

The Symbolic Meme Analysis of Traditional Opera Costumes from a Totem Perspective— A Case Study of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion

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Abstract: This paper, from a totem perspective, thoroughly analyzes the symbolic memes of traditional opera costumes within the Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion. It further explores their cultural value and aesthetic qualities through symbolic analysis of opera costumes, designation of totem elements, and studies on the process of meme transmission. This paper concludes that costume design of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion not only realizes the rich symbolism of colors, patterns, and textures, but also realizes cultural inheritance and innovation through totem elements and meme transmission systems. This offers greater theoretical support and practical advice in terms of further research on the usage and invention of cultural symbols and memes of opera costumes on the contemporary society as well as protection and inheritance of traditional culture.

Keywords: Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion; Traditional Opera Costumes; Totem Elements; Symbolism Memes; Cultural Transmission

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1. Introduction

Kunqu Opera is the pinnacle of Chinese classical drama, and is regarded as the ancestor of all operas. The Peony Pavilion, as a classic work of traditional Chinese opera, possesses costumes which are full of culture connotation and exclusive artistic value. In this paper totem perspective is discussed of the symbolic memes of opera costumes. The totems symbolize the primitive human religion of natural objectives or phenomena. The beliefs and ideas they embodied have gradually been incorporated into opera costume design and development over the years. The gorgeous designs, peculiar color combinations, and particular styles of the costumes in The Peony Pavilion may all be the resultant memes that were created under the pressure of the totem culture. These symbolic memes bearing the stamp of ancient culture have been transmitted down the long river of history. People have received, imitated, and recreated their cultural connotations and influence through the distinct art form of opera, which makes their connotation and influence even deeper in different eras and regions. A detailed study of these symbolic memes not only make it easier to trace the cultural origins of the Chinese opera culture, but also enable us better appreciate its value and significance in the specific cultural contexts, providing new insights and thoughts to the heritage and

development of the traditional opera culture.

2. Research Background and Significance

2.1 The Cultural Value of Traditional Opera Costumes

The costumes of traditional Chinese opera are a significant aspect of Chinese culture and possess very high cultural value. The opera costumes are not merely the significant elements of the stage performance but the symbolic system with abundant historical, cultural, and social information. One of the representative works of Kunqu Opera, *The Peony Pavilion*, has costumes which are quite artistic and symbolic in color, pattern and texture. As an example, the costumes of Du Liniang are predominantly light-colored and with peonies or orchids, which symbolize purity and grace respectively. Her loneliness and desire of love can also be traced through such costume design. It does not only form the image of the character, it also drives the plot of the story and the significance of opera costumes in narration and expression is emphasized greatly.

Opera costumes have irreplaceable value in the field of cultural inheritance. Through stage performance, they transmit the traditional cultural elements from generation to generation, and the continuity between the tradition and the reality is accomplished. The costume works of the Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* combine the traditional Chinese textiles and embroidery artistry, thereby presenting the exclusive beauty of the intangible cultural heritage. This heritage does not only maintain the spirit of the traditional Chinese culture but also offers inspiration and creativity to modern design.

2.2 The Role of Totem Symbols in Culture

Totem symbols, as a key component of culture, contain rich and diverse symbolic meanings as well as powerful cultural roles. Regarding the conventional opera costumes, the totem symbols are brought in different forms like decorative patterns and choice of colors and this has become a very significant device of passing cultural information. Taking the dragon and phoenix patterns as examples, as two significant totems of the Chinese nation, the dragon is a symbol of power and good fortunes, whereas the phoenix is a symbol of good morality and ethics. The application of dragon and phoenix motifs in the traditional Chinese opera costumes does not only add visual beauty to the costumes, but also provides the characters with certain cultural connotations.

The symbol of totem has varied uses in culture. Firstly, totem symbols as a symbol of national culture and spirit can significantly arouse the national identity and create national unity. Secondly, the purpose of totemic symbols is the inheritance and transmission of the culture, and they can also be a good way to transfer cultural information to the next generations by reproducing it in the arts. Lastly, in the contemporary society, the totem symbols can also innovate and regenerate, which can suit the different changes that take place in the times, and by doing so, give traditional culture new connotations of the times.

The symbolic memes of the traditional opera costumes in the view of the totems would be quite useful in a thorough analysis of the cultural values embedded in opera costumes, as well as provides a theoretical basis of the heritage and innovation of the traditional opera costumes.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Research on Traditional Opera Costumes

The traditional opera costumes play a significant role in the traditional Chinese culture and have been one of the burning issues of scholarly interest. Not only are they of high artistic value, but also carry rich cultural connotations. Cheng Yuhuai and Pan Jianhua^[1] in their research *Totem Worship-The Symbolic Gene of Traditional Chinese Opera Costumes*, mentioned in their research that the totem worship in the traditional Chinese opera costumes is an important component of the symbolic genes. This totem worship applies totem symbols that have extremely conspicuous external characteristics to emphasize on the life art and art life that people seek. Such a totem worship developed in thousands of years since the nature worship of the shamans to the symbolic worship and then to the regulated worship is the actual realization of the humanistic spirit of traditional Chinese opera costumes. The article by Song Junhua^[2] titled *Research on Ancient Chinese Opera Costumes* systematically tabulates the ancient Chinese opera costume development and discusses and expounds the transformation of opera costumes through the historical, cultural and artistic lenses. She believes that decorative quality and totem worship of opera costumes are dynamic. Even though the remnants of these changes can be traced back to the alterations in the social

culture, they also indicate the aesthetic worth of the opera art itself.

Regarding Kunqu Opera costumes, Yao Ziye, Liu Yueyi and Li Ruohui^[3] researched on the topic of The Evolution of the Artistic Characteristics of Kunqu Opera Costumes and indicated that the evolution of the artistic characteristics of Kunqu Opera costumes is closely linked to the evolution of Kunqu Opera itself. Kunqu Opera costumes were also widely disseminated and evolved among literati and gentry during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Its costume was designed with numerous aspects of the Southern Opera of the Song and the Yuan Dynasties and Zaju of the Yuan and the Ming Dynasties, and it contained the aesthetic features of the traditional Chinese drama system profoundly. Wang Lili^[4] began with the aesthetic outlook of the Jiangnan literati, and deeply analyzed the exquisite aesthetic characteristics of Kunqu Opera costumes. The author believes that Kunqu Opera costumes were too affected by the taste and poetic beauty of Jiangnan literati in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

3.2 Meme Theory and Semiotics

The semiotic theory is a new approach that can enhance the cultural interpretation of the opera costumes. Semiotic speaking, even patterns, colors, materials, etc. of opera costumes are symbols on their own. These symbols can be used to communicate a very rich cultural information after they are placed in a particular combination. In the article titled The Symbolic Presentation and Value of Traditional Chinese Opera Costumes, Zhou Yang^[5] stated that in semiotic theory a symbol consists of two- the signifier and the signified. The material form that the symbol possesses is the signifier and the concept or meaning that is referred to by the symbol is the signified. As far as traditional opera costumes are concerned, color, pattern and style together constitute the signifier system of the symbol. The system of signifier of the symbol is made up of color, pattern and style. As an example, red is frequently employed on the opera stage to demonstrate the fiery and daring personality traits, the dragon patterns are employed to reflect the imperial power and aristocratic position, the boudoir robe is employed in reference to unmarried girls in the inner rooms, etc. Jin Tianyi^[6], in her article titled Research on the Metaphor Mechanism of the Traditional Opera Costumes from the Perspective of Semiotics, critically deconstructs the metaphorical mechanism of opera costumes in reference to the two dimensions of elements and culture. Using the symbolic coding logic of the symbolic subsystems like color, shape and pattern of opera costumes, she examines the translation road of social hierarchy, religious ideas and aesthetic paradigms behind them. Moreover, it is also noted in the article that these symbols reproduce the meaning through deconstruction and integration of media under the impetus of new ideas and new technologies. This offers a systematic mechanism of semiotic analysis of in-depth interpretation and modern transformation of cultural value of the traditional opera costumes, and offers a creative model of the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

Meme theory has enabled us to think differently on the topic of studying cultural spread and heritage of opera costumes. The unit in the spread of cultural information is memes. Distribution is non-genetic, in particular, by imitation. When we study opera costumes, the meme theory can assist to comprehend how cultural contents that are represented in opera costumes are propagated and developed at various historical periods and social settings. Indicatively, studies that are made in the lens of meme theory indicate that the cultural aspects of opera costumes can be easily conserved and propagated with the assistance of digital extraction and creation of meme databases. In her article Research on the Digital Preservation of Traditional Opera in Intangible Cultural Heritage - Taking Liangshan Tune as an example Li Yuanshan^[7] examined the existing bottlenecks of the inheritance and development of Liangshan tune, a traditional genre of opera in the intangible cultural heritage. She identified the issues with its digital protection work, including the absence of a unified system of resource building, the mono-channel of dissemination, the inadequacy of training of professional talents and the ineffective management system. The article then suggested countermeasures, which include increasing digital collection and processing speed, creating immersive digital performance platforms, facilitating profound use of digital technology and enhancing digital protection system, in order to increase the digital protection level and spread of Liangshan tune. This is also a serious source of reference in the digital protection and inheritance of traditional opera.

3.3 Research on Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion

The costume design of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion being one of the representative works of Kunqu Opera has always been under the spotlight of research. Chen Wenwen^[8] believes in her study that the aesthetic connotation of the stage

costumes of The Peony Pavilion is embodied in the meticulous choice of its color, pattern and texture. As an illustration, the costume of Du Liniang is made of light blue with embroidered orchids on it. Her clothes design is the symbol of elegance and refinement of Du Liniang, and the inner section is the symbol of the loneliness and craving love of Du Liniang. Liu Anda^[9] made a comprehensive study of aesthetic features of Kunqu Opera costume in the lens of aesthetic culture. He believes that the beauty of the outer appearance of Kunqu Opera costumes is not only in its aesthetic features, but also in the rich cultural sources. The skillful use of color, pattern and texture helps to reveal the personality and identity of the character and social standing up to now, and also represents the aesthetic seeking of the Kunqu Opera.

Moreover, there are also significant advances in the study of the Kunqu Opera costumes in modern design. In the article *The Evolution and Development of Traditional Chinese Opera Costumes - A Discussion on the Innovation of Costumes in the Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion* by Bai Lingfang^[10], it is stated that traditional Chinese opera costumes date since the Ming Dynasty, and have a 500-year history. Their styles and forms have passed through the Ming Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China and up to the establishment of New China. Throughout this lengthy period of time, there have been no drastic fundamental changes, but there have never been no local changes and these changes have always been woven throughout the process of the ongoing improvement of the design of the opera stage. The most common costume enhancement practice took place in the late twenties of the last century. The passion of the whole society towards opera was great then, and the community of the Peking Opera offered a very successful and flourishing view. Many cultural personalities were involved in it thereby propelling a wave of opera enhancement within the Peking Opera fraternity. Many new Peking Opera scripts were composed, many new forms of opera costumes were developed in this movement.

In an attempt to realize the objective of modernizing and inheriting traditional opera culture, Wang Kexiang and Xu Qianqian^[11] applied the principles and techniques of visual design to the traditional Kunqu opera culture. They are concerned with aesthetic construction, spiritual expression, and cultural heritage within the visualization process of the characters, costumes, and scenes in Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* in order to discuss the space of development of Chinese Kunqu visual art in the digital era and facilitate the spread of Chinese Kunqu culture. Through the more intuitive means of artistic presentation of Kunqu culture, new design standpoints and techniques can be offered toward the preservation and study of such in tangible cultural heritage.

Summing up the above analysis of the studies of traditional opera costumes, semiotics and meme theory, and Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion*, it can be concluded that there is not only a high artistic value of opera costumes, but also a strong cultural connotation. The semiotics and meme theory offer fresh concepts and approaches to the study of cultural significance of traditional Chinese opera costumes. The costume design of the Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* as the constituent element of Kunqu art not only represents the beauty of Kunqu art, but also bears critical reference value towards the preservation and creativity of the traditional culture. Further studies can also examine the use and development of the cultural symbols and memes in the traditional Chinese opera costumes in contemporary society, particularly in discussing the possible potential of Kunqu opera costumes in digital transmission, as a way of providing theoretical support and practical advice on how to preserve and pass on the traditional culture.

4. Research Methods

4.1 Semiotic Analysis Method

Semiotics explores the meaning process of symbols in terms of their signifier (form) and signified (meaning) attributes. The semiotic analysis techniques could be applied to the study of the totemic symbols and cultural meaning of the opera costumes in the sphere of traditional opera costumes research. The symbols of the costumes of the Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* include the patterns, colors and textures of the traditional Chinese opera costumes. To illustrate this, in the play, Du Liniang predominantly puts on fine white or light colored gongs of embroidery, and the embroidery designs are predominantly peonies, magnolias, plum blossoms, etc. These patterns are not only aesthetically good, but they are also the noble, elegant, passionate personality and love of Du Liniang. Patterns are signifiers and the personality and emotions of Du Liniang are signifiers from a semiotic point of view.

Moreover, the color plays the crucial role in depicting clothing symbols too. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the color of the clothing

worn by Du Liniang will also be changed depending on the plot in the various scenes. As an example, the clothing in Dream of Love is mostly in cool colors to convey the repressed helplessness of the mentality of Du Liniang. This is achieved by using warm tones in scenes of Human Love to make it joyous. These colors are used to create the emotional articulation of the characters to the viewers via the symbolic role of clothing.

4.2 Meme Theory Implementation

Meme theory is a theory that researches on the spread of cultural information. This theory is of the opinion that culture is socially propagated using imitation as a means of information dissemination. The use of the meme theory can make us realize how the cultural symbols of opera costumes have propagated and changed through various historical periods and various social backgrounds. There is both tradition and originality in costume design in various versions of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion, however. As an illustration, in the youth version of The Peony Pavilion, due to the maintenance and enhancement of the traditional costumes of opera, the costumes are crafted using soft silk material, are more fitted, and are lighter in color. The costume design is somewhat in line with the aesthetics of the modern time. This enhancement may be considered a sort of meme transmission and mutation. The cultural symbols of opera costumes could be reproduced and advanced by means of imitation and innovation.

Moreover, the innovative use of opera costumes in the contemporary society can also be explained with the help of meme theory. Elements of the costumes used in the Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion have been used by the modern designers in the designing of modern clothes blending traditional culture and modern fashion. This has given the modern design more design inspiration and has created new avenues of cultural spread of the opera costumes.

4.3 Case Study Method

The case study approach is the method that implies making certain analysis of the research object depending on certain conditions, investigating the objective nature of the research, examining the inner laws of the research. The case study method is applicable to the analysis of the features, cultural connotation as well as development of the costumes in various versions of the play The Peony Pavilion when examining the costumes of the Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion. The costumes in the youth version of The Peony Pavilion are traditional, though they are also modernized. To illustrate this, in the scene, The Soul Departed, Du Liniang dies sitting halfway upon a chair in a white veil; after which, the Flower Goddess enters the stage, Du Liniang takes off her white veil, puts on a big red cloak, takes a plum blossom and turns to go. This giant red cloak is an adaptation of the traditional cloak that is closer to the fashion of the contemporary society and also indicates that Du Liniang is not actually dead but has gone home temporarily. By studying the costume design in the youth version of the play The Peony Pavilion through a case study, the design of the costume was not only successful in creating a great visual effect, but also a breakthrough in cultural connotation. The innovation maintains the cultural worth of the traditional opera costumes and it satisfies the aesthetic demands of the contemporary society in a better manner.

Applying the approaches of the semiotic analysis, meme theory, and case study, one can examine the symbolic memes of the costumes of the performance in Kunqu Opera titled The Peony Pavilion in a variation of perspectives. Semiotic analysis assists us in the interpretation of the totemic symbols and cultural connotations in the opera costumes, and meme theory demonstrates how the cultural symbols were innovated and applied in the opera costumes in various historical times and social contexts. The analysis of case studies involves the use of concrete cases to learn the nature of the opera costume design as well as the innovation and implementation of the present day opera costume design in a contemporary setting. A combination of these research methods allows one to arrive at results. We may investigate the benefits and constraints of traditional opera costume in their evolutionary process in several aspects and even contribute to help improve the effectiveness of the analysis results.

5. Case Analysis: Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion

5.1 Analysis of Costume Symbol

The costume symbolism in Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion is very abundant. These symbols by use of color, patterns and texture depict the character, identities and psychological meanings of the characters. The following information is a detailed analysis of the costume symbols of the main characters in The Peony Pavilion.

5.1.1 Costume Symbols of Du Liniang

The main female character in *The Peony Pavilion* is Du Liniang, whose costumes are very beautifully designed and symbolic in nature. The costumes of Du Liniang are generally pink or white, pink color signifies gentleness, purity and dreams which is in tandem with the beautiful and kind character of Du Liniang. The peonies, butterflies, and orchids are the totem symbols on the costumes, and have very high aesthetical value and symbolize the noble and elegant personality of Du Liniang and her desire to be loved. As an illustration, in the scene *An Amazing Dream*, the costumes of Du Liniang are largely adorned with butterflies, and the embroidery on these costumes is an allusion to her desire to be in love. The costumes of Du Liniang are primarily upper garment and lower garment style women clothes, which are casual and home-like clothes, which suit the identity and the role of a young lady in a dan (female role in Peking Opera). The materials predominantly are dainty silk, and the garmenting is more tailored, which adds the layering and fluidity of the clothes.

5.1.2 Costume Symbols of Liu Mengmei

In *The Peony Pavilion*, the male protagonist is Liu Mengmei whose costumes mostly consist of blue and green colors, the symbol of wisdom, tranquility, and hope, respectively. His costumes have totem signs which mostly consist of pine trees, cloud designs, and plum blossoms. Pine trees are used as a symbol of persistence, dignified spirit, and long-life in the traditional Chinese culture. Liu Mengmei endures many hardships, but he steadfastly maintains unconditional love to Du Liniang. The strength and dignity of the pine tree is used to represent the character and spirit of Liu Mengmei. The clouds have an impression of freedom and unpredictability. The life of Liu Mengmei was a full of ups and downs. The patterns of clouds that are used are subtle indications of where his fate is heading, but that the yearning to have a free life is infinite. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, plum blossoms became a common representation of the ideal spirit and personality that scholars highly cherished, which became appropriate to describe Liu Mengmei as a gentleman by the literati. The clothes worn by Liu Mengmei are mostly pleated with a pattern of corner flower, which are filled with gardenias with a sophisticated and academic approach that indicates his academic status and also reveals his reserved nature.

5.1.3 Costume Symbols of Chunxiang

Since Chunxiang is the maid of Du Liniang, her dressing during the play is mostly red and yellow which symbolizes her passion, liveliness and vitality. Regarding patterns, the clothes of Chunxiang tend to include butterflies, bees, and other insects. Butterflies symbolize love and freedom and bees are symbolic of diligence and sweetness. These patterns not just reveal the active character of Chunxiang but also mean her passion to life and her hopes to the future. The costumes of Chunxiang are based on the traditional attire of maidservants in opera: the tops and the long skirts. This style indicates the position and identity of maidservants in the ancient society. The short tops can be used in the workplace, whereas the long skirts are more respectful. To some extent, this style as a symbolic meme on the opera stage has continuity. It communicates to the viewer the fundamental identity of Chunxiang who is a maidservant and the viewer can easily recognize her position based on her dress code. Conversely, Chunxiang is a maidservant but the clothes she wears are slightly different in order to demonstrate her vibrant character. Her sleeves are pleated or her long skirt hem is quite dynamic. This small innovation in comparison with traditional maidservant clothes is a symbolic meme of the micro-structure of the character of Chunxiang, which hints at the fact that she is not a hard and unbending maidservant, but a vibrant and moving character. As the viewers observe these subtle innovations, they create the first impression about the personality of Chunxiang.

5.1.4 Costume Symbols of Other Characters

There are also numerous totem symbols concealed in the costumes of other characters in *The Peony Pavilion*. Indicatively, phoenixes and peonies are depicted in the costumes of the mother of Du Liniang, Lady Du. The phoenix is a symbol of nobility, authority and motherhood and the peony is a symbol of wealth and prosperity. These totem marks are an indication of the status and maternity of Lady Du. The Flower Goddess has costumes of numerous colors and floral ornaments. The Flower goddess is a messenger of nature, life and vitality, which adds to the atmosphere of mystery and dreaminess on the stage. The totem symbols that the costumes of these characters wear also possess their causes, connotation, and mechanism of meme transmission, which in combination form the fantastic costume culture of *The Peony Pavilion*.

5.2 Identification of Totem Elements

Totem elements have significant symbolic meaning in the costumes of Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion*. These elements are embodied through patterns and colors:

5.2.1 Peonies and Orchids

One of the traditional Chinese totems is the peony that symbolizes prosperity, love and wealth. In *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang is dressed in peony patterns, not only because of her high status but also her quest and desire to get love. She is subjected to feudal morals and longs to be free and loved. The prosperity and the peony symbolizes her desire to live a better life.

Orchids are associated with purity and classiness and are used to show inner emotions. Like in the case of *The Soul Departed*, the clothing of Du Liniang is orchid, which symbolizes purity and strength. In the scene *Union with the Ghost*, Liu Mengmei is dressed in a light blue robe with pale purple orchids, which reminds of the visual image of a lonely orchid in a lonely valley, slightly echoing the lonely aspect of the scene, and with the cultural connotation of the ghost of Du Liniang entering his dream to help him fulfill his dream, while he drinks alone at night.

5.2.2 Butterflies and Plum Blossoms

In Chinese culture, the butterflies are messengers of love and embodiments of freedom. In *The Peony Pavilion*, butterflies symbolize Du Liniang's immortal life and unwavering pursuit of love. The dream meeting with Liu Mengmei is symbolized with butterflies which are used to represent the soul of Du Liniang in the process of traveling through time and space seeking love. Plum blossoms are a symbol of perseverance and innocence and are mostly applied to the character of Liu Mengmei. The outfits of Liu Mengmei are filled with plum flowers, therefore, unveiling his gentlemanly appearance. In the scene *An Amazing Dream*, Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei are both dressed in white. The clothes of Du Liniang are embroidered with butterflies and the clothes of Liu Mengmei are embroidered with plum blossoms just like the butterfly-flower romance, symbolising their pure love.

*Table 1 The clothes of Du Liniang are embroidered with butterflies and the clothes of Liu Mengmei are embroidered with plum blossoms just like the butterfly-flower romance, symbolising their pure love. The picture above is from the stage performance, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*^[12].*



5.2.3 Cloak and Tassels

The cloak as a costume decoration element in the play is susceptible to some symbolism. In the scene *The Soul Departed*, Du Liniang with a red cloak and plum blossoms in her hand turns and leaves, heralding that she is not dead, and she is merely traveling temporarily, which will pave the way to her return in the next chapter. The costume has a dynamism and layering provided by the use of tassels, as well as indicates the agility and elegance of the character.

5.3 Analysis of Meme Transmission Mechanism

Meme theory offers a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of culture transmission of costume through Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion*. Memes being the fundamental unit of cultural information transmission are passed on in society by imitation. The transmission of the memes of costumes in Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* can be analyzed in the following way:

5.3.1 Assimilation and Memory of Memes

Assimilation: The costume memes of Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* are absorbed by the audience in visual symbols. As an illustration, the fine garments of Du Liniang and the warm clothes of Liu Mengmei, using the direct imagery of the color and pattern, can be easily absorbed by the audiences.

Memory: The audience recalls and maintains these costume memes via repetition of the stage performance and presentation. An example is that once the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* was performed several times, the audience developed a memory of the costume image of the female lead, Du Liniang, and when the same costume was used the next time, it would generate the same associations. The spread of such symbolic meme assists the audience to comprehend and embrace it, and the characters in classical opera become more familiar with their looks. Since *The Peony Pavilion* is performed in different regions and genres of opera the symbolic meme of the costume worn by Du Liniang is also inherited and evolved to some extent, yet its main style, colour, and pattern among the other main elements of the symbolism of the character will not change, thus, preserving the image of the character in question as something universal.

5.3.2 Meaning and Dissemination of Memes

Meaning: Kunqu Opera costume memes of *The Peony Pavilion* are largely conveyed by a range of media which includes stage plays, film and televisions, and contemporary design. To illustrate this, modern designers applied the image of the costumes in *The Peony Pavilion* in modern style clothing designs, and conveyed this through new design methods, thereby allowing the traditional costume memes to have meaning.

Dissemination: The peony and butterfly totemes of costumes of Du Liniang in opera are cultural memes which have high ability to spread. The channel of diffusion is via the visuals of the stage of opera i.e. watching the performance on the stage, the spectators feel the symbolic meaning of the totem symbols by being exposed to these exquisite costumes. Simultaneously, as the art of opera is widespread, these totem symbols are also familiar to people and popularized by them through the media, in the film and television productions and on the stage performances. Based on this, the symbolic meaning of the totem symbols is further spread and deposited that enhances the symbols of love and freedom that the totem symbols bear, thus facilitating the spread and propagation of its meme.

5.3.3 Variation and Innovation of Memes

Variation: The costume memes of Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* have been varied across different versions. The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* has undertaken the contemporary enhancements of the costumes has carried out modern improvements to the costumes while maintaining traditional elements, such as the diminishing of the traditional pleated blouses of the young male protagonist [10]. The patterns are primarily focused on body and collar, and the patterns on the cuffs and the bottom of the collar and shoulders of the traditional pleated blouses are eliminated. Even the design on the collar has been eliminated in the two plays, *Wedding and Departure*, and *Vowing between Man and Ghost*, so that the costumes can suit the aesthetic requirements of the contemporary viewers.

Innovation: The modern fashion designers used the costumes of the Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* in their designs, keeping the traditional cultural connotations of the traditional clothing and introducing the new life. The design series of MUKZIN is a clear example of how one can include the components of the Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* in the design of modern clothes. It is a combination of traditional culture and modern fashion that is realized through innovative design

techniques and, thus, it provides new paths to the preservation and development of Kunqu Opera.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

This paper analyzes the symbolic memes of the traditional opera costumes of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion from the perspective of totem. By closely examining the symbols of costumes, tracing the elements of the totem, discussing the mechanism of meme transmission, it is further found that the costume design of the Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion conveys rich symbolic meanings through color, pattern and texture. These symbols are not only used in determining the personality and emotions of the characters but also show the socio-cultural background that adds to the perception and empathy of the audience with the characters through visual communication. Secondly, totems have a great cultural symbolical value in the costumes of The Peony Pavilion. Peonies are an icon of wealth and good luck, orchids are an icon of nobility and beauty, butterflies are an icon of love and freedom, and plum blossoms are an icon of strength and innocence. The totemic elements not only increase visual attractiveness of the costumes but also add certain cultural nuances to the characters, which represents the cultural worth of traditional Chinese opera costumes. Thirdly, the meme theory gives a fresh insight into the analysis of cultural spread of opera costumes. The costume memes of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion on the stage are performed and spread in different forms: stage performances, films and TV works, and contemporary design. During the dissemination process these memes attain cultural heritage and innovation by processes like assimilation, memory, expression, transmission, variation and innovation. Lastly, this paper, by analyzing the costume memes of The Peony Pavilion, also concludes that the cultural aspects of the traditional opera costumes can be translated into the contemporary society by innovative design. Patterns, colors, and other textures of the old opera costumes can be used by modern designers both in designing modern clothing and adding a new life to the traditional culture as well as a good source of inspiration to the modern design. The innovation can not only serve to preserve and pass on the traditional culture but also to foster the co-evolution of culture and art.

Although this paper has conducted a relatively in-depth analysis of the traditional opera costumes of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion from a totem perspective, there are still some areas worth further exploration, including the dissemination and reception in a cross-cultural context, the implementation of the opera costume symbol memes in digital and virtual reality space, the dynamic evolution of costume symbols, audience acceptance and feedback on opera costume symbols, and cultural innovation and industrial integration. All these render the evolution of the traditional opera costumes in future more feasible.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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