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Chinese Circus and its Audiences: Past and Present

Circus in China until the 1760s was primarily regarded as an equestrian court performance to entertain nobles of the Qing Dynasty at the inauguration of the Chinese New Year, or to amuse foreign dignitaries bringing tributes. Since that time, circus has transformed into a popular entertainment art, featuring the integration of human, animal, dance, acrobatics, music, vocal, multi-media, and new technologies. In this article Susan Jia revisits the history of circus in China, and then focuses on its latest form of presentation in Shanghai Circus World (SCW), the premier circus establishment in China. The two core pieces in the SCW repertoire – ‘ERA: Intersection of Time’ and ‘Happy Circus’ – are examined to construct a representative miniature of modern Chinese circus, and from audiences’ perspective, the many comments written for online communities are analyzed to explore their understanding of modern circus. Susan Jia is an assistant professor in the School of Business and Management, Shanghai International Studies University. She researches means of developing the leisure and entertainment services industries.

Key terms: equestrianism, animal performance, Shanghai Circus World, text mining.

LAST YEAR was the 250th anniversary of modern circus, which dates back to Philip Astley’s earliest shows in 1768. Serious discussions of circus from an academic point of view have covered almost every continent of the world. For example, Kim Baston (2010) discussed the historical role of music within the dominant Euro-American circus tradition. She also concluded, after conducting a transatlantic study (2013), that the first circus in America owed much to that in Scotland.

Micah Childress (2010) examined clowns and songsters in American circuses during the last half of the nineteenth century. Julieta Infantino (2015) reviewed the contemporary history of circus arts in Buenos Aires. In addition, Mark St Leon (2014) uncovered the routes taken by circus entertainers in the Pacific in the century from 1841 to 1941. However, none investigated or went deeply into the development of the form in China, a country with a rich history of circus culture and practice.

In the 1760s, circus in China was primarily regarded as an equestrian court performance to entertain nobles of the Qing Dynasty at the inauguration of the Chinese New Year, or to amuse foreign dignitaries

bringing tributes. Following the Chinese New Year, which is usually around mid-February, a grand circus performance was held in the West Garden of the Old Summer Palace, one of the royal gardens of the then Emperor Qian Long. Every summer, the Emperor would decamp from the Forbidden City and stay there to avoid the heat while handling state and military affairs, which is why it was named the Old Summer Palace.

The West Garden had several hectares of flat square ground where the Imperial Guards usually practised drills. However, in the New Year season it turned into a playground. The New Year circus featured vigorous equestrians, dazzling acrobats, and grand fireworks (anonymous, 2015). Worth noting were the equestrians dispatched from the Eight Banners, the then militia, who stood on horseback and performed a variety of breathtaking actions.¹ The performance was repeated in the same place in 1753, 1787, and 1795, when Qian Long entertained missionaries from Portugal, the King of Kazakhstan, and envoys from the Netherlands respectively.

Circus continued to be popular among Qing Dynasty rulers. Katharine A. Carl, an American painter who was appointed by the

imperial court to make portraits of the Empress Dowager Ci Xi in 1904, remembered that she joined the imperial household to attend a circus performed by a European circus troupe touring to China.² Originally, the troupe had not planned to visit Beijing, the imperial city, but had been performing in Tianjin, a harbour city eighty miles from Beijing, but somehow, Ci Xi heard about the troupe and was impressed by its poster which pictured animal tricks. Consequently, the troupe was immediately summoned to entertain Ci Xi and Emperor Guang Xu, as well as concubines and princesses.

Interestingly, lakeside radish farmland was assigned as the venue – and most surprising was that Ci Xi took the lead in harvesting the radishes, followed by the other imperial womenfolk. Afterwards, a temporary stage was constructed on the newly harvested land before the circus opened. About 200 officials were also invited to participate. According to Carl, Ci Xi, as a female, was very fond of trained animals such as dogs, whereas Guang Xu was more into the masculine horses and equestrians.

The Qing Dynasty was eventually overthrown in 1912 and, after years of turmoil and war, in 1949 China entered a new epoch under the Communist Party of China. In the early years of the new nation, circus had a distinctly political complexion. The Qiqihar Circus Group (QCG), founded in 1952, was one of the many groups under the direct guidance of the Party committee for propagating socialism, as were role models in agricultural and industrial production (Xia, 2016).

Thus, a programme originally named 'Group Horsemanship' was provisionally renamed 'Militia's Horsemanship' to suggest the nation's constant need for defence against imperialism. An impromptu comic turn involved two somersaulting acrobats, one of them playing the part of a People's Liberation Army soldier, and the other acting as a hostile enemy. Moreover, QCG owned a buffalo that could dance to a flute, echoing the Chinese saying 'to play the lute to a cow', meaning to have chosen the wrong audience. The buffalo turned out to be a gift from Ho

Chi Minh, the then president of Vietnam, as a symbol of friendship between the two socialist countries.

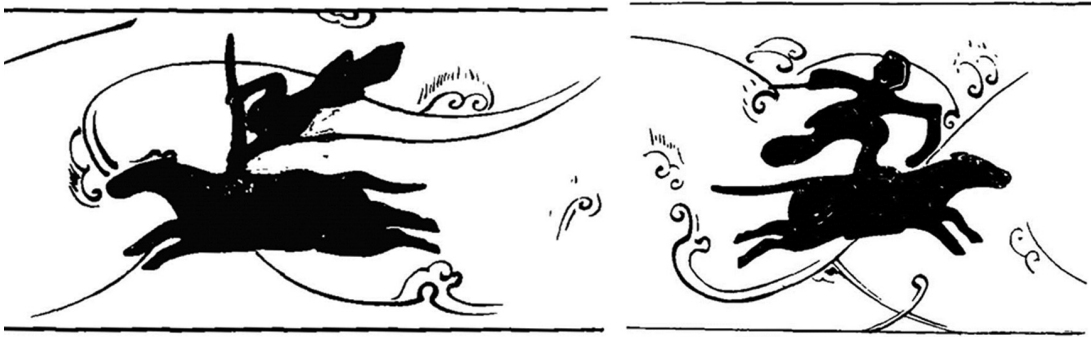
By the twenty-first century, circus in China had transformed into a popular entertainment art, featuring contemporary integration of human, animal, dance, acrobatics, music, vocal, multi-media, and new technology. I will concentrate on these latest forms of presentation of circus in China by investigating Shanghai Circus World (SCW), the leading circus establishment in China. The two core pieces in the SCW repertoire – 'ERA: Intersection of Time' and 'Happy Circus' – will be analyzed to construct a representative sampling of modern Chinese circus.

Furthermore, from the audiences' perspective, the several thousand comments posted on online communities are analyzed with respect to their motivation and comprehension of modern circus. But before that, I will review some of the practical and cultural issues in Chinese circus over the centuries.

The Evolution of Circus Forms in China

The word 'circus' in Chinese translates as 'ma xi' – 'ma' meaning horse, while 'xi' means play. Although modern circus has already transformed from equestrian performance to a mixture of human, animal, dance, acrobatics and other skills, both in the Chinese context and on a global scale, circus has always been called 'ma xi' in China, indicating the importance of equestrian performance as its classic form.

As early as 1600 BC in the Shang Dynasty, the Chinese people had learned to ride on horses and drive carriages with passengers or goods. Horse riding became ever more important in the battlefield. *The Book of Songs* records a historic battle between Yin and King Wu of Zhou, during which King Wu's army outnumbered Yin's in chariots, won the battle, toppled the Shang Dynasty, and ushered in the long rule of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC). Highly valued, horse riding was later included in the 'Six Arts', the noble education system of the Zhou Dynasty,



Images on a vanity box uncovered in 1975 in an ancient Han tomb in Shaanxi, China, depicting equestrian performances of the Western Han Dynasty. Reproduced by permission of Wenliang Shao.

together with etiquette, music, archery, literacy, and arithmetic.

In the later stages of the Zhou Dynasty, advancements in military tactics saw the increasing significance of cavalry over chariots, which put extra emphasis on horse riding and training skills (Shuai, 1990). This was also the era of growth in regional trading, and fine-bred horses were being imported from central Asia in herds, generating a kind of horse-riding activity other than for military practice: equestrian performances.

From unearthed cultural relics, it can be seen that equestrian performance had been prevalent since the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 8). On a vanity box uncovered in an ancient Han tomb in Shaanxi, a central province of China, in 1975, patterns depicting equestrian performances are clearly visible (Shao, 1985). One image is of a man who is upside-down and supporting himself with a stick which pivots the saddle of a running horse. Another shows a man bearing arms and standing on the back of a running horse balancing on only one leg. (See illustrations above.)

During the Song Dynasty (960–1279), more kinds of animals had been added to circus performances. Most adventurous was the training of beasts of prey, such as lions and leopards.³ These performances were held in open areas without huge cages or fences. For safety reasons, either the audiences were invited to watch from above, or the beasts performed on the deck of a boat. Less constrained were bear exhibitions, with seemingly clumsy beasts looping the loop and brandishing cudgels.⁴ But the most surpris-

ing feature was the donkey dance.⁵ Donkeys had been associated with stupidity in Chinese culture, but the Song trainers were skilful enough to turn the animals into nimble dancers moving in perfect sympathy to drumbeats.

The form of circus performance did not change much over the following several centuries, except that in the twentieth century the venue gradually moved from outdoors to in. In 1962, a reporter named Mo Yoo paid a visit to the China Circus Group, or CCG (Yoo, 1962). Established in 1958, CCG was at the time famous for animal training, as well as high-wire acrobatics introduced from the Soviet Union. Yoo's report vividly documented the coaching of dogs to calculate numbers, and the alignment of horses to nod curtain calls.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the decline of animal use in circus, both in China and worldwide (Baston, 2016). The remaining animals have been treated in an equal and reciprocal manner, as discussed later in this article when I focus on the two core pieces in the SCW repertoire.

In the twenty-first century, international communication has become a new norm, as has the circus art and business for China. Starting in 2013, China has four times held the China International Circus Festival, or CICF (Guo, 2016). In November, 2017, 25 top circus teams from 18 countries gathered in China for a period of eight days to compete in the fourth CICF (Guangdong Changlong Group, 2017). Apart from CICF, China also hosts invitational tournaments, and once invited the world-renowned Cirque du Soleil

for a nationwide tour (Xu, 2017). In the meantime, China is making great efforts to promote its own international influence in circus by sending teams to attend global tournaments, where Chinese circus artists have impressed the world by incorporating into modern circus such Chinese cultural elements as *The Journey to the West* (Jiang, 2016), one of the four great classical novels of China, and *The Songs of Chu* (Ou, 2012) by the patriotic Chinese poet Yuan Qu.

Programme of the Shanghai Circus World

Shanghai, the international city in eastern China on the Pacific coast, had its historical moments related to circus. In 1863, Richard Risley Carlisle appeared in Shanghai to promote his juggling shows (Emeljanow, 2015). In the following year, Rose Edouin Bryer and George Benjamin William Lewis, both circus performers, were married in Shanghai (Arrighi, 2015). Today, Shanghai Circus World (SCW) is the leading circus venue in China, and will be the focal point of the rest of this article.

SCW covers an area of 22,500 square metres. It is situated in central Shanghai, and easily accessible via public transport. Its main facility is the Acrobatics Field, which can accommodate 1,638 spectators. The Acrobatics Field is equipped with advanced light and sound facilities, as well as a compound lifting stage. Not far away are the rooms where the animals enjoy their leisure time. SCW also provides exhibition, shopping, and catering services to customers in the 12,000-square metre guest centre.

One of the core pieces in the SCW repertoire is 'ERA: Intersection of Time'. This show begins with 'Wheel of Time', with a huge wheel hung in mid-air and rotating constantly. On the perimeters of the huge wheel are three secondary wheels. Half a dozen deft performers walk and jump between the wheels using breathtaking body techniques. The wheels rotate faster and faster, representing the everlasting and dynamic history of human life.

'ERA' enters its most sentimental moment during 'Love of Time', which features only

one actor, one actress, and one violet satin sheet in the air. The couple hold the satin and beautifully hover above the stage, demonstrating marvellous aerobatics. At one moment they appear as a beautiful rosy cloud on the horizon. and at the next, they incarnate a pair of loving swallows intimately flying together.



'Love of Time'. Reproduced by permission of Shanghai Circus World.

The audiences are also excited by 'Motor of Time', the finale of 'ERA'. No sooner has an enormous steel cage appeared on the stage than eight riders dash into it on motorcycles. Within the cage, the riders drive at an extraordinarily high speed but somehow miraculously avoid colliding. Their amazing stunts win enduring applause from the audiences until the end of the 'ERA' show.

But the other core piece of SCW is 'Happy Circus', illustrating the concept of 'green homeland' by integrating elements of ocean, forest, prairie, and city. The performance is given by both actors and animals, the actors interacting equally. Some even play the role of animals to emphasize the philosophy of reciprocity and respect in the human-animal relationship.



'Happy Circus'.
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Circus World.

Happiness is the essence of 'Happy Circus'. In 'Ocean Park', three sea lions dance cheerfully in their aquarium, interpreting the state of harmony and freedom. In 'Forest Fun', monkeys, tigers, parrots, and peacocks assemble to display the colourful forest kingdom, and 'Heroic Prairie' features group equestrians, a bear as a jeep driver, and several opuscula, delivering passion, and romance, as well as the conflict between environment protection and pollution. Finally, 'City Home' incorporates handsome dogs and homing birds to express people's anticipation of a better life.

Shanghai Circus World: Audiences

Many circus spectators have written online reviews after watching the show, which provides data through which researchers can approach and understand these audiences. In China, the largest online review community is Dianping.com.⁶ On this website, more than 3,400 users have written reviews about SCW. These were retrieved for systematic investigation in this article, and first analyzed using a text mining tool,⁷ which is able automatically to identify the major topics from a number of documents, and then manually select those to be quoted.

Text mining reveals that circus audiences write the reviews over fourteen topics from

three categories – see the table on page 371 for the topics identified, as well as the frequently used words within those topics. Category 1 is of 'Audience Identities', and includes the following key terms: 'kid', 'childhood memory', 'foreigner', and 'companion'.

Specifically, many parents come to watch the circus with their children. One spectator recalled:

I went to SCW with my son on a weekend. He was so excited when he saw the tigers. The performance has two sessions, and during the intermission, he and the other children played with the clowns happily.

The second session features funny interactions between actors and audiences. Before we leave, my son took several photos with the big dogs and horses. He was really having a wonderful day.

Some adult audience members preserve memories of childhood, when they first engage with circus. One spectator remembered:

This is a place that carries my childhood memory. When I was a child, I came here with my parents to watch the performance. Nowadays, I am a mother myself, and I am bringing my child. How time flies!

There is also a significant proportion of foreign spectators, because circus is indeed a strongly international performing art. According to another description:

In the evening, you will see a long row of tour buses waiting at the gate. They have just brought in hundreds of foreign tourists. It seems that SCW has more foreign audiences than domestic ones. Along the streets, vendors are trying to persuade foreign consumers to purchase artifacts. Inside the Acrobatics Field, the Chinese-style acrobatics have won enthusiastic cheers and whistling from our foreign friends.

Audiences also frequently mention their companions in the reviews, affirming that circus watching is an important activity for family and social networking. One spectator stated:

I came to watch circus with some of my friends. We were all amazed by the wonderful performance. Nowadays, people would prefer going to cinemas or theatres. They spend less time on enjoying circus, acrobatics, or folk arts. But from now on I have added circus into my list of social activities.

Category 2 of the table is 'Performance Description'. It includes the following topics: 'breathtaking performance', 'motorcycle', 'animal', 'professionalism', and 'atmosphere'. To be specific, audiences are very much impressed by the breathtaking moments represented by the motorcycle display. Meanwhile, audiences also recall much about the animals. As for the atmosphere, spectators describe the scene as 'interactive', 'warm', and 'successful'. Regarding the actors and actresses, they are sincerely respectful of their professionalism. Praise includes:

The cast members have been highly dedicated. There is some time when animals, especially beasts, are in low spirits and difficult to master. The beast master would gracefully reposition the animals and start again, in respect for the audience.

I have not been a fan of stunts. Watching risky stunts does not give me enjoyment; it actually makes me feel worried and suffering. A short glimpse of a stunt would remind me of the bitterness of offstage training. The actors and actresses must have been practising days and nights to achieve such hyperbolic body flexibility. Their background stories are countless and untold.

Category 3 of the table is 'Supportive Issues'. It includes the following topics: 'location', 'stage facility', 'ticket booking', 'service

facility', and 'price'. Because SCW is located directly above a subway station, it has very convenient access. Audiences have also noticed the efforts made in stage facilities such as lighting and scenic background. Most spectators book tickets online. The service facility has been considered as 'old' but 'clean'. Finally, most spectators believe the ticket for an SCW show is inexpensive and worth the price.

Based on this sampling of the online reviews, it can be seen that circus has maintained its popularity over the past decades, with a liking for the form being inherited by the younger generation primarily through family traditions. Meanwhile, circus has also gradually expanded its social range, with more and more people choosing to watch with friends and colleagues.

Conclusions

Circus in China has many similarities with circus around the globe. Originating in equestrian performance, the form has evolved through several stages, including the incorporation of more trained animals, the move indoors, the adoption of state-of-the-art technologies, and the re-examination of the human-animal relationship.

Chinese circus once had a unique history of participating in diplomatic protocol and political propaganda. But in the twenty-first century, similarities of purpose have outweighed the differences, manifested by the frequent multinational communication between all types of circus organizations in China and worldwide.

Looking back over the past 250 years, it is gratifying to witness the advancing transformation of circus. What of the next 250 years? Will the circus business continue to flourish, or will it be replaced by emerging forms of entertainment? This is not an urgent question, but surely an issue for serious reflection. Luckily, previous circus practices have precipitated sufficient understanding of human-animal relationships and between humans ourselves, guiding future practitioners to the protection and extension of the art of circus.

Table of topics identified from online reviews

Category 1: Audience Identities

Kid	kid	performance	happy	nice	baby
	excellent	parent	experience	excited	circus
Childhood memory	circus	watch	childhood	school	acrobatics
	Shanghai	activity	spring	magic	grow
Foreigner	foreigner	Shanghai	tourist	gate	evening
	occupancy	performance	audience	group	bus
Companion	excellent	next	friend	opportunity	satisfied
	family	daughter	parent	son	husband

Category 2: Performance Description

Breathtaking performance	performance	splendid	actor	breathtaking	exciting
	action	nervous	worried	dangerous	difficult
Motorcycle	motorcycle	perform	program	last	air
	ride	fly	breathtaking	cage	amazing
Animal	animal	tiger	interaction	lion	horse
	lovely	dog	monkey	parrot	sea lion
Professionalism	actor	training	stage	year	minute
	effort	admire	action	professionalism	dedicate
Atmosphere	performance	actor	audience	program	applaud
	entire	atmosphere	success	interaction	warm

Category 3: Supportive Issues

Location	Shanghai	traffic	subway	building	exterior
	station	shape	ball	environment	walk
Stage facility	light	stage	music	effect	traditional
	Chinese	instrument	background	band	design
Ticket booking	ticket	advance	reserve	staff	seat
	phone	groupon	online	time	book
Service facility	program	environment	site	facility	compact
	old	place	AC	year	clean
Price	price	expensive	ticket	worth	inexpensive
	ERA	schoolmate	free	truly	company

Notes

1. Yi Zhao, *Leisure Miscellanies*.
2. Katharine A. Carl, *With the Empress Dowager of China*.
3. Yuanlao Meng, *Kaifeng: a Documentary*, Vol. 7.
4. Anonymous, *Celebrities of the West Lake*.
5. Xiu Ouyang, *A Tale of Song*, Vol. 2.
6. <www.dianping.com>.
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My thanks to Zhihong Zhou and Jiayi Ma for their contribution to this article.