of crosstalk, thus subordinating the other approaches, resulting in the weakening of crosstalk development and the disappearance of some well-crafted jokes. Deyunshe, however, changed the situation and created new representations of the old jokes, and this eventually attracted both conventional crosstalk fans as well as young audiences.

In addition, urban youths are also attracted to DeYun shows because the performances offer them escape and comfort from the immense pressure they face in contemporary China (Zheng, 2020). With the growing number of fans, or *Gangsi* in Chinese, Guo launched another artistic product in Deyunshe - a crosstalk festival. Since 2010, Guo has designated September 12th as the Gangsi Festival every year to express his gratitude to fans who support him. The performances in the festival are put up by the best DeYun artists. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Gangsi Festival has become one of Deyunshe's key highlights every year.

A product is likely to sell better if it is available in multiple places, rather than in a single location. In the marketing mix, place strategy refers to the distribution and flow of the products (Gitman & McDaniel, 2007). Consumers also prefer convenience and are more likely to purchase products that are within easy reach (Nijssen & Frambach, 2001). If the products are in places that are considered inconvenient, marketers need to think of ways to break down the location barriers. The place strategy for performing arts requires further examination. For one, a live performance can only take place in a fixed location at any given time (Merx, 2006). The choice of the venue thus becomes an important factor affecting the performance's place strategy.

Of course, with live streaming technologies today, this notion of a fixed location is being challenged and renegotiated. The show could also tour different venues in multiple cities in order to reach out to a larger audience base. Last but not least, the show could also be recorded and thereafter distributed via different media, such as DVD and online streaming portals. The place strategy of performing arts also considers the distribution of related activities of the performance, such as the box office locations, placement of promotional materials, as well as choice of media platforms for pre-recorded shows.

While it is common for performing arts companies to run their own venues in fixed locations, Deyunshe has set up venues in multiple cities, mostly in the northern region of China, where Chinese crosstalk prospered in the early days. At the time of writing, Deyunshe has nine theatres, which include six in Beijing, one each in Nanjing, Changchun and Harbin. Moreover,

these performance venues are situated in commercial areas with convenient transportation. For instance, in Beijing, places such as Sanlitun and Sanqingyuan are both in the business districts well connected via metro and buses. There are plenty of restaurants and malls nearby for audiences to spend their time before and/or after the show. In a way, Deyunshe took into account the target audiences' feelings alongside their leisure needs.

Prior to the company's efforts to revitalize Chinese crosstalk, the youth population in China are generally disinterested in this traditional art form and considered it unfashionable. Deyunshe's attempts to reinvent and innovate Chinese crosstalk, alongside effective communication channels, have effectively narrowed the gap between the art form and the youths.

In 2004, Guo attempted to cooperate with a radio station, from which many audiences learned about Deyunshe thereafter. This successful collaboration led to the company's major breakthrough, when Beijing Tianqiao Theatre signed a deal to showcase DeYun shows. Since then, Deyunshe went on to cooperate with other online video platforms, television programmes, online audio applications and use short video platforms (Youjiang, 2019). Till now, Youku is the biggest online video platform to find recorded DeYun shows from the company's festivals, as well as domestic and international commercial tours.

As of February 2018, the total number of video clicks for DeYun shows on Youku has hit 700 million views (Wu, 2018). Furthermore, Deyunshe also participated in well-known television variety shows, such, 'Happy Comedian', 'The Comedy', and 'Smiling Proud Wanderer', all of which had high viewerships. Exposures on these various platforms have brought Deyunshe much fame, which translated to sell-out shows in their venues.

Most audiences could purchase tickets to DeYun shows through the authorized online booking channel, Damai.cn. Deyunshe also provides avenues for audiences to buy tickets via phone call or through the box offices at the venues. Similar to many well-known performances in Mainland China, DeYun shows (especially those with famous performers) are also sold in a secondary ticket market, i.e., ticket scalping. This particular sales channel is likely to do more harm than good to Deyunshe, and the company needs to actively identify ways to counter such notorious acts. One possible way is to adopt the real-name ticket system, which has been implemented in the purchase of high-speed rail tickets.

Price is another important element in the marketing mix. Pricing strategy refers to the amount of money the consumer needs to pay for the product. For consumers, the total cost incurred in purchasing a product is also considered (Nijssen & Frambach, 2001). For instance, if someone has to drive 30 kilometers to get a product, the total cost includes the cost of the petrol and other opportunity costs on top of the product's price. For performing arts, audiences are paying for the experience of the show without any tangible product to bring home (Walmsley, 2019).



Therefore, the ticket price should consider the availability and novelty of the experience, as well as the offerings of direct competitors and other leisure choices.

Deyunshe is the current market leader for Chinese crosstalk performances in China. For DeYun shows involving the company's star artists, prices could go extremely high. For instance, the price of a ticket to Yue Yunpeng (Guo's top disciple) performance in Zhengzhou in 2016 went up to 5000 RMB. Generally, Deyunshe's pricing depends on the nature of the performance.

For their live performances, Deyunshe differentiated the prices of the shows that are presented for the purpose of introducing Chinese crosstalk to the public with those that are meant for commercial runs. Performances in Deyunshe's venues usually cost 20 to 200 RMB per ticket, which is considered highly affordable in China. On the other hand, the company's commercial shows could sell from 200 to 800 RMB (or more) per ticket. Nevertheless, Deyunshe has ensured high quality performances with good scripts and well-trained artists, regardless of venues and ticket prices.

People strategy, in the extended marketing mix, refers to anyone that comes in touch with the product and its customers. Simply put, people could be the ones who create and make the products, or the ones selling the products directly or indirectly to the customers (Groucutt, Leadley & Forsyth, 2004). When applied to the performing arts, people could refer to the artists involved in creating the artistic experience, or those who contribute beyond the performance experience, such as the marketing staff or front of house team.

Sometimes, artists are also considered product strategies because their artistic visions and interpretations are what made the experience possible. Yet, for Deyunshe, they have devoted efforts to also brand their artists, so much so that artists and DeYun shows are two different, yet equally important symbols of the company. Many crosstalk artists in Deyunshe have dabbled into the entertainment industry, of which they participated in films, television series, variety shows, and reality shows. The artists' training as crosstalk artists have made them excellent actors who are quick witted and humorous, and their exposures in the entertainment industry have brought them personal fame, which benefited Deyunshe.

As a result, audience numbers for DeYun shows increased exponentially, and many young people formed fan groups for specific Deyunshe's artists. Fans could also be regarded as part of Deyunshe's people strategy. Female fans, in particular, are called DeYun Girls. In some cases, these fans are more interested in the personal charm of the artists, rather than Chinese crosstalk itself.

One such artist is Zhang Yunlei, whose image is not unlike the current aesthetics of young and handsome male idols in China (and Korea). Despite being a traditional crosstalk performer, Zhang has received treatments similar to other major pop idols. Once, when Zhang was invited to a variety show, the gifts he received included 100 grams of gold bars, amongst other luxuries

(Huihuo, 2019). The spending power of these fans of specific artists is also likely to be higher than the usual crosstalk fans.

The idolization of Deyunshe's artists might also come across as contradicting the company's mission to develop professional crosstalk. Some media have commented that the actors are not really focused on the crosstalk art form, but have instead become stars (Ye, 2019). Si (2019) also expressed the concern that Deyunshe is moving further away from crosstalk, and the various groups are doing more harm than good. While it is good for the artists to have fans, Deyunshe should consider strategies to eventually transfer these individuals to future crosstalk fans.

Physical evidence is part of the extended marketing mix used mainly in the service industry. Basically, physical evidence comprises the tangible cues of services, such as the physical environment, ambience and layout of the place where the services are carried out (Groucutt, Leadley & Forsyth, 2004). It could also refer to physical signs and symbols relevant to the services (Hoffman & Bateson, 2017). While there is a marked difference between performing arts and service, a performance offers an intangible product – the experience.

For the performing arts, physical evidence could refer to the exterior and interior of the venue, corporate identity of the arts organization, as well as other tangible cues such as merchandise or dress code of the front of house team. Deyunshe venues are usually intimate, and the total number of seats in a venue range between 250 and 350. Moreover, their venues adopted Chinese-style decorations, imitating the tea house from the Republican era. The small-size venue allows significant interactions between actors and the audiences, which is an integral part of traditional crosstalk.

A successful use of the physical evidence strategy will bring about strong brand image (Sethna & Blythe, 2016). Deyunshe strives to build an image of both a traditional yet professional crosstalk group, through its alignment to traditional Chinese culture and production of high-quality performances. Its logo comprises the Chinese character *De* inside a circle with clouds, which symbolises good luck in Chinese culture. The theme colour red symbolises happiness in Chinese societies.

Deyunshe's artists also don traditional long coats, with different designs depicting the status of the artists. For instance, established crosstalk artists such as Guo and Yu Qian put on gowns with elaborated embroideries, while younger and newer artistic members wear plain gowns without adornments. Such rules adhere to the Confucious beliefs of showing respect for the senior and more renowned artists and at the same time, for this traditional artform.

Deyunshe has created a number of commercial products alongside its shows. For instance, the company sells DeYun coats at high prices in crosstalk-themed restaurants belonging to Guo.

Deyunshe has to be mindful not to over-commercialize its offerings, which might lead to the integrity of the traditional artform being compromised.

## **5. Conclusion**

From this exploratory research, it can be concluded that Deyunshe's efforts to commercialize Chinese crosstalk have more hits than misses. The company has definitely created a viable model for traditional performing arts, crosstalk or otherwise, to be revitalized and made marketable.

During the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2017, Xi called for a people-centric approach in this new era, suggesting inclusivity in all matters pertaining to development, including the arts and culture. Furthermore, in Xi's 14-point basic policy, while the idea of scientific development is of core importance, it clearly states that development should coincide with livelihood improvement and well-being of the Chinese people (BBC Monitoring, 2017).

In spite of this, the current performing arts industry in China still reek of capitalism, where the financial gains from the current progress of the arts and culture seem to only benefit specific groups of the people, such as investors, company owners, as well as intellectual property owners. Furthermore, in the process of revitalization and commercialization, traditional performing arts risk being reduced to yet another leisure choice, whereby the artistic values are subordinated. Yet, it warrants further inquiry on how the values of traditional performing arts and the well-being of people could be safeguarded in its commercialization process.

Despite the increase in the number of theatre venues and seats as compared to the previous year, the actual number of performances, audiences, and box office takings fell by an average of 12.4% in 2018 (Yu, in-progress). From a product life cycle perspective, theater venues in China seem to have leveled out at maturity and are beginning to show decline. A possible future research could be on how the commercialization of traditional performing arts could become viable extension strategies for theatres.

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