



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Emotional Communication and Dramatic Conflicts in Modern Huai Opera Performances: A Case Study of Xianglin's Wife

Jingjing Wang^{1*}, Supath Kookiattikoon²¹PH.D. candidate in Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand²Asst. Professor in Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand**ARTICLE INFO**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores tragic elements in Huai Opera, focusing on Xianglin's Wife. It analyzes how the opera conveys themes of suffering and injustice through costumes, vocal performance, music, and gestures using a semiotic framework. By examining these audio and visual signs, the study reveals the intricate systems of signs that communicate the characters' emotional conflicts, including struggles with fate, nature, society, and oneself. Through this semiotic analysis, it highlights the emotional depth of the narrative and the universal human experiences it portrays, emphasizing the significance of Huai Opera as a powerful medium for storytelling and emotional expression.

***Corresponding Author:**

INTRODUCTION

Huai Opera is one of over 200 indigenous Chinese operas, originating from the regions along the Huai River. Historically, the precursor to Huai Opera performance involved street artists from the flood-stricken Huai River areas, who belonged to the lowest social status. These artists would go door-to-door singing about their personal hardships and the harsh realities they faced with crying-stylized tune. This background explains why Huai Opera frequently centers on themes of suffering, tragedy, and the struggles of ordinary people. During that time, laborers in the audience saw their own experiences mirrored in the characters' suffering and emotional journeys, creating a deep connection between the performances and the viewers. As a result, Huai Opera continues to resonate emotionally with people in Northern Jiangsu and Shanghai. The repertoire Xianglin's Wife is one of the most recognized figures in Chinese theater. Her name has become synonymous with tragedy, making her a lasting and classic figure in Modern Huai Opera.

Tragedy Elements in Huai Opera

Xiqu, aka, Chinese opera, is theater as well. Wang Guowei first introduced the western concepts of comedy and tragedy to China (Ding, 2021; Kanval et al., 2024; Rashid et al., 2023). Then there was a heated discussion among Chinese theater experts on the classification of Chinese theaters. However, it is too simplistic to classify Chinese theater simply by the western theater theory. According to Aristotle (2006), tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, presented in the form of action rather than narrative. He believed that the most effective tragedies evoke feelings of pity and fear in the audience, which are characteristic of the highest form of tragedy. Most repertoires in Huai Opera often have hardship scenes in which some sad stories or tragic circumstances are sung. So if we define the sad and fierce feelings in these repertoires as tragedy, it refers to another kind of tragedy, not equated with the tragedy of ancient Greek ones. While Aristotle's definition of tragedy provides a framework for understanding classical Greek tragedies, it may not fully encompass the range of tragic themes and emotional experiences found in other theatrical traditions like the Huai Opera. While both may evoke feelings of sadness and hardship, the cultural and artistic contexts of Huai Opera may lead to a different interpretation of tragedy compared to ancient Greek tragedies. Therefore, while Huai Opera may contain elements of tragedy, it represents a distinct form of dramatic expression with its own conventions and nuances.

Xianglin's Wife resonates well with the audience because it deals with universal themes of suffering, injustice, and the plight of women in a patriarchal society, which characterizes both traditional and modern China. Her marginalization and societal oppression in semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, strike a chord with the audience, making her story both powerful and relatable.

Emotional Interpretant in Xianglin's Wife

The concept of the interpretant is central to Peirce's triadic theory of the sign. It suggests that the interpretant offers a translation of the sign, enabling us to gain a deeper understanding of the sign's object. Peirce (1966) coined three kinds of interpretants, the emotional, the energetic, and logical Interpretants. They consist respectively in feelings, in efforts, and in habit-changes (MS 318:43-4). The first proper significate effect of a sign is a feeling produced by it, hence the emotional interpretant (CP 5.475). An emotional interpretant is the initial response or feeling that a sign elicits. According to Peirce, every functioning sign must have an emotional interpretant because this includes the feeling of recognizing the sign.

The concept of interpretant aims to reveal the process of sign cognition. Interpretant can be a sign in return, it reveals that semiosis is a dynamic process, which undoubtedly involves the interaction of subject and object.

Costumes and Makeup

The elaborate costumes and makeup designs in Huai opera are not just aesthetic but carry symbolic meanings that evoke emotions. Different colors and patterns can signify different emotional states and character traits. Huai opera Xianglin's Wife is a classic repertoire adapted from Luxun's short story, Xianglin's wife is a female ranking the bottom of China's social hierarchy because of her gender and lowly birth. She is a poor widow at a young age, after she submits to a second arranged remarriage by her mother-in-law; her little baby is killed by wolves and her husband dies of illness.

The depiction of sister Xianglin wearing patchy costumes with plain colors (see figure 1 on the right hand side) conveys her impoverished status and reflects the bleakness of her circumstances. The white hair and the eye makeup serve as visual signs of the toll her experiences have taken on her. It suggests that the trauma, grief, and relentless suffering she has endured have aged her prematurely, both physically and emotionally. At the first sight, these visual signs produce emotional interpretants

first for the audience, the image creates overwhelming contrast with the first appearance of young, hardworking and kindhearted sister Xianglin.



Figure1: image differences of Xianglin's wife in different phases (Colorful Drama Channel, 2022, Bilibili,10:32,1:50:47)

Vocal performance

The way a character sings, with variations in pitch, tone, and tempo, can convey sorrow, joy, anger, or love. Chen Cheng plays the role of Xianglin's wife explains her vocal performance in *Questioning Heaven*, she claims that "the creation of the voice is also crucial. This segment's singing has a wide vocal range. It's essential to convey the character's sense of tragic indignation, helplessness, and the aura of impending death to the audience" (*From the textbook to the theater, Xianglin's Wife brings the audience three questions.*, 2021). Singing with a tone that can shift from soft, mournful notes to rhythmic, anguished cries. The unique tune styles and melodies in classic traditional Huai Opera are designed to evoke specific emotions in the audience.

Music and Instruments

The performance of a musical piece is a sign. It communicates and is meant to communicate the composer's musical ideas; however, these ideas usually manifest as a series of feelings. If a sign leads to any further significant effect, it will do so through the mediation of the emotional interpretant, and this further effect will always involve some effort (CP 5.475).

The instrumental music accompanying the performance also plays a crucial role in evoking emotions. Traditional instruments like the erhu二胡, pipa琵琶, and bangu板鼓 create a soundscape that enhances the emotional atmosphere. Huai tune as the oldest and popular tune is particularly effective and appropriate in storytelling. The melodies are crafted to convey complex narratives, it is sung by an actor and evokes feelings of sadness and empathy in the audience (Zhao,2016; Farooq et al., 2010; Jam et al., 2017). The audience's immediate feeling of sorrow upon hearing the mournful tune and lyrics. In the scene of *Questioning Heaven*, Xianglin's wife continuously and rhythmically asked eleven questions to Heaven, crying as she did so: Could it be that my grandmother lied to me when I was young? Did my mother-in-law lie to me when I grew up? Did the private school teacher lie to me? Did Old Master Lu lied to me? Did my fellow villagers lie to me? Did the monk in the temple lie to me? Did the literate people lie to me? Did the illiterate mountain folks lie to me? Did the men in the world lie to me? Even the women lie to me? Did the old fortune vendor lie to me? The bangu accompanies the singing with Huai tune, providing a regular, quick succession of beats that the audience can hear as the actor utters each question. The rapid, repetitive beats of the bangu create a sense of urgency

and pressure, mirroring Xianglin's wife's frantic search for answers and justice, especially before she was destroyed by the oppressive nature of feudal society and its ethical codes (Chu, 1984).

Facial Expressions and Gestures

The voice in Huai Opera is not isolated from the physical performance. The actor's body language, facial expressions, and movements are all synchronized with the singing. This holistic approach ensures that the emotion conveyed through the voice is mirrored by the actor's physical presence, creating a more powerful and immersive experience for the audience.

The actors' facial expressions and physical gestures are highly stylized and symbolic, conveying complex emotions. These visual cues are immediately recognizable and elicit specific emotional responses. In a 13-minute-long performance depicting Xianglin's wife discovering her son's body after he was eaten by wolves, the actor would use a combination of gestures and facial expressions to convey the depth of her heartbreak and horror. If break down the performance into smaller segments, it is worth noting that the actor applies the smallest unit of meaning to convey feelings. The actor collapses onto the ground, crawls to her son step by step with the right leg, drags the paralyzed left leg, hits the ground with her fist, one arm repeatedly reaches and droops feebly, and breathes loudly with her mouth downturned, tearful eyes dazed. Actor uses signs to convey intense grief and physical struggle. The exaggerated sorrowful expressions of a character in distress, combined with symbolic movements, might evoke pity and compassion in the audience.

Table 1: analysis of signs and emotional interpretants in Xianglin's Wife

Gesture 1: Collapsing on the ground
Emotional interpretant: physical and emotional breakdown and the collapse of her world It could evoke feelings of helplessness and profound sorrow in the audience.
Gesture 2: Crawling and dragging herself to her son
Emotional interpretant: her determination and desperation to reach her son despite immense physical and emotional pain The audience could feel her maternal instinct and evoke empathy and sadness.
Gesture 3: Hits the ground with her fist
Emotional interpretant: her anger and frustration at the situation, as well as her helplessness The audience could deeply feel a sense of injustice and rage.
Gesture 4: Arm reaching and falling down repeatedly
Emotional interpretant: exhaustion and despair
Gesture 5: Hitting her chest with her fist
Emotional interpretant: her profound sorrow and regret, and self-blame The audience could perceive this as an expression of her guilt and her carelessness contributed to the tragedy.

Gesture 6: reaching out with trembling fingers
Emotional interpretant: her vulnerability and the intensity of her emotional and physical shock The audience could feel a sense of her fragile state and desperate need of physical touch of her son.
Facial expression 1: Heavy breathing
Emotional interpretant: loud, labored breathing conveys her intense emotional state and physical exhaustion. The sense of panic, urgency, and overwhelming sorrow, may make the audience feel her struggle.
Facial expression 2: mouth downturned
Emotional interpretant: her deep sorrow and grief
Facial expression 3: Tearful and dazed eyes
Emotional interpretant: inner turmoil and emotional destruction, the audience could be drawn into her sense of loss and confusion.



Figure 2: presentation of gesture 1, gesture 2 and 4 (Colorful Drama Channel, 2022, Bilibili, 1:00:49,1:01:05)



Figure 3: presentation of gesture 6, facial expression 2 and 3 (Colorful Drama Channel, 2022, Bilibili, 1:11:47, 1:05:03, 1:03:18)

Emotion as Driving Force of Conflicts

Opera or theater is fundamentally a manifestation of the human emotions. Regardless of how advanced our technological prowess in conquering nature becomes, or how sophisticated our economic structures, political systems, legal frameworks, and ethical standards are, these achievements alone do not define us as human beings. We become truly 'human' when we develop a 'subjective' awareness, allowing us to introspectively examine ourselves and our relationship with our environment.

Susanne Langer (1953) claimed that a work of art is a single, indivisible symbol, a prime symbol (p. 369). It is sensation remembered and anticipated, feared or sought or even imagined and eschewed that is important in human life. It is perception molded by imagination that gives us the outward world we know. And it is the continuity of thought that systematizes our emotional reactions into attitudes with distinct feeling tones, and sets a certain scope for an individual's passions. In other words, by virtue of our thought and imagination we have not only feelings, but a life of feeling (p. 372). According to Susanne Langer, the audience's perception, shaped by their thoughts and imagination, enables them to receive and interpret the signs sent by actors, experiencing a rich array of emotions. In the context of Xianglin's wife, the audience brings their own memories and anticipations to the theater, empathizes with her suffering, and visualizes her world. Their continuous thought processes systematize their emotional reactions, creating a coherent overall attitude toward the narrative. This structured engagement allows the audience to experience not just isolated emotions but a full, meaningful life of feeling throughout the performance, making the theatrical experience powerful and resonant. Moreover, emotion is the driving force behind dramatic conflicts (Zhen, 1986). It is the emotions that contribute to the conflicts of Man and God, Man and Man, Man and Nature, Man and Society, Man and himself.

Man and God

The emotional conflict between Xianglin's wife and fate or divine forces is evident in her tragic circumstances. Xianglin's wife buys the character "福" (blessing) twice with hope, expecting that Heaven would bless her and her family. However, she later suffers the loss of family members and is pathetically treated as a demon who brings misfortune to others. Sister Xianglin is convinced by Aunt Liu that donating a threshold to the temple can be redemption. Threshold is treated as the symbol of her sins in folks' belief, when visitors of the temple stomp on it, it can substitute Sister Xianglin's sins and avoid being punished in the afterlife. She donates all her hard-earned savings to the temple to get a threshold. Despite her devoutness and prayers, she still faces immense suffering and discrimination, therefore, leading to a conflict between her faith and her cruel realities of life.

Man and Nature

The opera's setting in rural China exposes characters like Sister Xianglin to the harsh realities of nature. Emotional conflicts arise as characters suffer in such an unforgiving environment. The loss of her son to wolves represents the unpredictability and brutality of the natural world. Driven out of her mind by the death of her son, she repeatedly sings the haunting lyrics to fellows: "I am silly, I am stupid, I only know there are wolves in winter, I don't know there are wolves in spring." Her sorrowful monologue ironically seems annoying to her fellows. Her death in a blizzard symbolizes nature's ultimate indifference to the plight of laboring women. Despite her tragic circumstances and relentless suffering, nature offers no shelter. The cold, uncaring blizzard mirrors the emotional and social isolation she faced throughout her life.

Man and Society

Xianglin's wife a nameless child bride, Xianglin is actually her first husband's name. She takes care of her future husband in the mercenary marriage, the status of daughter-in-law in that society is

generally low, especially in mercenary marriage. They have to do a lot of housework, and some are abused by their husband's family and servants. Qiu and Dory Poa (1987) argue that feudal ethics can destroy the lives of Chinese laboring women. In the paternal family order of the laws and folk customs of the Qing Dynasty, women were regarded as the vassals of men in their will and status (Chen&Lu, 2019). A wife's chastity is of cultural significance in ancient China, where widows should compel to defend this virtue by refusing remarriage. Instead, they would dedicate themselves to caring for their deceased husband's parents or, in some cases, choose to end their lives (Sun, 2018). This practice reflects the deeply ingrained cultural norms surrounding female fidelity during that era. However, Xianglin's wife still was sold by her mother-in-law to another man after fierce resistance, faced discrimination from her peers and was deemed impure due to her lack of chastity. Xianglin's wife exemplifies this, living in an era where her potential is limited to that of a near-slave despite her hard work, kindheartedness, simplicity, honesty, and tenacity. She is a victim of the oppressive social norms and structures that prevent her from achieving a better life, illustrating the devastating impact of feudal ethics on women's lives. Low social status and struggles against societal norms create emotional conflicts rooted in class divisions, gender inequality, and societal expectations.

Man and Himself

Internal emotional conflicts within Xianglin's wife, such as grief, guilt, regret, and self-doubt, drive much of the opera's narrative. She grapples with overwhelming guilt and self-blame for the deaths of her loved ones. Despite these being due to external circumstances, she internalizes the blame, believing she is cursed or responsible for their fates. In Huai Opera, Liu aunt minds her assist: "You became widow twice, your hands are not clean, cannot touch the sacrifice instruments" "My hands are not clean? Am I doing the wrong thing? Am I making the trouble?" Xianglin's wife responds. Liu Aunt's accusation that Sister Xianglin's hands are "not clean" because she became a widow twice reflects societal stigmatization. This external blame exacerbates Sister Xianglin's internal conflict, as she begins to internalize these accusations. Her self-doubt signifies her internal struggle to reconcile her actions and circumstances with the harsh judgments imposed upon her by society. Sister Xianglin's internal conflict is also a struggle with her identity. As a hard-working, kindhearted, and honest woman, she cannot understand why she is perceived as impure or unlucky. That's why she questions everything in the end of her life, "At eleven, sold as a bride, suffering endless torment 十一岁卖身为媳受尽折磨. Xianglin fell ill suddenly and died. When my husband died, everyone blamed me 丈夫死大伙偏说是我罪过. Forced me to sell myself and marry a second husband 逼我卖我再嫁二夫.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Huai Opera, with its roots in the struggles of ordinary people along the Huai River, continues to captivate audiences with its emotionally resonant narratives. Through themes of suffering, injustice, and the human condition, Huai Opera, particularly exemplified in the story of Xianglin's Wife, explores the complex emotional conflicts faced by individuals in society. From the internal struggles of self-doubt and guilt to the external conflicts with fate, nature, and societal norms, Huai Opera goes deep into the human psyche, evoking empathy, compassion, and reflection in its audience.

Semiotics provides a critical framework for understanding the meanings conveyed in Huai Opera. By analyzing the signs present in Huai Opera's costumes, vocal performances, music, and gestures, we can uncover the layers of meaning and cultural significance embedded in each element. This semiotic approach helps to elucidate how the opera communicates complex themes of suffering and injustice, as well as the emotional and social conflicts faced by the characters. Through the study of these

semiotic elements, we gain deeper insights into the narrative's impact and its ability to resonate with audiences on multiple levels.

The emotional interpretants elicited by the performances, aided by the expressive vocal performances, evocative music, symbolic costumes, and poignant gestures, create a profound and immersive experience for viewers. Peirce's concept of the interpretant sheds light on the intricate process of sign cognition, revealing how the audience's perception and imagination enrich their emotional engagement with the narrative.

In essence, Huai Opera serves as a powerful medium for exploring and expressing the depth of human emotion, reflecting both the tragedies and triumphs of life. Through its enduring popularity and cultural significance, Huai Opera continues to provide a platform for storytelling that resonates with audiences, offering insight into the universal value and emotions that connect us all.

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