

Patterns, Symbols, and Narratives—A Cultural Interpretation of Theatrical Costumes at Zhoukou Guandi Temple

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Abstract: In traditional temple fair theatrical performances, costume patterns not only serve as symbolic representations of regional beliefs but also play a crucial role in theatrical narration and spatial construction. These patterns embody specific cultural symbols while gradually developing unique narrative functions through temple fair rituals and folk performances. Taking Zhoukou Guandi Temple as a case study, this paper analyzes the types, symbolism, and narrative functions of theatrical costume patterns, exploring how these patterns construct theatrical narratives within a religious space. By examining their profound significance in cultural inheritance and ritual expression, this study aims to reveal the narrative mechanisms embedded in traditional theatrical costume patterns.

Against the backdrop of the Qing dynasty, where communication media and transportation were relatively limited, the dissemination of books was largely confined to a small elite class and affluent households with the means to attain literacy. For the general populace, information was primarily transmitted through oral tradition or popular artistic media, among which theater played a pivotal role. In the case of Zhoukou, theatrical performances had a particularly influential role in shaping local folk art. This influence is vividly reflected in the carved figures on the stone reliefs of the Zhoukou Guandi Temple, where certain characters are not depicted in Qing-era everyday attire but are instead dressed in costumes derived from theatrical traditions.(Figure 1)

The influence of traditional opera on the characterization of figures in the Spring and Autumn Pavilion is explicit. This section selects six representative images of theatrical costume figures for examination.(Figure 2)



Source: Photographed by the author

Figure 1 Theatrical Costumes of the Figures in the Spring and Autumn



Figure 2(1): Wensheng Jin (Scholar's Scarf) – Yuan Xuefen and Fan Ruijuan as Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo in the Yue opera *The Butterfly Lovers*; Figure 2(2): Fangchi Sha Mao (Square-Winged Gauze Hat) – Zhou Chuanying as Kuang Zhong in the Kunqu opera *Fifteen Strings of Cash*; Figure 2(3): Zhongjun Kui (General's Helmet) – Zhang Qiuping as the Elder in the Yue opera *Three Glimpses of the Princess*; Figure 2(4): Yuanwai Jin (Gentry's Scarf) – Dong Kedi as Yang Jikang in the Yue opera *The Birthday Celebration Coming From Five Daughters*. The above images are sourced from the “Chinese Opera” WeChat public account.

Figure 2 Theatrical Stills



Figure 3(1): Portrait of Lu Su from the Peking opera Gathering of Heroes.; Figure 3(2): Portrait of Liu Bei from the Peking opera In Extremely Good Fortune. The above images are sourced from Mei Ruoheng’s *Jingju: Such Beauty*.

Figure 3 Theatrical Costumes

1. Types and Symbolic Meanings of Theatrical Costume Patterns

The portrayal of characters in traditional Chinese opera is not solely reliant on the design and structure of costumes; the patterns adorning these garments also play a crucial role. The author selects several distinctive patterns for detailed analysis, such as dragon motifs, phoenix motifs, auspicious clouds, tiger patterns, and various floral designs. Each pattern holds specific symbolic meanings and cultural functions in theatrical performances. This section examines four representative theatrical costume patterns through textual and visual analysis.(Figure 3)

Dragon Motif: A Symbol of Authority and Divinity. The dragon motif is generally regarded as a symbol of authority and sanctity. In theatrical costumes, it is predominantly used for emperors, deities, and other noble characters, signifying power, prestige, and divine presence. For example, in the stone carvings of Zhoukou Guandi Temple, where Guan Yu is venerated as an emblem of loyalty and righteousness, the incorporation of dragon motifs in his costume not only highlights his valor and martial prowess but also reinforces his deified status.[1]



Figure 4 (left): Dragon pattern; Figure 4 (right): Phoenix pattern
Source: Photographed by *Chinese opera costume patterns*

Figure 4 Dragon and Phoenix Pattern

Phoenix Motif: A Representation of Female Nobility and Auspiciousness. The phoenix motif is typically associated with noblewomen, including empresses, princesses, and aristocratic ladies, symbolizing dignity and auspiciousness. In traditional Chinese culture, the phoenix embodies peace and prosperity, conveying a sense of auspicious blessings. In theatrical performances, the use of the phoenix motif serves both as an identifier of a character's noble status and as a bearer of cultural connotations related to well-wishing and prosperity.(Figure 4)

Tiger Motif: A Symbol of Bravery and Majesty. The tiger motif represents bravery and authority, commonly adorning the costumes of military generals in traditional opera. Characters such as Zhang Fei and Dian Wei from Romance of the Three Kingdoms often wear garments featuring tiger patterns, emphasizing their valor and formidable presence. The bold and dynamic design of the tiger motif enhances the impression of the character's strength and martial prowess.

Floral Motifs: Expressions of Character Traits and Emotions. Floral motifs in theatrical costumes serve as symbolic representations of a character's personality or emotional state, enhancing the dramatic tension of the performance. For instance, the peony symbolizes wealth and nobility, the plum blossom represents resilience and steadfastness, and the lotus signifies purity. These floral designs are intricately incorporated into costumes to visually convey the inner qualities and emotions of a character.

The arrangement and composition of patterns in theatrical costumes are highly refined and deliberate. Traditional opera costume patterns emphasize symmetry, as seen in Figure 1, where the dragon motifs are symmetrically placed to symbolize harmony and order. Examining the stone carvings of Zhoukou Guandi Temple, we observe that the costume patterns typically expand from the collar to the hem, creating a visually striking effect. Additionally, intentional blank spaces are sometimes left around the main motifs to enhance the three-dimensionality and depth of the design, ensuring the central pattern stands out with greater prominence.

2. The Narrative Function of Theatrical Costume Patterns

Before the advent of television and film, when information dissemination was not yet well developed, traditional opera was the primary form of entertainment for the common people. In rural villages and market towns, theatrical troupes were invited to perform only during festivals and special occasions to enhance the celebratory atmosphere. Within the realm of theatrical costumes, patterns were not merely decorative but carried significant narrative functions. As soon as an actor stepped onto the stage, the audience could immediately discern the character's role through the costume's patterns, aiding them in identifying the character's status and understanding the plot.

Symbolism of Identity and Distinction. The application of patterns in costumes often directly corresponded to the identity of the character. For example, imperial figures were adorned with dragon motifs, military generals with tiger patterns, and aristocratic female characters with phoenix designs. These visual symbols played a crucial role in helping the audience quickly recognize the category and social status of the character being portrayed.

As an ancient saying goes, "Attire reflects virtue, and clothing manifests aspirations." In theatrical costumes, patterns are not merely external markers of identity; they also convey the inner virtues and ambitions of the characters.

Expression of Emotion and Character Traits. The selection and arrangement of patterns serve as a medium to convey the emotional state or personality traits of a character. For instance, characters adorned with plum blossom motifs often embody resilience and unwavering determination, whereas lotus patterns emphasize purity and nobility. As stated in The Book of Songs, "Plucking plantain in abundance, speaking softly as I gather", natural imagery is employed to endow characters with emotional symbolism, enriching their narrative depth.

Narrative Cues for Space and Time. Certain patterns function as indicators of temporal and spatial transitions within a performance. For example, in sacrificial or ritual dramas, the appearance of auspicious cloud motifs often signifies that the character is about to enter a sacred space, enhancing the transcendental and mystical qualities of the play. This aligns with the saying, "Clouds rise as dragons soar, symbolizing ascension," metaphorically representing shifts in a character's fate and the progression of the narrative rhythm.[2]

3. Visual Semiotic Analysis of Theatrical Costume Patterns

From the perspective of visual semiotics, the patterns on theatrical costumes are not merely ornamental; they represent a dynamic construction of meaning. Patterns such as dragon motifs, auspicious clouds, and tiger stripes function as symbols embedded within specific cultural contexts, generating multiple layers of meaning as they are interpreted by the audience. This meaning-making process is shaped by the cultural tradition of "encoding" and depends on the audience's "decoding" experience.[3]

In the theatrical performances at Zhoukou Guandi Temple, the signifier of the dragon motif manifests as a solemn visual form, while its signified meaning points to sacredness and authority. The auspicious cloud pattern, with its light and soft visual qualities, symbolizes blessings, protection, and prayers for good fortune. The tiger stripe pattern, characterized by its bold and fierce appearance, conveys bravery and majesty. However, these meanings are not static. As the narrative unfolds, the significance of these patterns shifts according to different dramatic contexts. For instance, in battle scenes, the tiger pattern symbolizes fearlessness and heroism, whereas in homecoming scenes, it suggests resilience and peace after enduring hardships. Similarly, the auspicious cloud pattern reinforces a sacred atmosphere at the beginning of a play but later, at the climax, embodies blessings and the fulfillment of fate.

The audience's cultural experience serves as a crucial foundation for the generation of meaning in costume patterns. In temple fair theater, costume patterns often evoke a collective resonance with specific historical narratives, religious beliefs, and cultural memories, making visual symbols a significant medium for storytelling and cultural identity. The variations in audience interpretations of these patterns reflect the diversity and complexity of cultural cognition. This fluidity and openness in semiotic meaning transform costume patterns from mere visual representations into powerful tools for narrative construction and emotional expression.

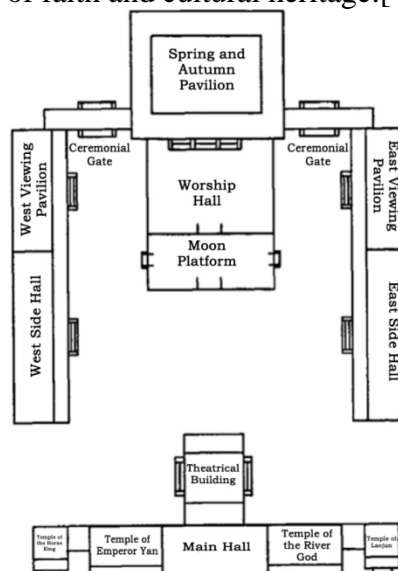
4. The Spatial Construction of Theatrical Performances at Zhoukou Guandi Temple

As a significant site for local religious practices and folk activities, Zhoukou Guandi Temple hosts temple fair theatrical performances in a spatial arrangement imbued with ritualistic and symbolic meanings. During temple fairs, the stage is set up either in front of or within the temple, creating a triadic spatial structure of "temple–stage–audience." This spatial configuration not only accommodates performance and viewing needs but also reinforces the close connection between theatrical activities and religious rituals. The performance area is often meticulously decorated, with costume patterns corresponding to the temple's statues and murals, thereby constructing a coherent visual and spiritual narrative.

In the theatrical space, costume patterns are meticulously designed. Motifs such as dragons, auspicious clouds, and tiger stripes not only align with temple culture but also contribute to the construction of a narrative space that interweaves the realms of humans, deities, and theater. The actors' entrances, the progression of the plot, and even the patterns on their costumes establish a symbolic dialogue within the space, as if the audience is engaging in a conversation with the ancients. This interplay further reinforces the intrinsic connection between theatrical performances and the

sacred space of the temple.

Among the various architectural elements in Zhoukou Guandi Temple, the Spring and Autumn Pavilion stands out as particularly distinctive. Situated in the second courtyard of the temple, this courtyard is enclosed by the theater building, east and west viewing pavilions, side halls, the worship hall, and the Spring and Autumn Pavilion. As the most prestigious structure within the Guandi Temple complex, the Spring and Autumn Pavilion is regarded as the dwelling place of the deity. Notably, its main entrance faces directly toward the theatrical stage (as shown in the figure). On the anniversary of Guandi's veneration, operatic performances are held here, serving a dual function: to entertain both people and deities. During these sacred festivities, streams of pilgrims and local residents gather to pay homage and watch the performances. While the primary audience of the theater is human—planned, funded, performed, and observed by people—the ritual significance of the performances extends beyond mere human entertainment. These dramatic enactments are offerings to the deity, emphasizing the interplay between religious devotion and theatrical expression. Large-scale entertainment events for the common people were rare throughout the year, making these theatrical performances an eagerly anticipated and joyous occasion. The community immersed itself wholeheartedly in this grand spectacle. However, at its core, the festival's true focus was on the deity. The preparations spanned several days, and the performances continued for multiple days, with every step carried out meticulously—no effort spared—because the divine presence was believed to be watching from above. From the moment the festival's approach was announced until the final curtain call of the last play, the primary recipient of this entire ritual was the deity enshrined in the Spring and Autumn Pavilion. The dual purpose of entertaining both humans and deities coexists harmoniously, yet the emphasis remains on the latter. The notion that “the gods are watching” forms the very foundation of this grand event. Through this carefully orchestrated spatial arrangement and visual spectacle, the audience is not merely watching a theatrical performance but actively participating in a collective ritual of faith and cultural heritage.[4] (Figure 5)



Source: Zhu Yanhong, *Study on the Architecture of Zhoukou Guandi Temple*, Henan University, 2012.

Figure 5 Zhoukou Guandi Temple Architectural Layout

5. Conclusion

In the patterns of theatrical costumes at Zhoukou Guandi Temple, two narrative techniques coexist: they function as a visual semiotic system and as crucial components of cultural storytelling. Through

the application of these patterns, the theatrical performances construct a multi-layered cultural context within spatial and dramatic structures. Elements such as dragon motifs, auspicious clouds, and tiger stripes serve not only as visual markers of character identity but also reinforce their symbolic meanings within the theatrical setting, aiding in plot progression and atmospheric construction.

The narrative space created by these patterns extends beyond mere aesthetic function. Through their symbolic visual language, they establish a resonance between theatrical performance and the temple's spatial environment, guiding the audience's perception and facilitating their understanding of the plot and characters. This pattern-based narrative does not merely serve the artistic expression of the theater itself; rather, it records and transmits local culture and collective social memory in a distinctive manner. These patterns forge a tacit connection between temple fair theater and its audience, becoming a crucial medium for cultural heritage. Perhaps it is precisely these seemingly minute visual symbols that constitute the most vivid and authentic cultural memories embedded in temple fair performances.

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