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Culture at the place: Chinese travelers' perceptions of touristification of selected traditional performances in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The uniqueness of Malaysia's multicultural heritage is inextricably linked to its geographical spaces. As important carriers of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), traditional performing arts form distinctive cultural landscapes through their organic integration with specific geographical environments, architectural spaces, and ecosystems. Based on cultural geography and tourism experience theories, this study examines how Malaysia's traditional performing arts (such as Penang's Nyonya dance, Sarawak's longhouse ritual dances, and Kelantan's shadow puppetry) attract Chinese independent travelers through their spatial characteristics, while analyzing the spatial factors affecting tourists' in-depth experiences. Using mixed methods including questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 226 Chinese independent travelers, the study found that 94.5% of respondents showed strong interest in experiencing performances in their original spatial contexts, particularly those closely connected with specific geographical environments. However, approximately 78% of tourists reported difficulties in accessing information about performance spaces, understanding their cultural significance, and physically reaching the venues. The research further reveals that the connection between performing arts and geographical spaces significantly influences tourists' cultural identification and depth of experience. Based on empirical findings, the study proposes solutions including establishing multilingual promotional channels, designing "performance-location" themed tour routes, and enhancing digital media marketing strategies. These findings provide new perspectives for spatial planning in Malaysia's cultural tourism and offer valuable references for the tourism activation of intangible cultural heritage worldwide.

KEYWORDS: Malaysian traditional performance, Chinese independent travelers, Intangible Cultural Heritage tourism, preservation of traditional performance

1. Introduction

Conventional performances are a vital aspect of intangible cultural heritage, and they are rich cultural signs that convey the identity, history, and art of different ethnic nations and groups or 'safeguard', their valued cultural forms. The implementation of the Convention often requires selecting 'representative' elements to display to outside audiences, sometimes for financial gain. Missing from both the Con . The performances tend to be passed from generation to generation and exist as a dynamic heritage that demands intentional actions to safeguard, especially during a period dominated by accelerated globalization and homogenization of culture (Liu, 2022). The preservation of traditional performances has become an increasing priority for researchers and policymakers, who discuss different strategies for their sustainability. Some support educational programs focusing on cultural sensitivity and intergenerational transfer (Al Halbusi et al., 2021), while others emphasize the use of digital technologies, including virtual reality and online repositories, in reviving interest and accessibility (Nikolakopoulou et al., 2022). Yet, despite these, traditional performances are still subject to outside forces, mainly because of changing social interests, urbanization, and domination by digital entertainment, which routinely drowns out cultural heritage for modern entertainment (Carnegie et al., 2022) heritage and scientific collections of public not-for-profit museums, art galleries and similar repositories has been subject to considerable discussion and debate for the past three decades. Our purpose is to critically examine this perennial financial reporting controversary, in the context of the three conceptions of accounting: accounting as technical practice, social practice and moral practice as articulated in the definition of accounting proposed by Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b. While such traditional performances struggle with contemporary entertainment industries, the need arises to seek new modes of preservation and appreciation such that they relate to modern audience sensitivities while preserving their cultural integrity.

Traditional performing arts' spatial and regional characteristics constitute the core dimensions of their cultural continuity. As tangible carriers of local culture, traditional performances construct an irreplaceable cultural identity through the triple interaction of performance venues (such as opera stages and ancestral hall plazas), regional symbolic systems (such as dialectal singing styles and ritual attire), and ecological environments (such as landscape-based live theaters) (Lei, 2010). For tourists, this spatial practice serves as a multisensory immersive experience—reinforcing cultural identity through mechanisms such as decoding visual symbols and evoking auditory memories (Cohen, 1988)— and forms a cognitive framework for cross-cultural understanding. As revealed by Urry's (1990) "tourist gaze" theory, when the canal space of the Venice Carnival and the walled setting of the Pingyao Shehuo Festival are juxtaposed geographically, the spatial differences highlight cultural particularities, prompting tourists to engage in deeper reflection on "local knowledge" (Geertz, 1983). In this context, the significance of tourists lies not merely in witnessing performances but in immersing themselves within specific cultural spaces. Through multidimensional experiences— such as embodied practices (e.g., participating in interactive rituals), emotional resonance (e.g., empathizing with local memories), and cognitive reconstruction (e.g., reflecting on cultural differences)—tourists undergo an identity transformation from "sightseers" to "cultural interpreters" (Wearing et al., 2016; Ourahmoune, 2016). The way spatial environments facilitate this transformation not only enriches the depth of the tourism experience but also, through the bodily engagement and meaning-making of tourists, may provide a new pathway for the contemporary transmission of traditional performing arts.

Tourism has become a growing force for the revitalization and diffusion of traditional performances, creating new avenues for the development of cultural heritage, regional identity, and economic growth (Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022). Traditional performances in most destinations have become the focus of tourist attraction, enabling people to interact and appreciate local cultures' aesthetic and historical values. Malaysia, with its rich multicultural heritage, has incorporated traditional performances like Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong, and Zapin into its tourism industry, employing them as instruments to enrich tourist experiences and foster cultural appreciation (Hanifah et al., 2020). However, the commercialization of these performances has raised issues of touristification, where artistic and cultural expressions are modified to suit the needs and expectations of international tourists at the cost of their original meanings and social contexts (Xiang & Mohamad, 2023). Among the growing cultural tourist market, independent Chinese travelers have been highly interested in experiential and real cultural experiences, which has placed their reactions toward performance-based touristification at the center of scholarly research (Katahenggam & Wee, 2024). Discovering how Chinese independent travelers interpret and participate in Malaysian traditional performances is beneficial since it provides important data regarding the evolving forces of cultural tourism, heritage preservation, and overseas visitor expectations. As increasing reliance on tourism is being used to fund traditional performances, consideration must be

given to how far touristification adds to or cheapens their cultural value so that the use of heritage within tourism is sustainable in addition to being responsive to its inherent worth.

This study applies a questionnaire survey to collect data, intending to examine the extent to which Chinese independent tourists visit traditional performances during trips to Malaysia and the determinants of their selection of these performances. By examining the tourists' cultural origin, travel motivations, and interest levels in traditional performance, the study seeks to find the primary determinants that shape their decision-making. Understanding these tendencies will enable the development of certain strategies for innovative presentation and cultural promotion of traditional performances, updating them to meet Malaysia's tourist sector. This study will also enlighten us on how different presentation modes, marketing efforts, and contextual storytelling can enhance audience interest, making traditional performances appealing to modern travelers while preserving their cultural authenticity. Through these findings, the research aims to bridge the gap in between heritage maintenance and tourism expansion, offering proposals that balance authenticity with contemporary visitor needs.

Aside from tourist tastes, this study will explore Chinese independent travelers' attitudes and opinions regarding Malaysia's multiethnic culture, especially with regard to their knowledge and appreciation of traditional dances and performing arts. By examining how much tourists identify with and enjoy different cultural attributes, this research will determine how these aspects draw tourists, improve tourist satisfaction, and add value to the overall trip experience. Apart from establishing the significance of traditional performance in influencing culture tourism, these lessons will guide the processes to enhance integration within Malaysia's larger tourism network. The research also aims to serve pragmatic recommendations that stakeholders in tourism, such as the policymakers, cultural bodies, and traditional performers, will abide by to ensure that traditional performances constitute an integral sustainable element of Malaysian tourism. By strengthening the bond between travelers and cultural heritage, this research will ensure the long-term conservation of traditional dance and economic development and cultural exchange through tourism.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Independent traveling and cultural consumption

Independent travel has remarkably affected how tourists interact with cultural heritage, moving from passive voyeurism to active engagement and personalized discovery (Cai et al., 2021). Independent travelers differ from mainstream package tourists because they desire flexibility, genuineness, and experiential interactions, prioritizing in-depth cultural interaction over set itineraries (Cheng, Tian, & Chiu, 2024). The emergence of digital travel platforms, social media, and review systems has also enabled these travelers to self-plan their travels based on real-time information and peer feedback (Akpan et al., 2024). Studies indicate that Chinese independent travelers, for instance, are motivated by the quest for cultural discovery, wanting authentic and educational interactions with local cultures rather than commercialized tourist attractions (Carmody et al., 2025). However, their cultural authenticity is shaped by numerous factors like individual expectations, media portrayal, and comparative exposure to their own culture (Katahenggam & Wee, 2024). This suggests that while some Chinese tourists engage in historically precise and unaltered performances, others appreciate contemporary interpretations that make cultural experiences more convenient and entertaining (T. (Tina) Li, Liu, & Soutar, 2021). Therefore, tourism stakeholders must strike a balance between preserving cultural purity and keeping up with evolving tastes among independent travelers.

The growing need for cultural consumption among independent travelers has seen the rediscovery of the old art forms to suit multitudes. Cultural performances like Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong, and Chinese Opera have been marketed as heritage tourism products in Malaysia, where adaptations have been made to suit international tourists' tastes (Zainal et al., 2024). Though this adaptation promotes economic viability and cultural visibility, it also evokes controversy surrounding commodification and authenticity (Katahenggam & Wee, 2024). Other scholars contend that tourist-hinged adaptations might undermine the depth of the culture and ritual value of performances such that they become watered-down entertainment (Pandey et al., 2022). Others claim that adaptation and creativity are vital for maintaining existing art forms relevant in the contemporary tourism sector (Leung, Ho, & Leung, 2023). For independent travelers from China, authenticity and cultural value in the performance of their heritage arts can be shaped by their previous familiarity with Chinese arts, resulting in subjective judgments on what makes for an authentic experience (Zhang, 2023). This factor shows how, in addition to passive enjoyment, cultural consumption can be about one's own experiences and comparisons and how these guide travelers' constructions of meaning for traditional performances during travel.

2.2 Traditional performances as tourism product

Traditional performances are now strategic tourism commodities, created to promote a nation's cultural identity, destination image, and economic value (Kurnianto, 2023). In Malaysia, traditional performances like Wayang Kulit (shadow puppetry), Mak Yong (dance-drama), and Dikir Barat (group singing performance) have been re-packaged and marketed for both local and foreign tourists (Hijjas, 2021). These performances are typically presented in heritage parks, cultural villages, and themed parks, with narration, language, and length adjustments to suit different audiences (Li et al., 2023). Although these adaptations increase accessibility and marketability, they also bring into question the loss of cultural authenticity and indigenous values (Della Torre, 2021). Academics contend that the the commercialization of traditional performances results in a loss of depth of culture, turning them into commodity tourist shows instead og genuine expressions of heritage (Lim, Rasul, Kumar, & Ala, 2022)no review, to date, has provided a comprehensive overview of the past, present, and future trends of CE. Instead, past reviews on CE are often limited to conceptual (e.g., construct. Nevertheless, This is an inherent contradiction in cultural heritage tourism, and tourism planners must create sustainable models, balancing economic gains with the preservation of culture (Gjødsbøl, 2023).

Despite fears of commercialization, tourism helps to sustain traditional performances by offering economic benefits that favor artists, cultural organizations, and the community (Kurnianto, 2023). Without tourism's financial support, numerous traditional arts are at risk of decline as locals lose interest and cultural participation changes between generations (Ananda et al., 2023). Independent Chinese travelers' understanding of traditional performances as tourism products is informed by pre-trip information searches, individual expectations, and past experiences with Chinese heritage performances (Xie, Siau, & Liu, 2024). Others welcome the attempt to globalize and modernize these performances, while others find fault in losing depth and ritualistic meaning (Arts, 2021). In addition, digital platforms and social media have expanded the debate regarding cultural performance quality and authenticity, changing expectations and selections among future visitors (Rivero et al., 2023)thus generating new ways of communicating and educating about the heritage they preserve. This article explores the indissoluble relationship established between these emerging edu-communication models and the spaces destined to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage (ICH. This new dynamic underscore the requirement for adaptive tourism strategies that support traditional performances being both economically sustainable and culturally authentic, maintaining their core while complying with the modern demands of tourism.

2.3 Touristifaction traditional performance of Malaysia

Touristification of Indigenous performances in Malaysia captures the intricate dynamics between cultural heritage, economic viability, and changing audience demands (Khalid & Hussin, 2022). As cultural performances become more incorporated into tourism, they are structurally adapted to increase marketability, accessibility, and entertainment (Villiers, 2021). This trend is seen in Malaysia in the transformation of Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong, and other traditional performances, where the old scripts are trimmed, multilingual storytelling is used, and new sound and light effects are added (Zakaria & Hua, 2024). Although such modifications increase audience reach, they also create fear of cultural watering down and erosion of traditional richness (Hu, Ng, & Liu, 2021). Studies show that Chinese independent tourists react to touristified performances in varied ways; some appreciate the attempt to enhance traditional forms of art, but others disapprove of commercialization and the act of staging such performances (Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020). They are influenced by digital discourse, online reviews, and first-hand experiences with traditional Chinese performances and use them to determine authenticity within a foreign culture (J. Li, 2023).

In spite of these issues, some researchers contend that touristification is a means of cultural preservation that keeps traditional performances economically sustainable and culturally relevant in an increasingly changing global tourism environment (Cheung & Yiu, 2022). Without the financial support and visibility tourism provides, numerous traditional art forms are likely to disappear as interest dwindles and generations change their level of cultural involvement (Lim et al., 2022). Malaysian tourism players are, therefore proactively formulating approaches towards cultural preservation and modernization such that performances maintain their artistic and historical value while being attractive to international audiences (Hamzah et al., 2025). Independent travelers feature prominently in this debate since their call for experiential and authentic experiences can redefine tourism policies and cultural performance acculturation (Carmody et al., 2025). With the growth of tourism, the problem is to develop sustainable models of cultural heritage tourism where economic prosperity does not result in loss of culture but instead provides a ground on which traditional performances both in their original and modified forms, would flourish (Xiang & Mohamad, 2023).

2.4 The Role of Space and Locality in Traditional Performances and Tourist Perception

The spatiality of traditional performances is central to constructing audience perception and experience, especially in the context of cultural tourism (Hamzah et al., 2025). Performance spaces, whether produced in formal theaters, heritage sites, or open-air cultural villages, determine the ways in which cultural expressions are framed and experienced by tourists. Historic performances held in actual settings—historic temples, rural villages, or cultural centers of heritage—provide an immersive experience that increases the cultural relevance and authenticity of the performance (Cheung & Yiu, 2022). The settings provide greater proximity between performers and the audience since the physical space enforces the traditional and ritualistic nature of the art form. But in the tourism context, performances are usually transferred to commercialized spaces like upscale hotels, theme parks, or upgraded theaters, which could result in the loss of authenticity and cultural richness (Lim et al., 2022)no review, to date, has provided a comprehensive overview of the past, present, and future trends of CE. Instead, past reviews on CE are often limited to conceptual (e.g., construct. The commodification of space may turn performances into spectacles that aim to serve tourist demands, possibly changing their initial meaning and purpose (Villiers, 2021). This brings up questions of whether authentic performances in tourist areas can maintain their cultural authenticity or become cosmetic exhibitions unattached to their historical and social context.

For independent Chinese tourists, the spatial environment of performances becomes fundamental in influencing their perception of authenticity and connection with Malaysian traditional arts. Scholarly studies indicate that Chinese tourists tend to look for cultural experiences that are "authentic" and closely associated with historical and native traditions instead of excessively commercialized and staged representations of heritage (Cheung & Yiu, 2022). Nevertheless, performances presented in commercialized or modernized settings can foster feelings of disconnection, enabling tourists to consider them an entertainment option instead of a genuine cultural expression (Khalid & Hussin, 2022). Although commercialized performance venues are characterized by ease of access, convenience, and standardized experiences that are attractive to foreign travelers, they can be deprived of the atmospheric and contextual content that influences cultural engagement (Xiang & Mohamad, 2023). Therefore, balancing accessibility with authenticity in the spatial arrangement of traditional performances is an utmost challenge for Malaysia's tourism industry. Knowing how Chinese independent travelers perceive and react to various performance spaces will enable tourism stakeholders to develop strategies that preserve cultural integrity but promote tourist experience and satisfaction.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on the perceptions of Chinese independent travelers regarding the touristification of traditional performances in Malaysia, employing a quantitative research method that combines secondary data collection and questionnaire surveys to explore Chinese tourists' awareness and interest in Malaysian traditional dance. As a central Southeast Asian nation, Malaysia boasts a superior geographical location in the tropics with abundant natural landscapes and a multicultural society. Its proximity to Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines positions it as a vital hub connecting Asia with other continents. Malaysia shares a border with Thailand, is linked to Singapore via the Johor-Singapore Causeway in the south, faces Indonesia's Kalimantan Island across the sea to the east, and is close to the Philippines' Palawan Island to the north, making it a convergence point for transportation and culture in Southeast Asia (Figure 1). This unique geographical location establishes Malaysia as a regional transportation hub establishes Malaysia as a regional transportation hub and fosters its role as a melting pot of diverse cultures. The Buddhist culture of Thailand, the modern urban landscape of Singapore, the tropical charm of Indonesia's Bali, and the island allure of the Philippines have all profoundly influenced Malaysia's culture and tourism industry, offering visitors rich cultural experiences and further enhancing its competitiveness as an international tourist destination. Moreover, Malaysia's proximity to China, with short flight durations and no time difference, provides significant convenience for Chinese tourists. This geographical advantage, combined with its abundant tourism resources—including beautiful beaches, tropical rainforests, modern cities, and unique cultural heritage—collectively forms Malaysia's strong appeal as a tourist destination. By studying the preferences and interests of Chinese independent travelers, we can better understand the potential of traditional Malaysian performances in the tourism market and provide a foundation for promoting deeper collaboration between China and Malaysia in the fields of tourism and culture.

3.1 Research Location

The collection of secondary data used in this study focused on the development of tourism in Malaysia, traditional dance performances as an intangible cultural heritage, including the number of Chinese travelers to Malaysia in recent years, and the status of information on traditional dance performances in Malaysia from the perspective of Chinese tourists. The questionnaire survey targeted Chinese Independent travelers, referring to tourists who travel independently, not relying on tour groups or travel agencies but planning and arranging their own itineraries, freely choosing destinations, transportation, accommodations, and activities. This type of travel is flexible and allows travelers to explore destinations more freely, customizing their travel plans according to personal interests and preferences. Surveying Independent travelers provides a more representative view of the preferences of Chinese tourists. A total of 226 valid questionnaires were collected through purposive random sampling, with the help of travel agency consultants who assisted in distributing the questionnaires. The background survey revealed 104 male respondents (46%) and 122 female respondents (54%). Regarding educational background, 88.2% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree or higher. This indicates that independent travelers typically consider language and communication issues and have certain educational requirements. The questionnaire consisted of 6 major items and 9 sub-items, including 1)Demographic information; 2) Chinese tourists' perception of Malaysia's multicultural culture; 3) Channels through which Chinese tourists obtain information about Malaysia; 4) Chinese tourists' preferences for participating in Malaysian activities; 5) Whether Chinese tourists are interested in watching Malaysian traditional dances; 6) Factors affecting Chinese tourists' participation in or viewing of Malaysian traditional performances. All questions were initially written in Chinese, translated into English, and analyzed after collection. Data analysis mainly employed descriptive statistics, calculating each survey item's frequency distribution and percentages. Descriptive statistics summarized the demographic characteristics of the respondents (such as gender and educational background) and their response distribution for each survey question. The study identified key trends and proportions in Chinese Independent travelers' interest in and preferences for Malaysian traditional dances by analyzing frequency distributions and percentages. This approach gave a clear picture of the data and enabled an understanding of the general travel preferences of Chinese tourists. Ethical principles were strictly adhered to during the research process to maintain participants' integrity and safety. All participants gave informed consent, ensuring they knew the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their answers. No identifiable personal information was gathered during the survey in a manner that violated the participants' privacy. Also, data analysis and presentation were in terms of aggregate and no participant identification to ensure protection against disclosure. It ensured ethics was upheld to maintain the findings' integrity and protect participants' rights.

4. Results And Discussion

4.1 Result

4.1.1 Perception of Cultural Identity of Multiracial Malaysians

This survey probed the cultural identity of Chinese independent travelers and how they viewed Malaysia's multiracial culture. The results show that out of the 226 respondents, 85 said they could feel very strongly about Malaysia's rich multiracial culture, while 81 said they felt it even more strongly, reporting that they felt it very deeply. In addition, 45 respondents reported that they had a moderate degree of recognition, 13 said that they did not feel it was there, and just 2 said that they felt it was completely lacking. These findings reveal that 93% of the Chinese independent travelers rated their feelings about Malaysia's multiracial culture as above average. This reflects the significant impact of Malaysia's multicultural environment in enriching visitors' travel experience, creating an indelible mark on their trip.

4.1.2 Information Sources and Cultural Engagement of Chinese Independent Travelers in Malaysia

The survey results on the channels utilized by Chinese independent travelers to obtain information about Malaysia are presented in Figure 2. The data reveals that social media is the most significant source for accessing local information, followed by recommendations from friends and relatives, travel websites, television programs, and other channels. This underscores the pivotal role of digital platforms in shaping travel planning, decision-making, and destination engagement for modern travelers. Meanwhile, Figure 3 highlights the findings of a survey focused on Chinese travelers' experiences with traditional Malaysian performances. Out of the 226 respondents, only 21.6% had watched traditional Malaysian dances, while the remaining 78.4% had not engaged in this cultural activity. These results suggest that, despite the availability of Malaysia's rich cultural heritage, most Chinese tourists may not actively seek out or participate in such traditional experiences during their visit. This highlights a potential opportunity further to promote Malaysia's cultural
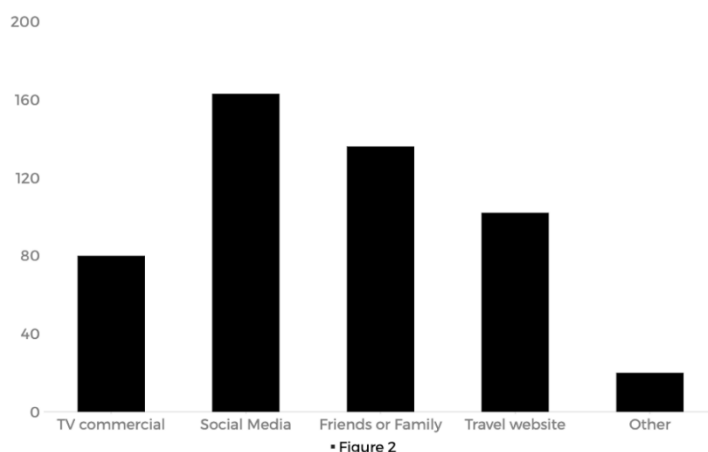
attractions to international travelers.

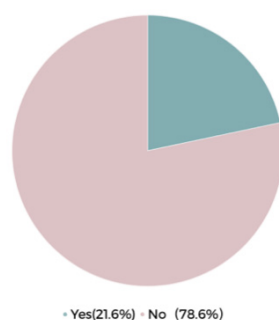Figure 2: Channels to learn about Malaysian multiracial culture.

• Yes(21.6%) • No (78.6%)

Figure 3: A survey on whether Chinese independent travelers have watched Malaysian traditional performances.

4.1.3 Preference in Participating in Malaysian Cultural Activities

Table 1 reveals the preferences of Chinese independent travelers for tourism resources in Malaysia, ranked in the following order: "Vacation Island" > "Ethnic Architecture" > "Special Diet" > "Festivals (Traditional Performance/ Activity)" > "Ethnic Costumes" > "Ethnic Art" > "Others." This ranking clearly prioritizes natural attractions, such as vacation islands, followed by cultural and culinary experiences. When comparing these preferences to broader trends in Chinese tourists' interest in Malaysia's tourism offerings, it is evident that the top three priorities are "vacation islands," "ethnic architecture," and "special food," reflecting the appeal of Malaysia's diverse natural landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Furthermore, according to the survey results (Table 2), a striking 94.5% of the 226 respondents expressed a positive and enthusiastic attitude toward the idea of participating in and watching Malaysian ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) traditional performances, indicating a strong interest in engaging with the country's cultural traditions.

Table 1: Survey on Chinese Independent Travelers Preference for Tourism Resources in Malaysia (Multiple Choice)

Number	Item	Number of options	Important
1	Specialty Food	117	3
2	Ethnic Architecture	119	2
3	Ethnic Costumes	91	5
4	Vacation Island	131	1

5	Ethnic Festivals (Traditional Performance/ Activity)	92	4
6	Ethnic Art	51	6
7	Others	16	7️

Table 2: Interest in seeing a traditional Malaysian performance

Option	Number of participants	Percentage
Interested	86	38%
Very interested	75	33.10%
Average	53	23.40%
Not interested	10	4.40%
Very not interested	2	0.80%

4.1.4 Participation in Malaysian Traditional Performances

Among the 226 respondents, a mere 9.2% reported having attended a traditional Malaysian dance, performance, or cultural event, highlighting a relatively low level of engagement with these cultural activities. In contrast, a significant majority of 90.8% indicated that they had not participated in such events, suggesting a notable gap in exposure to traditional Malaysian cultural expressions (Figure 4).

· NO(90.8%) · YES(9.2%)

Figure 4: Percentage of Chinese independent travelers participating in Malaysian traditional performances.

4.1.7 The factors influencing watching and participating in Malaysian traditional performances

As seen from Table 3, location distance was the main factor considered by Chinese independent travelers, accounting for 62.8% of the total. The second choice was the issue of performance time, accounting for 57.5% of the total. The third choice was not being able to understand the content of the performance, accounting for 47.7%. This was followed closely by the price of tickets and safety in getting to the theatre, with 39.8% and 26.9%, respectively, and other factors, with 6.6%.

Table 3: The factors that affect tourists' willingness to participate in watching traditional performances in Malaysia.

Option	Number of participants	Number of people who chose the program	Percentage
Distance of location	226	142	62.80%
Inappropriate time of performance	226	130	57.50%

Inability to understand the content of the performance	226	108	47.70%
Ticket price	226	90	39.80%
Safety concerns (Safety on the way to and after the show)	226	61	26.90%
Others	226	15	6.60%

From the above data, it can be found that most Chinese independent travelers actively participate in Malaysian traditional performances and are willing to experience this cultural tradition. However, many Chinese independent travelers are unable to participate in Malaysian traditional dance performances mainly due to cross-cultural barriers and the lack of information about Malaysian traditional dance, which is also in line with the researcher's view. In the following section, the researcher will discuss the intercultural barriers and cultural publicity of Malaysian traditional performances and give recommendations.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 The Key Role of Space and Locality in Tourists' Perception

Research has shown that space and locality are not merely physical backdrops for cultural performances but are fundamental elements in shaping tourists' perceptions and cultural experiences. Their combination influences how tourists interpret cultural performances and directly affects their sense of immersion, emotional resonance, and cultural identity. Space and locality impact tourists' perceptions primarily in three ways:

Firstly, Space Shapes the Expression of Cultural Performances. Space is not just a stage for cultural performances; it plays a crucial role in determining performance forms, presentation techniques, and audience interaction (Davis-Fisch, 2017). Different spatial environments directly influence cultural performances' structure, rhythm, and audience experience. For example, 1. The Influence of Religious and Ritual Spaces: Traditional performances in front of mosques or temples often carry a strong ritualistic atmosphere. For example, the Zapin dance in Malaysia adopts a more solemn style during religious celebrations, with slower movements and a sacred musical ambiance (Mustaffa, N., & Idris, M., 2020). However, the same dance becomes more entertaining in folk celebrations, with a livelier and more upbeat tempo. 2. Differences Between Urban and Rural Environments: Cultural performances vary significantly between urban and rural settings. For instance, lion dance performances in front of Chinese temples emphasize ritual significance, highlighting the connection between tradition and faith. In contrast, high-pole lion dance performances in commercial plazas focus on competitiveness and visual impact, catering to the aesthetic preferences of modern urban audiences (Figure 5). Thus, when tourists experience the same cultural performance in different spatial settings, they can observe its adaptive variations, leading to a deeper understanding of the multidimensional nature of cultural performances. This spatial diversity makes cultural performances dynamic and closely intertwined with their environments, reinforcing their cultural expressiveness.

Figure 5: Lion Dance Performances in Traditional Malaysian Temples (Left) and Modern Shopping Malls (Right)

Source from: (Left)https://forum.ettoday.net/news/1114680

(Right) http://news.lnd.com.cn/system/2022/02/07/030291966.shtml

Secondly, locality endows cultural performances with a unique identity. Cultural performances are rooted in specific regions and deeply reflect the local natural environment, historical heritage, and social structures. Therefore, locality plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of cultural performances. Studies have shown that the natural environment influences performance styles. For example, eastern Malaysia's Magunatip bamboo dance (Figure 6) is known for its precise steps and fast-paced rhythm. Its movements are inspired by the surrounding jungle environment, mimicking the interactions between hunters and nature. In contrast, the Joget dance (Figure 7) from western Malaysia, influenced by coastal trade culture, features smoother, more fluid movements and music with an exotic flair. At the same time, the locality fosters a multicultural fusion in performance arts. As a multiethnic nation, Malaysia's performing arts incorporate elements from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous traditions. For instance, Malaysian lion dance performances integrate local traditional instruments such as the Rebana Ubi and Kompang (Wang & Wang, 2016), preserving the essence of Chinese culture while also showcasing localized characteristics that shape a distinct cultural identity. As a result, when tourists experience cultural performances in different regions, they observe the diversity in performance styles and gain insights into the unique cultural identities formed through historical and regional developments. This sense of identity fosters deeper emotional resonance and cultural understanding, enhancing the overall experience of cultural performances.

Figure 6: Magunatip dance
Source from: https://www.mysabah.com/wordpress/murut-bamboo-dance-magunatip/

Figure 7: Joget Dance
Source from: https://www.topasiatour.com/malaysia/traditional-dance-in-malaysia.html

Thirdly, experiencing authentic traditional cultural spaces and regional support; In today's digital era, technology has positively transmitted and preserved traditional culture. However, while visual recordings (such as photos and videos) can capture the visual elements of cultural performances, they cannot fully recreate the atmosphere, interactivity, and immersive experience of the real environment. Their specific regional surroundings often shape cultural performances, closely linked to natural landscapes, architectural styles, and community interactions, forming a unique cultural context. However, in visual recordings, these crucial elements are often diminished or lost, making it difficult for viewers to gain a complete cultural experience. For example, the traditional Malay dance *Mak Yong* (Figure 8) and Sabah's *Sumazau* dance (Figure 9) originated in natural environments that deeply influenced their artistic expression. When these performances are recorded, viewers can only see the dance movements but cannot fully experience the cultural depth and interactive atmosphere that the original setting provides. The limitations of recorded media often result in fragmented cultural understanding, preventing audiences from fully immersing themselves in the spatial and cultural essence of the performance. Therefore, to truly understand and experience cultural performances, it is essential for tourists to physically enter authentic regional environments, engaging multiple senses—including sight, hearing, smell, and touch—to fully appreciate the original charm and depth of these cultural expressions.

Figure 8: Images of Mak Yong
Source from: **https://www.holidify.com/pages/dances-of-malaysia-3862.html**

Figure 9: Images of Sumazau Dance
Source from:
https://www.mysabah.com/wordpress/sumazau-dance-of-kadazandusun/

4.2.2 Media and Malaysian traditional dance understanding among Chinese tourists
Traditional dance, as a form of cultural expression, carries deep historical and cultural significance, shaping cultural identity and transmitting traditional values. Preserving and promoting traditional dance contribute to cultural sustainability and enhance cultural heritage's economic and tourism potential (Ariffin et al., 2023). This study found that Chinese independent travelers demonstrate a strong interest in and identification with Malaysia's multiethnic culture, with 93% of the 226 respondents expressing a high level of cultural recognition. This indicates that Chinese tourists support and

appreciate Malaysia's multicultural landscape, which in turn can provide sustainable economic and cultural benefits for Malaysia's ethnic communities and traditional performances. Furthermore, this strong identification lays the foundation for developing in-depth cultural tourism experiences targeted at Chinese tourists.

The study also investigated the primary channels through which Chinese independent travelers learn about Malaysian culture. The findings reveal that social media is the most influential platform, followed by family recommendations, travel websites, and TV media. This aligns with the broader trend where new media has gradually replaced traditional TV as the dominant medium for cultural communication (Cai et al., 2021). Social media's portability, rapid dissemination, and cost-effectiveness make it a preferred tool for spreading cultural information (Rasaputhra et al., 2024)adopting social commerce for day-to-day operations has increasingly become an important phenomenon. Several factors have been identified by previous researchers regarding the adoption of social commerce, but academic research is scarce on the relationship between the factors influencing social commerce adoption and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs. Chen et al., (2022) further argued that social media platforms offer low participation barriers, allowing widespread dissemination of information at minimal cost.

For example, a search for "Malaysian dance" on WeChat's in-app browser on May 29, 2024, revealed that the top video was a traditional dance performance at Melaka Nyonya Village, which had been uploaded by a Chinese tourist a month earlier. With over one billion active monthly users, WeChat is considered one of China's most popular social media platforms (Hijjas, 2021) (Figure 10-11). This highlights the power of user-generated content in increasing cultural visibility. Thus, leveraging social media platforms is essential for the widespread promotion and understanding of Malaysia's traditional dances, ensuring they reach and resonate with a larger audience.

In addition to social media, other highly utilized sources of cultural information include family recommendations, travel websites, and TV media. These channels remain valuable touchpoints for Chinese tourists when exploring Malaysian culture. However, effective promotional strategies require platform-specific approaches due to variations in social media usage across different regions. For instance, in China, WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin are among the most popular platforms. Therefore, creating engaging content and interactive campaigns on these platforms can effectively capture the attention of Chinese tourists. On the other hand, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter hold greater influence for international markets. As such, Malaysia's cultural promotion strategies should be diversified across different media ecosystems to enhance domestic cultural preservation efforts and Malaysia's international cultural image.
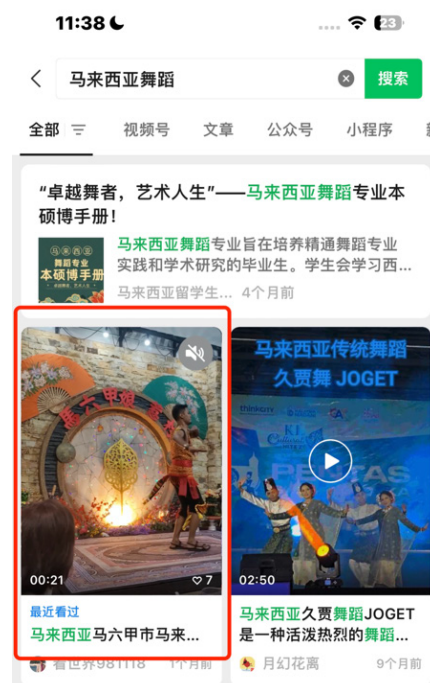

Figure 10: Wechat video uploaded by an individual voluntarily to the video zone - the performance of Nyonya Village, Malacca
Source from: Author's WeChat account search (29. May 2024)

Figure 11: Traditional dance performance of Nyonya village, Malacca
Source from: https://www.facebook.com/nyonyavillage/

4.2.3 Publicity influences Chinese tourists' choice of traditional dance performances

The diversity of tourism products plays a crucial role in shaping travelers' choices, yet traditional cultural performances often struggle to gain visibility in the competitive tourism market. This study explored the preferences of Chinese independent travelers regarding traditional dance performances when choosing Malaysia as a travel destination. However, empirical observations revealed that Chinese tourists rarely encounter information about Malaysia's traditional culture and dance during their travel planning process. This aligns with previous findings that island-related activities dominate Chinese independent travelers' preferences when visiting Malaysia (Mahdi & Rajak, 2025). Further analysis of Chinese tourists' activity preferences in Malaysia indicates that their interests, beyond island activities, rank in descending order as ethnic architecture experiences, food culture experiences, festival participation (including traditional dance and cultural activities), ethnic costume experiences, and ethnic art experiences. Notably, watching traditional dance performances is not a top priority in their travel plans. A key reason behind this low level of engagement appears to be the lack of accessible information about Malaysian traditional dance performances on mainstream travel platforms and promotional channels targeting Chinese tourists.

In the digital era, tourism decisions are significantly influenced by online branding and trust-building mechanisms, where travel websites and social media platforms act as primary information sources for international tourists (Putu, Noviana, & Darma, 2020). However, secondary research highlights a notable gap in promoting Malaysian traditional performances across Chinese travel websites and social media outlets. The dominant promotional content focuses on island destinations, modern attractions, and food experiences, while traditional cultural performances remain largely underrepresented. For instance, data from Ctrip, China's leading travel website, shows that Petronas Twin Towers is the most sought-after attraction among Chinese tourists (rated 8.0/10), followed by theme parks, Legoland, and resort islands (rated between 6.9 to 7.5/10). Search results for terms like "Malaysian performances" or "Malaysian ethnic events" primarily yield concert listings by Chinese singers rather than traditional cultural performances (Zainal et al., 2024). Similarly, Fliggy, another leading Chinese travel platform, prioritizes modern attractions such as Genting Park, Legoland, and Sunway Waterpark, all rated above 4.9/5 in user searches. When searching for "Malaysia shows" or "Malaysia activities," the results predominantly feature water sports in Sabah, animal performances in zoos, and only one cultural show in Mali Mali Cultural Village, which lacks significant tourist engagement (Figure 12) (Zakaria & Hua, 2024). These findings suggest that unless Chinese independent travelers actively seek information on traditional Malaysian dances, they are unlikely to include them in their travel itineraries. This highlights the need for enhanced digital marketing strategies, targeted promotions, and increased representation of traditional performances on widely used Chinese travel platforms to bridge the information gap and attract more tourists to Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage experiences.

Figure 12: Screenshot of "Malaysia Show" found on Fliggy App (2023.11.21)
Source: https://www.fliggy.com/?ttid=seo.000000580&seoType=origin

4.2.4 Diversifying promotional methods for the sustainability of traditional dance

The sustainable development of traditional dance performances in Malaysia requires diversified promotion strategies that align with the expectations and behaviors of international travelers. Traditional performances have evolved beyond their original ecological context, so their visibility and accessibility must be enhanced through varied promotional methods. A multi-channel promotion strategy is necessary to target different audiences effectively by utilizing digital media, printed materials, and direct engagement platforms. Beyond simply advertising the choreography and aesthetics of traditional dances, promotional content should also emphasize historical, cultural, and symbolic interpretations to create deeper emotional and intellectual engagement among tourists. Results of this research indicated that Chinese independent travelers were highly interested in attending Malaysian traditional dance performances, but many had never been to one. A more in-depth exploration of their hindrances to participation revealed three main issues: the inappropriateness of reaching performance venues, incompatible scheduling with travel plans, and confusion with performance narratives. These challenges show that structural enhancements in accessibility, flexibility of scheduling, and cultural interpretation services are critical for boosting tourist interaction with Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage (Steelyana & Tahir, 2020).

Pre-trip itinerary planning is one of the greatest hindrances for international visitors since many independent travelers prepare their itineraries ahead of time and can skip traditional performances if the show timings are not synchronized with their schedule. This implies that performance organizers need to explore providing flexible show timings, on-demand performances, or partnerships with key tourist destinations to guarantee accessibility. Also, restricted access to information regarding performances before arrival in Malaysia reduces tourist participation, necessitating more appealing and focused promotional campaigns. New-age digital marketing campaigns, multilingual websites, and dynamic content can drive visibility and international tourist attraction. Also, cross-cultural and language barriers to communication hinder full appreciation of depth and meaning by tourists who attend traditional performances. To mitigate this, the performance organizers can provide on-the-spot translations, multilingual guides, and interactive educational interactions for improved cross-cultural exchange. Uribe-Jongbloed (2023) stated that cross-cultural communication barriers tend to limit tourists' capacity to appreciate and comprehend the richness and meaning behind traditional performances. With strategic timetabling, increased accessibility, and culturally sensitive marketing campaigns, Malaysia can widen the roles of traditional performance in tourism so that their long-term sustainability and international competitiveness can be guaranteed.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Recommendations

This study makes two crucial recommendations based on findings and discussion: increasing promotional channels for international tourists and proposing flexible performance scheduling options.

5.1.1 Increasing promotional channels for international tourists

In addition to further pushing the visibility and appeal of traditional Malaysian performances, diversifying and targeting propaganda channels for international tourists is required. Consolidating cultural knowledge and identity through proper promotion and education can encourage more appreciation and participation in such performances. One approach is to offer multilingual interpretation services on-site at places of performance and tourist attractions in order that such visitors from different backgrounds may more fully enjoy the historical significance and artistic value of these performances. In addition, educational brochures, leaflets, and video presentations may be developed in order to present information on the origins, cultural significance, and unique artistic styles of Malaysian traditional dance. By making the tourists further understand and appreciate these performances' cultural significance and authenticity, they are better suited to identify culturally and participate. This resonates well with the wider ambitions of sustainable cultural tourism in that experiential involvement precipitates both the preservation of heritage as well as financial gain.

Apart from on-location learning, employing digital media and marketing tools is also significant in engaging an international audience. Social media promotional approaches must be adapted for each nation by researching global visiting groups' preferred sites and content usage behaviors. Focused advertising, promotional films, and engagement programs can identify the dynamism and diversity of Malaysian traditional shows in drawing in cultural visitors who desire genuine experiences. Also, expanding offline marketing channels through participation in international tourism expos, cultural exchange events, and international travel shows can significantly enhance global visibility. These platforms provide an opportunity to interact with the travel sector, the media, and cultural institutions and create partnerships that can boost cultural tourism inflow. By integrating online and offline marketing, Malaysia has the best potential to position its traditional performances at the center of its cultural tourism plan to maintain broader global outreach and long-term sustainability.

5.1.2 Propose flexible performance scheduling options

To more effectively serve overseas visitors and promote their accessibility to traditional performances, the tourism and performance industries can cooperate to bring in portable performance scheduling programs that provide personalized and uninterrupted viewing experiences. These programs can be specific to various traditional performances and become more accessible, convenient, and attractive to international audiences. One notable enhancement would include organized pick-up and drop-off services for travelers going to these shows. Upon arrival in Malaysia, foreign visitors may appreciate special transport services that directly transport them to performance areas, saving them the trouble of navigating foreign transport systems. This increased mobility and accessibility would be time- and effort-saving for travelers, leading to a more overall comfortable and engaging experience. In addition, since international visitors hail from various economic backgrounds, the inclusion of multi-currency payment options for ticketing would significantly enhance convenience. Cooperation with local banks and foreign payment networks may enable tourists to purchase tickets in their preferred large international groups of currencies, including the US dollar, the euro, and the renminbi, to make booking easier and lower financial obstacles for tourists.

In addition to enhancing logistics, providing multi-day itinerary plans may give visitors longer periods to become immersed in Malaysian cultural performances more deeply. Traditional performances, particularly those with elaborate narratives or ritualistic meaning, take more than one viewing to be and thoroughly enjoyed. By curating multi-day cultural experiences, the tourism and performance industries can prompt visitors to visit a broader range of traditional performances, further enhancing their knowledge of Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage. Organized itineraries incorporating consecutive-day performances, cultural workshops, and heritage tours guided by professionals may appeal to independent travelers who seek genuine and immersive experiences. Moreover, group performance packages or group discounts can incentivize visitors to prolong their stay in Malaysia, positively affecting the local tourism industry. A harmoniously integrated strategy that brings together convenience, accessibility, and enhanced cultural interaction would attract more foreign visitors to traditional performances and enhance Malaysia's status as a world-class destination for cultural tourism.

5.2 Conclusion

The unique charm of traditional performances, particularly intangible cultural heritage (ICH), as an integral part of Malaysia's tourism industry, largely stems from their deep connection to specific regional spaces. These performing arts are often rooted in distinctive cultural spatial contexts—ranging from the symbiotic relationship between Penang's Nyonya dance and the Straits colonial architectural landscape to the spatial interaction between Sarawak's indigenous dances and the communal rituals of longhouses—forming irreplaceable cultural-geographical markers.

A survey of independent Chinese travelers indicates that tourists are highly interested in watching ICH performances and eager to understand their cultural significance through authentic spatial experiences. Most respondents expressed a willingness to incorporate such immersive cultural engagements into their travel plans.

However, a critical challenge lies in the disparity between tourist enthusiasm and the limited accessibility of authentic cultural spaces. Due to a lack of detailed cross-cultural tourism information and the predominance of single-channel promotion strategies, most travelers can only access "stage-adapted performances" detached from their original spatial contexts, thus missing out on a fully immersive cultural experience. This spatial disconnect results in a superficial engagement with cultural consumption, preventing Chinese independent travelers from developing a deeper understanding of ICH through a sense of place. Travel itinerary constraints, time limitations, and a lack of interpretation regarding the connection between performances and their specific locales (e.g., how dance movements reflect local landscapes or architectural features) further exacerbate tourists' experience anxiety.

To overcome these limitations, it is essential to emphasize spatial narratives as a core component of tourism marketing. Customized travel packages should incorporate visits to original performance venues, allowing tourists to experience the organic connection between artistic forms and geographical environments—whether through juxtaposing Kelantanese shadow puppetry against rural rice field landscapes or spontaneous dance interactions in the historic streets of Malacca. Dynamic promotional activities should highlight the spatial uniqueness of different regional performances, while multilingual services should focus on interpreting the geographic symbolism embedded in dance movements (e.g., the relationship between wave-like gestures and coastal fishing communities).

By reinforcing spatial authenticity and regional specificity, Malaysia can transform ICH from a mere "performance product" into a multidimensional "local knowledge system." This space-oriented cultural tourism strategy not only satisfies Chinese independent travelers' dual demand for authenticity and accessibility but also facilitates their transition from passive spectators to active cultural explorers. The collaborative efforts of tourism boards, cultural institutions, and performing arts companies should focus on curating a series of spatial narrative experiences—ranging from augmented reality (AR) reconstructions of historical performance sites to the development of "culture-geography" themed travel routes. Such initiatives would enable Malaysia's ICH to showcase its irreplaceable regional charm on the global tourism stage, creating truly unforgettable cultural spatial experiences for visitors.

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