

# An Empirical Analysis of Oil Painting Techniques Under Opera Symbols

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## Abstract

Chinese opera has a powerful and unique symbolic identity. This paper focuses on the symbolic symbols in the multiple and complex symbolic systems of the opera and uses its own creations as an example to start a discussion on the visual images. Through the system of meaning under symbolization and the extended transcendental value of the connotative meaning of the opera are reconstructed in the visual images, exploring the other side of human nature and forming an intricate and contradictory deconstruction body. Opera's unique symbol system throughout the performance process of the opera, injecting new life into traditional Chinese culture, especially in the stage performance to strengthen the charm of opera, enriching the diversified and profound art theater.

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**Keywords:** Empirical Analysis, Oil Painting Techniques, Opera Symbols

### Article history:

Received: 05/04/2024

Revised: 08/05/2024

Accepted: 18/05/2024

## Introduction

Chinese opera is deeply rooted in the rich and ancient traditions of Chinese culture, which is considered a valuable national asset and a significant cultural emblem. According to Taylor (1998), culture encompasses a wide range of spiritual and material elements, such as ideas, behaviors, literature, art, legal systems, and tangible products. Taylor (1998) suggests that culture can be understood as a collection of symbols and representational systems used by humans. Cahill (2017) defines art as a symbolic language (Wang 2017, p.10). Semiotics, as described by the author, is the examination of culture as a system of signs and symbols. This approach views signs and symbolic systems as carriers of embedded meanings, and it is not just an academic perspective on culture, but also a way to define its fundamental characteristics. The opera performance itself operates within its own distinct symbolic system, and the opera as a whole serves as a cultural symbol. When combined with the reinterpretation of painting, the interaction of these multiple symbolic systems contributes to the “era of grand culture” in the symbolization of opera. Cultural symbols are characterized by their strong abstraction and rich connotations.

Cultural symbols represent the unique culture of an organization, region, ethnic group, or country, and they carry important cultural meanings. Opera culture serves as a symbol carrier. According to Zhao (2021), a symbol is a perceived representation of meaning, and everything that conveys meaning is a symbol. Therefore, interpretation relies on symbolic signs in language and images. Eco (1997) suggests a cycle between text and interpretation, where the proven becomes the basis for further proof. (P.07)

## Methods

This essay is a component of a PhD dissertation study on the creation of opera symbols in modern oil paintings by making use of my own artistic endeavors as an object. The subject's research is developed through qualitative methods, and picture analysis is examined via the lens of the individual's creative process.

Firstly, it is important to understand the characteristics of sign language symbols in Chinese opera. The focus is on the aesthetic qualities of opera sign language, which

are to be expressed through sign language as symbolic characteristics. The main emphasis is on capturing the sign language symbol characteristics of Chinese opera in visual form, with gestures as the central element. The study explores the relationship between the symbolic characteristics of sign language and the expression of oil painting, delving into how the sign language gestures in opera can be translated into contemporary oil painting. The analysis of contemporary oil paintings is combined with an examination of the characteristics of the era and expressive techniques.

This research primarily utilizes qualitative methods, including case study analysis and image analysis. The case study method focuses on exploring the diversity of Chinese opera theme oil painting and how it inspires contemporary oil painting exploration. The image analysis method involves examining representative works to understand their creative lineage and how they reinterpret Chinese opera symbols in contemporary oil painting. The study also involves summarizing and evaluating the significance of presenting these art works and symbols, as well as providing critical evaluation and discussion to guide artists and promote cultural and artistic progress.

## Results and Findings

After the 1990s, the emergence of Pop Art had an impact on several Chinese contemporary artists, including Wang Guangyi, Wei Guangqing, and Yang Guoxin. However, Chinese Pop Art differs from American Pop Art in that Chinese artists tend to incorporate sensitive historical events and symbols with political implications into their work. For example, Wang Guangyi is known for creating “political pop” pieces, while Wei Guangqing focuses on “cultural pop” with a unique cultural relevance. Although the popularity of pop art has waned in China, the pop mindset and cultural attitude continue to influence many artists today. In contrast to this trend, my own artistic approach begins with exploring human nature, delving into inner emotional expression and physical desires. I use sign language as a symbolic element and employ the “unorganized body” form along with hard-edged painting techniques to jointly explore the metaphors and iconographic symbols associated with the performance art of opera in my creations.



Figure 1 *Searching in the Unable to Help Myself* by Chuifa Zeng, 2019

Source: Author's own photography

The artwork's composition is influenced by Marguerite's work, featuring two hooded figures whose faces are completely obscured, making it impossible to discern their genders. This imagery is used to depict the current living conditions of humans and the complex dynamics of social groups, characterized by suspicion, deceit, and jealousy. The piece explores the fragile aspects of human nature, conveying emotions not only through facial expressions but also through body language, reflecting an inner search for restlessness and a sense of mystery. The artwork employs irregular facial colors and a flat painting technique, with flowing red lines symbolizing the flow of blood into the heart, creating a contrast between warmth and coldness. The vibrant and sharply contrasting colors, along with the interplay of clear hues and flowing lines, contribute to the overall harmony of the piece.

The artwork combines squares and circles, aiming to create harmony among the fragmented color blocks and variations of warm and cool tones. The resulting image forms a mysterious, strange, and unidentifiable face, revealing a delicate aspect of human nature that appears to be in conflict and confusion. Only those who are present in the moment can truly comprehend the underlying emotions.

Heidegger (1996) states that being is the essence of existence, and it is the source of the capacity for entities to influence each other, as well as the ability of conscious beings to perceive, recognize, evaluate, and utilize this influence (p. 5-10). In the middle

of the painting, there are two pairs of hands, one warm and one cold, touching each other in stark contrast. The colors are arranged in a Pop art style, seemingly conveying a message or serving as a metaphor. The painting's language consists of the face-like color blocks covering the head and body, along with the brightly colored hands, creating conflict and contrast within the image. Although seemingly unrelated, it actually draws attention to the hidden power dynamics at various levels. The obscured color blocks conceal social rights competition and emphasize the complexity of society and the undisclosed aspects of the human heart. The seemingly contrasting colors actually conceal a range of practicality and allure. Thus, the artwork points to the intricate emotional desires of human nature and the competition for rights among individuals.



*Figure 2 A Claim in a Thousand Words, by Chufa Zeng, 2019*

Source: Author's own photography

From a linguistic perspective, sound is the initial point of reference. However, according to Aristotle, speech symbolizes emotions and words serve as symbolic representations. This is because sound, being the primary symbol, has a direct connection with the mind and is not just a simple reference point. It can also indicate the mood, which can be identified by the mood's brightness or by comparing it to natural objects.

The artwork “A Claim in a Thousand Words” (Figure 2.2) shows some influence from pop art in its visual style, but it also contains meaningful subject matter. The image features pairs of warm and cool colored hands reaching out from the lower part of the work, resembling a curved and rippled block of sea-colored waves. Nine hands with different postures extend from the picture, with three red hands in the middle surrounded by six others, creating a sense of confrontation or communication through sign language. This expresses the inner emotions of the characters, with each hand conveying a range of expressions similar to those of a face. The artist, Yusuf, aims to depict the intricate and contradictory aspects of human emotions, such as joy, happiness, delight, horror, fear, and dread. He believes that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and random. In this piece, the signifier neglects the face but carries face-like traits to express the subject’s thoughts, reconstructing a semiotic system of emotions and desires to achieve social communication. The reference is presented through different postures and symbols, with each symbol representing a person’s thoughts and identity. According to Pierce (1997), “Every thought is a symbol, and life is a series of thoughts, and linking these two facts, the word or symbol used by a person is the person himself” Each symbol combines separate elements and interpretations, leading to conclusions that explain objective reasons and clarify real facts, ultimately forming the social roots of social subjectivity and multiplicity.

Adorno (2011) argues that subjectivity is a fundamental aspect of personality, cognitive understanding, and personal practice. He suggests that it is a potential goal to strive for rather than an inherent source of basic identity. The work evokes thoughts of individuals in contemporary society who are pursuing dreams, love, and truth, but encountering obstacles. It portrays them as being submerged under the waves, yearning for truth while facing resistance. The title “Claim” is notable for its striking and restrained nature, suggesting that even in immobility, resistance can still be asserted. The title’s restraint is reflected in the contrasting warm and cold colors on the screen, symbolizing a natural formation of the work and conveying a self-reflective and critical spirit of subjectivity. This spirit aims to challenge a spiritual doctrine and establish a rationalist trend of thought.



Figure 3.3 “Warm Heart” by Chufa Zeng, 2022

Source: Author’s own photography

Deleuze (2011) argues that desire functions as a symbolic system that is not based on representation, and it can generate an unconscious flow within the social sphere. He contends that all desires are spontaneous, fragmented, and constantly in motion, operating without rules and capable of creating anything. He suggests that desire is always seeking new opportunities and purposes, leading to a diverse range of nomadic activities and a rich, dynamic mobility. In society, the primary task is seen as suppressing and controlling desire, confining it within a separate closed structure that encodes desire and social priorities.

The artwork “Warm Heart” (Figures 3.3) highlights desire as the fundamental element of social identity and existence. It depicts a torso-less figure with hands of varying skin tones and genders reaching out from different directions, representing what Deleuze and Gattari refer to as the “disorganised body.” This disorganised body is portrayed as having organs and biological cells, yet lacking social engagement, organization, and connections. The image is devoid of symbols and appears closed-off and outdated. The text suggests the possibility of giving this body a new reorganization and reconstruction.

The entire image is divided into differently sized color blocks, which then transform into the symbols of the face in the modern era, representing diversity, plurality, and non-subjective modes of thinking. Deciphering it requires understanding the functioning of various social mechanisms that drive the dynamics of the production system for different individuals in society, thereby igniting a surge of desire for mobility. In this way, the desire machine becomes the driving force behind the image, using the power source of the hand to directly engage with and seek social and spiritual fragmentation within an egoic or superegoic structure, and to “recodify” everything to re-establish connections with the state, society, and human emotional and spiritual state, reintroducing desires and needs into society. In the process of trying to restore the subject’s conception and rationality and elevate the ideology of thought to a position of significance, the red line becomes the dividing line of the divided symbols—not just any line, but the line of the dismantling of the social symbols—forming a very active and fluid stream of consciousness that breaks through the re-territorialization and enters the field of intensity, complexity, and change. The dynamic function of yearning. The fire in the middle of the image, which appears to be warm, is actually a complex contradiction and a release of energy. It affects people differently at different times, warm for those who are shivering and cold, tricky for those in the heat of summer, and genuine for those who are like-minded. The key is the desire is at what time or what stage to stimulate out, in the real conflict struggle is to use or exclude completely depends on the ideological consciousness and desire to control the strength and jurisdiction. The ability to make reasonable judgments and to cope with deep-seated problems are all rooted in the subject’s rational, ultra-experiential reconstruction of the macro- and micro-construction.

Throughout human history, both images and symbols share a common origin. The symbols of opera have become carriers of culture, as the author has rejected natural biases against rationality and the concept of eternal law, as well as the conservative approach to historicism. Instead, they have chosen to stand at the intersection of traditional culture, playing a significant historical role. Both images and symbols must be acknowledged and recognized in some way, as they are inseparable from the foundation of all visual arts.

The visual images and symbols in artworks illustrate people's subjective consciousness in social production practice, emphasizing the dominance of historical materialism in social practice. They also record the current state of art in a new historical period through the experience of life and the pursuit of artistic spirit. According to Burke (1966), "Without a symbol system, the world has no form of meaning" (p. 3-6). Symbols are pervasive, as Peirce also states that "The whole universe... is full of symbols, even if it is not entirely composed of symbols." Lange (2002) similarly asserts, "Without symbols, man could not think, he would only be an animal, therefore symbols are the essence of man... Symbols create the world of man away from the senses" (p. 028). In an era highly influenced by symbols, the common issues faced by human civilization revolve around the significance of their study.

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