

Real Political Intention Concealed in the Advertisement for “Shen Yun Performance” Advertisement

On December 22, 2018, San Francisco Gate, an American website, published an article commenting that although Shen Yun ads are ubiquitous, the ads may be deceptive.

Unless you live under a rock, you’ve probably seen a billboard or heard dozens of ads for Shen Yun Performing Arts.

In the Bay Area, people are so used to seeing the ads of “Shen Yun” on TV and on the sides of buses. People even joke that this December should be renamed “Shen Yun season.” Since I started writing this article about two minutes ago, I’ve already seen a Shen Yun spot run on KTVU.

But what is it? The answer is a little complicated.

Shen Yun bills itself as “the world’s premier classical Chinese dance and music corporation.” They have performances in 93 cities around the country, from Billings to Little Rock. The dress code suggests you might want to wear a tuxedo or evening gown since you’re “in for a special treat.” If you buy a ticket to a show (which runs from \$80 to \$400 in San Francisco), you can expect two hours of traditional Chinese dance accompanied by a live orchestra.

If you’re to believe Shen Yun’s own advertisements, you’ll get so much more. The hyperbolic 2018 ad promises that the performance will “move you to tears” and change how you see the world.

Unexpectedly, however, the ads may be overselling it a bit.

Some people who go to the show complain they didn’t know what they were in for. Because nowhere in the effusive advertisements is it mentioned that Shen Yun has a political bent. Shen Yun translates to “divine rhythm,” and according to the show’s website, the artists who put on “Shen Yun” practice “Falun Gong,” also known as “Falun Dafa,” a belief system that encompasses meditation, tai chi-type exercises, and “strict morality.” Smoking, alcohol, and extramarital or same-sex sexual relations go against the teachings.

A 2017 Guardian article by Nicholas Hune Brown describes one part of the show: The curtain rose on a group of young students sitting in peace, meditating and reading oversized yellow Falun Gong books. The dancers performed elaborately pantomimed good deeds—helping an old woman with a cane, chasing down a woman who had dropped her purse. But when one unveiled a Falun Gong banner, suddenly a trio of men wearing black tunics emblazoned with a red hammer-and-sickle entered. The communist thugs began beating people up, clubbing and kicking innocent Falun Gong followers.

Scenes like that didn’t sit well with all viewers.

The Fresno Bee’s arts writer Donald Munro saw “Shen Yun” in 2016, and called the show “a beautiful and odd production that veers wildly between two extremes: delicate artistic excellence on one hand and a brusque, heavy-handed effort to inculcate political and spiritual viewpoints on the other.”

Many people posting reviews on Yelp weren’t as eloquent. Here are some of the comments on the Shen Yun performance from Yelp.

“Be warned: Religious sermon!” It was a Yelp review from someone who saw the show in Fresno. “I walked out as soon as anti-evolution statements were made on the screen. False advertising!”

“I rate this a zero star. This show is purely cult propaganda. Do not waste your money and time for this,” said Ron F. from Pittsburg, California.

Roast B. said, “We just saw the show in San Francisco. It was boring. Every dance was more or less the same. There wasn’t any story or interesting theme. A lot of cultish propaganda was also thrown into the performance. We walked out in the 2nd half and met other people walking out also. We all felt ripped off after watching this show.”

“It’s the radio ads that are annoying,” commented by Chrysanthemum A.

“We went to see Shen Yun Chinese dance in Berkeley. Their showcase looked stunning and we decided to see the performance. Our tickets were expensive and they cost \$300. The dances were not as impressive as in the showcase. The movements of dancers sometimes were not synchronized. There was not as much acrobatics as in their video. The couple dances were devoted to describing oppression of Falun Dafa followers in China. Then we listened to a song that Darwin theory leads people to nowhere and Falun Dafa is right answer how to live life. At the end we were shown banners that Falun Dafa is good. I think the Shen Yun performance should be categorized as religion event that preaches about Falun Dafa. If we knew about it we would not go,” reviewed by Valeriya V.

“Be warned: Religious sermon! I saw the Shen Yun performance in Fresno. Little did I expect it a sermon against evolutionism. I was insulted. As a biotech engineer, I was completely blown away that we would get a religious sermon in a Chinese dance performance and one which goes against one of the fundamental facts of life science. I walked out as soon as anti-evolution statements were made on the screen. False advertising!” reviewed by S.T.

Ingrid G complained, “Went for Shen Yun. We had Will Call tickets and were misled by three ushers outside, including standing in a long line, before we found it. Then, the inside usher told us the wrong location for our seats (odds instead of events). Poorly trained folks. As to the show, Shen Yun sucked. The Dancing was like high school color guard—repeatedly—and then they threw in a couple of terrible soloists who sang religious songs! OMG, what? This Dancing was supposed to be inspired by the pursuit of harmony, forbearance and truthfulness and we got another agenda altogether. The only redeeming qualities were the costumes and a little bit of creative digital imagery. Lots of money spent to promote this show, including a suggested dress code no less, implying a classy affair. Way too expensive for what we saw.”

“Totally agree with Cassie H. I rate this a Zero star. This show is purely cult propaganda. Do not waste your money and time for this,” commented by Ron F.

“I am sure those 4 or 5 stars ratings are written by families of these performers. If you don’t believe, just go and waste \$100 yourself. It’s a high school art club performance at most but not a show that cost \$100 for a ticket,” reviewed by Young W.

For many audiences who are unhappy about “Shen Yun,” the performance itself is not bad, although some of them also complain that it is not of high quality. Yet, most of the negative comments disclose their unawareness of the political nature of the show beforehand. “Shen Yun” official website claims that the performance is a “unique experience.” It seems that this is the only consensus for all.