

Langue and Parole Analysis on Aesthetic Setting of ‘The Last Emperor of Tang Dynasty’ Musical Theatre

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Abstract

A theatrical performance on a large-scale open stage needs a sound visual appearance in all its scenography elements such as the backdrop, costume, lighting and props. Due to its distance between the audience and stage is quite far, strong aesthetic elements with profound symbolic meaning are needed to ease the audience to understand and engage with the story. ‘The last Emperor of Tang Dynasty’ is a musical theatre performed daily in Xi’an recites the historical tragedy between Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and her favourite concubine, Yang Guifei. It is staged at Huaqing Hill, the original site of the ancient palace built in 723rd c. The backdrop includes the actual hill at the back of the stage, a large screen in the middle that displays different montage for different scenes. In front of the stage that acts as the middle stage shows the depth and scale of the castle, whereby the pool in front is also used as a ‘wet’ stage. The wet stage represents the bathing ground for the concubine and sometimes used as water curtain during scene change replacing curtains. In this study, the researcher will analyse the aesthetic elements displayed throughout the show that contain semiotic meanings of langue and parole in its design elements like colours and form. As the theatre performance has limited time to present the details of each character or events, it is vital to represent emotions or scene using impactful visuals to assist audience’s understanding about the story or characters. Thus, this study is made to analyse on how these elements works as the langue and parole to emphasize the two. The combination of langue and parole derived from other cultures had enhanced the storyline and enhanced the audience understanding towards the whole performance. The shift in meaning from traditional Chinese contexts to a universal visual language demonstrates Chinese culture’s adaptability and acceptance of other artistic forms. This cultural flexibility has been instrumental in elevating musical theater, showcasing how a blend of visual and cultural expressions can create a more profound theatrical experience.

Keywords: Chinese culture, langue and parole, musical theatre

Introduction

Presenting a historical fact in the form of performing arts is challenging, since it is quite demanding to make it interesting in such limited time. This is due to the fact that history has an in-depth facts that need to be told with specific chronology but at the same time it has to be entertaining and understood by the audience. The story is based on an actual history of the last Emperor of Tang dynasty who had ruled China for 300 years. The palace was built in Lishan Mountain which has natural hot spring until today. The palace had become the favourite place for the emperor to make a stop whenever he was in Xi’an. The Last Emperor of Tang’s Dynasty evolves around the story of the Emperor Xuanzong, aged 64 when he decided to take Yang Guifei as her favourite and official concubine; even though at that time Yang Guifei was already married to his son, Li Mao. But in this musical theatre, it did not focus much on these historical details but emphasise on the romantic story between the two. According to history, the last Emperor did not pay much attention to his administration which led to disappointment to the Generals who need to prevent attacks from the North. The emperor gave all his administrative decisions to his family members to decide, which led to the Generals outraged. At the end, the

Generals decided to kill and overthrow the emperor, but he begged to exchange his life to anyone except him. Consequently, the Generals decided that, by taking away his favourite concubine will make the emperor focus back to his administration, so they decided to replace him with Yang Guifei. Despite the heavy decision, he agreed reluctantly and Yang Guifei was executed. Nevertheless, the emperor was in grief and lost focus on his administration. He regretted his choice and mourned endlessly. At the end, he was poisoned by one of his officials and died in vain. The historical facts were then combined with a fantasy that he was reunited with Yang Guifei in heaven.

Despite a tragic end, the performance did not fail to impress the audience, by incorporating exciting visual elements to portray different mood of scene. This study is made to analyse the visual elements used and how they were presented in a musical theatre production. By having a visual analysis using the theory of langue and parole, it will make us understand the meaning of each element used like colours of object. Besides, the mixture of visual language from other culture or universal symbols added had further enhance the performance and provide better understanding to the storyline.

Literature Review

The concepts of langue and parole, as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal work on structuralist linguistics, can provide valuable insights into the ways in which colour is employed in the performative arts to convey mood and meaning. (Culler, 1977) Langue, the abstract system of linguistic rules and conventions, can be seen as the underlying framework that governs the use of colour within a given cultural or artistic context. Parole, on the other hand, represents the individual, contextualized instances of colour usage, where artists and performers draw upon the linguistic resources of their respective traditions to express themselves (Culler, 1977).

Roland Barthes expanded on Saussure's ideas of langue and parole in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, by exploring how meanings are constructed in culture. In Barthes' semiotic theory, language (or any sign system) can be understood through two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. Here's how these relate to langue and parole:

- i. **Langue and Denotation:** In Barthes' theory, langue is like the structure or rules of the language system—the “shared code” that everyone understands, similar to denotation, which is the literal or primary meaning of a word or symbol. Just as langue forms the common ground for communication, denotation is the straightforward meaning that everyone recognizes.
- ii. **Parole and Connotation:** Parole, on the other hand, aligns with connotation, the deeper, personal, and cultural meanings that individuals bring to language. Connotations go beyond the literal and reflect subjective interpretations, cultural beliefs, and individual perspectives. In Barthes' terms, parole embodies these individual nuances and interpretations as people use language to express specific ideas, emotions, or cultural identities.

Barthes took the foundational idea of langue and parole and expanded it to show how meanings shift based on cultural and social influences. He highlighted how what we consider “natural” or “obvious” meanings are shaped by cultural ideologies, revealing how langue and parole work together in creating complex layers of meaning in everyday life. Therefore ‘parole’ in Chinese interpretation represented in the theatre might differ from other cultures like the West and East as the meanings have different connotation.

Similarly, the concept of translanguaging, as discussed by García and Wei, can be a useful lens through which to examine the ways in which performers and artists draw upon multiple linguistic and semiotic resources to create meaning. By embracing the fluidity of language and the blurring of boundaries between named languages, translanguaging allows for a more nuanced understanding of how colour is used to convey mood and emotion in performance (Otheguy et al., 2015; García & Wei, 2013). Inter-connectedness of different modes of expression, translanguaging allows for a more nuanced understanding of how colour can be employed to convey mood and emotion in performance arts.

By recognizing the underlying linguistic structures that govern the use of colour or other gesture as symbols, as well as the individual and contextualized instances of its deployment, researchers and practitioners can gain valuable insights into the expressive potential of the subject of performance. For instance, the concepts of *langue* and *parole* can be applied to analyse the use of colour in lighting and costume design within theatre performances. The *langue*, or the abstract system of rules and conventions, can inform the choices of colour palettes and their symbolic meanings in a production, while the *parole*, or the individualized instances of colour usage, can reveal how performers and designers leverage these linguistic resources to convey mood, emotion, and meaning to the audience.

The application of the *langue-parole* dichotomy to the study of colour usage in performance arts can be further elaborated. The *langue*, or the underlying system of colour symbolism and associations, provides a foundation for the artistic choices made by performers and designers. This linguistic framework shapes the cultural and historical understanding of how certain colours are imbued with specific meanings and emotional resonances. For example, the colour red may be associated with passion, anger, or danger, depending on the cultural context.

The *parole*, on the other hand, represents the individual and contextualized instances where artists and performers draw upon this linguistic repertoire to create unique and expressive colour palettes. Performers may use colour in their costumes, lighting, or stage design to subtly or dramatically convey the emotional journey of their characters, while designers may employ colour to establish a particular mood or atmosphere for the performance. By understanding the interplay between the *langue* and *parole* of colour, this study intends to gain deeper insights into the communicative and expressive power of colour in the musical theatre of 'The Last Emperor of Tang Dynasty'.

The study by (Fischer-Lichte, 2008) on the interplay between the semiotic and performative dimensions of theatre highlights the challenges in analysing the ephemeral nature of live performances, and how semiotics can provide a framework for understanding the structured coherence of theatrical signs (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Similarly, the examination of the contradictory significations of audio-spatial signs in Tom Stoppard's plays demonstrates the potential for theatrical works to rebalance and reorient the semiotic interpretations of their elements (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Additionally, the discussion of the dynamics between form and content in post-Maoist Chinese theatre underscores the ways in which aesthetic considerations are often inseparable from political and historical contexts (Chen, 2001). In the case of 'The Last Emperor of Tang Dynasty,' the aesthetic setting can be seen as a manifestation of the complex interplay between the traditional and the modern, the regional and the global, that has characterized the development of Chinese theatre over the decades.

The aesthetic setting of 'The Last Emperor of Tang Dynasty' musical theatre can be viewed as a '*parole*' or an instantiation of the '*langue*' of traditional Chinese theatrical conventions. The sparse and minimalist set design, powerful lighting, the highly stylized costumes, and the symbolic gestures of the performers all function as signifiers that evoke the rich cultural and historical context of the Tang Dynasty. Importantly, the use of colour in the aesthetic setting also plays a crucial role in relating emotion based on psychological and cultural associations. The muted, earthy tones of the set design and costumes, for instance, may evoke a sense of tranquillity and restraint, while the occasional pops of vibrant hues could signify moments of heightened drama or spiritual significance. The lack of realism in the staging and the emphasis on formalized dramatic techniques serve to heighten the emotional and symbolic impact of the performance, engaging the audience in a "world of exotic sights and bizarre sounds" that is characteristic of Chinese opera. This approach to staging and performance can be seen as a means of preserving and transmitting the '*langue*' of traditional Chinese theatre, even as the production adapts and incorporates '*parole*' elements from other theatrical traditions. (Liu, 2018; Li, 1988; Chen, 2001; Hsu, 1964)

Interestingly, the cultural interpretations of these colours can sometimes differ from their psychological associations in the Western context. For example, while red is often seen as a positive and auspicious colour in Chinese culture, but it has been associated with aggression and danger in Western psychology; it also carries the added significance of being a symbol of power, prosperity, and vitality (Elliot & Maier, 2013). Yellow, the colour of the imperial court and the sun, is revered as the

most auspicious and noble of all the colours, embodying the concept of harmony, balance, and the divine.

The comparative analysis of colour meanings between Chinese culture and Western psychology reveals both similarities and divergences, reflecting the unique cultural and linguistic perspectives. While there are universal trends in colour preferences and associations, the specific nuances and connotations can vary significantly across different cultural contexts.

Methodology

The theatre performance was observed on site at Lishang Palace in Xi'an city in the province of Shaanxi, China. The scenes from the performance were recorded using a video recorder and then analysed by frame. The frames were later being examined scene by scene to emphasized on the semiotic massage embedded on its elements or principles of design. There are many elements shown on stage, but this study only focuses on its costume, backdrop and lighting. Since there are many scenes, this study will only emphases on the main scenes, like the romantic scene, bathing scene, execution scene and war scene. The visual elements will then be analyse using Langue and Parole format to get a clearer picture on how those elements are used to portray story or emotion to the audience.

The analysis of theatrical performances through the lens of Saussure's linguistic concepts of 'langue' and 'parole' offers valuable insights into the intricate layers of meaning and symbolic representation. In the context of 'The Last Emperor of Tang Dynasty' musical theatre, this approach can illuminate the ways in which the aesthetic setting of the production conveys deeper cultural and historical narratives (Hsu, 1964). This explanation of the langue and parole can be seen in visuals as referring to Figure 1 -5 as follows:

Table 1

Figures, Langue and Parole


Figure	Langue	Parole
 <p>Figure 1. Visual of a romantic scene. Source Hanisa Hassan (19.7.2024)</p>	<p>Main colour: Blue costume for dancers.</p> <p>Costume of the main character: Yellow – bright and can be seen from afar.</p> <p>Overall colour: harmonious colour with low contrast with similar hue intensity.</p>	<p>Blue represents tranquility and romance of the couple.</p> <p>Yellow colour historically is reserved to the highest-ranking colour for the rulers in many countries, including China.</p> <p>The harmonious colour with low intensity represents the calmness and unity of the couple.</p>




Figure	Langue	Parole
 <p><i>Figure 2. Visual from a bathing scene. Source Hanisa Hassan (19.7.2024)</i></p>	<p>The highlight of the fountain has a contrasting blue hue, focusing on the main character on taking her bath in white clothes.</p>	<p>The colour blue acts as water and Yang Guifei are clad in white- the while and blue is linked to calmness and tranquility in Chinese performing arts.</p>
 <p><i>Figure 3. Visual of a war scene. Source Hanisa Hassan (19.7.2024)</i></p>	<p>Bombastic scenes shown from flames that were burning from all angles from the front stage with smoke.</p> <p>Yellow flames with red lighting.</p> <p>Contrasting colour of costume for the king which is clad in white.</p>	<p>A symbolic of burning of the city, destruction made from the war by the enemy.</p> <p>Red lighting is used to symbolise destruction. Yellow symbolizes the high intensity of war.</p> <p>Signifying the city is under attack and the palace is getting burnt. Red creates a tense feeling.</p> <p>Resembles the Emperor as an innocent figure.</p>
 <p><i>Figure 4. Visual of a tense scene on execution of Yang Guifei. Source Hanisa Hassan (19.7.2024)</i></p>	<p>White colour on the centre stage with Gui Feng being lifted</p> <p>The emperor climbing the stairs on his knees with his right-hand waving to Gui Feng.</p> <p>Majority colour on the scene is red.</p>	<p>White represents pure soul and death in Chinese culture. The light represents the path that brings the soul of the dead consort to the afterlife. On the other hand, white hues always portray as purity and innocence in many connotations.</p> <p>The gesture of one hand lifted signalling to stop the execution, while bending on his knees represent regret of his decision.</p> <p>The red colour represents war, anger and tense moment on the scene.</p>


Figure	Langue	Parole
	<p>Blue backdrop with water being highlighted on the front stage.</p> <p>Both characters wear white colour costume.</p> <p>Background stage is filled with dancers with big, feathered birds in white.</p>	<p>Blue is a cold colour which gives a soothing and calmness mood to the characters in this scene.</p> <p>White represents the innocence and purity of both characters.</p> <p>The birds are associated with angles as represent in many cultures.</p>

Figure 5. Source Hanisa Hassan (19.7.2024)

Discussion

Colour is the profound element seen in such a large-scale stage. The stage emphasis on formalized dramatic techniques serve to heighten the emotional and symbolic impact of the performance, engaging the audience in a “world of exotic sights and bizarre sounds” that is characteristic of Chinese opera. This approach to aesthetic elements reflects the ways in which “dramatic styles and techniques were never treated merely as formalistic categories” in the context of post-Maoist Chinese theatre, but rather were “embedded in context and predetermined by content” (Chen, 2001). The musical theatre production, in this sense, becomes a parole that embodies the langue of traditional Chinese theatrical conventions, while also negotiating the political and historical circumstances that have shaped the development of the art form over time. Both langue and parole witnessed by this performance had a mixture of cultural elements, universal understanding and overall aesthetic composition.

The red colour in lighting that normally symbolises auspiciousness and prosperity in Chinese culture (Okafor, 2020). It also represents luck, joy, and happiness (Chilton, 2024) and always being used in special celebrations like Chinese New Year or marriage. Van Wagner mentioned that ‘red is a bright, warm colour that evokes strong emotions; Red is also considered an intense, or even angry, colour that creates feelings of excitement or intensity’ While Logan and Clarke wrote, ‘Red is the colour for courage, strength, and pioneering spirit; it is the colour of anger, violence and brutality’ (O’Connor, 2009). In this musical theatre, it is used to symbolise fire, aggression, and impulsion, during war and execution scenes (see Figure 4). It showed that the presentation of the musical theatre combines both langue and parole used in Chinese colour symbolism and universal parole of colours which had presenting red in a more universal meaning rather than cultural.

Cool hues used to create a calm and relaxing mood (Crozier, 1999). Blue is calming, relaxing, and healing (O’Connor, 2009). Wagner in O’Connor (2009) also mentioned that ‘blue calls to mind feelings of calmness or serenity and often described as peaceful, tranquil, secure, and orderly’. The blue colour signifies associated with healing and trust, while green represents renewal and vitality (Verot, 2023). In other interpretation like the Chinese opera masks, blue shows uprightness and stubbornness (The Colors of Peking Opera, 2024). However, blue in this theatre signifies water, calmness and tranquillity- another adaptation of universal parole of colour used mainly on the lighting and set during the bathing scenes (see Figure 2).

Yellow is a hue widely recognized for being cheerful, energetic, and happy. It inspires enthusiasm, creating a sense of warmth and vitality, but as a color that elicits strong emotions, its meanings can be both varied and complex (McLean, 2023). Nevertheless, it has auspicious meaning in China, linked with good fortune and even imperial power. The colour yellow always symbolises the

supreme leader in many Asian countries. Therefore, the emperor and his consort always clad in yellow-coloured costumes in this musical theatre (see Figure 1 and Figure 5). These culturally specific interpretations highlight how the parole of colour can deviate from broader, more universal understandings, enriching the expressive potential of colour in the performance.

White feathers on birds, like angel with wings or Halo portrayed in western cultures also have similar meaning to ‘heaven’ or angles. White also represents in a few scenes especially to signify heaven in the last scene. White represents universal meaning of purity or innocence which are different from Chinese culture that signify disaster, an expression of exhaustion, bloodless and lifelessness, which symbolizes death, an ominous omen, and a dead end (Okafor, 2020). Therefore, the musical theatre had adapted universal parole to signify meaning of innocence and purity which can easily be understood by the viewers. Universal culture shown on the aesthetic elements also helps to create the mood especially in the lighting throughout the performance. By combining both paroles, it gives a universal colour to signify reincarnation after his death, forgiven and innocence in the other world.

Besides colour, other generic langue and parole used include the body gestures like putting one hand up, with palm facing the enemy to signal the ‘stop’ sign (see Figure 4). Birds with white feathers represent angles in heaven (see Figure 5). The symbolic meaning of the white colour under the influence of Western culture and ideology has shifted from associations with abandonment, omens, aversion, disaster, fatigue, and lifelessness to representations of purity, cleanliness, fairness, justice, and flawlessness (Okafor, 2020). The splashing of water in blue colour literally signified as bathing in Figure 2. Fire represents burning sensation (in this theatre used to symbolise war) and destruction which uses its universal meaning and usage in many cultures worldwide. Even though in Chinese culture, red and yellow always represent auspicious colour, but for the war scene, it had adapted universal langue and parole as the colours also represent destruction and confrontation.

Conclusion

The finding of this study can be concluded as in Figure 6 below:

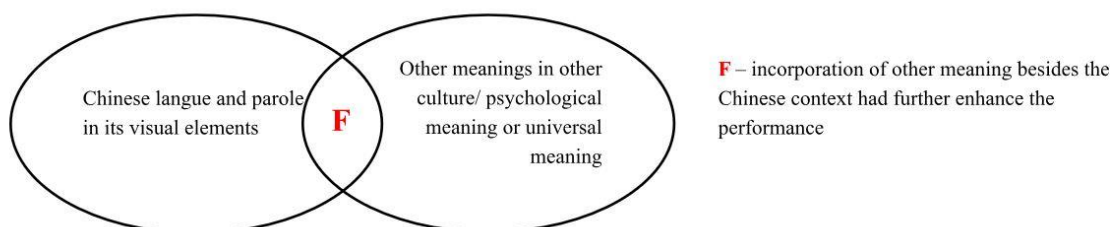


Figure 6. Combination of Chinese langue and parole with other meanings had enriched the musical theatre performance.

By incorporating both traditional cultural symbolism and other universal connotation in colour for the musical theatre, it had effectively engaged the audience with the storyline and conveys an easy understanding of the intended emotional cues. The strategic used of lighting, costumes, and backdrops not only enhances the story line but also allows the audience to viscerally experience the mood and atmosphere of each scene. Through the blending of Chinese cultural semiotic meaning with bold visual elements, it had evoked powerful emotional reaction among the audience. Similarly, the incorporation of western aesthetic elements in colour representing the ‘langue and parole’ of fire, water, and smoke had further enrich the performance. It also added to the multi-sensory experience (like water splashing and heat from fire burning as part of the show) further immerses the audience experience on site. This multifaceted approach to visual storytelling resonates with the viewers on a deeper level, leaving a lasting impact and facilitating a more profound understanding of the story’s themes and messages. The langue and parole used throughout the theatre performance are basically

easy to interpret by the audience with limited time given (for a less than two-hour show). The incorporation or universal understanding on langue and parole with the Chinese culture had added values to the whole performance.

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Biography

Dr. Hanisa Hassan is an Associate Professor at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). She received her Ph.D in Design Studies from Bandung Institute of Technology, MA in Art and Design Education and BA in Fashion from MARA Institute of Technology. Her research always associated with her major in traditional Malay clothing, culture, aesthetics, craft innovation and costume in performing arts. As a fashion major, she frequently collaborates with international universities to explore the evolution of costumes from folk to court traditions and their transformation in contemporary society. Her extensive experience studying and working abroad in countries like Indonesia and China has enriched her connection with various cultures which she channels into her multidisciplinary research in art and design.

Dr. Nerosti Adnan works at Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia. Her work explores intercultural performance, body politics, and the transmission of indigenous dance forms in traditional contexts. She has conducted extensive fieldwork across Indonesia and is currently leading a funded research project on archiving endangered dance repertoires such as *tari selendang*, *piring*, *inang*, *galombang* and other traditional forms.

Dr. Muhammad Fazli Taib Saearani, is an Associate Professor of Dance Studies and the Dean at the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia. He received summa cum laude from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia with a Doctorate in Performing Arts and Visual Arts Studies in the field of dance education in the classical court dance heritage of Yogyakarta. His research focuses on dance education, dance heritage through non-formal education, creative movement education and sociology of dance.

Sun Zenyu is currently a doctoral candidate at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), pursuing research on the costume traditions of the Manchurians in China. Currently, she studies under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hanisa Hassan, with whom she also collaborates on broader studies of culture and costume from Chinese perspective.