

The Application of Sichuan Opera Face-Changing Techniques in Character Creation in Chinese Drama

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Abstract

Sichuan Opera face-changing (*bianlian*) is widely received as virtuosic spectacle, yet its dramaturgical function in character creation remains under-theorized. This study examines how face-changing operates as a device for character construction, and how it has been transferred into Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*). Three objectives guided the research: to clarify the origins and constituent elements of Sichuan Opera; to analyze its face-changing techniques; and to examine the application of those techniques in character creation in Chinese drama. A qualitative design combined documentary research, in-depth interviews, and practice-based records. Informants comprised three experts and scholars including a second-generation face-changing inheritor three professional performers, and twenty general audience members. Classic Sichuan Opera excerpts, notably *The Legend of the White Snake* and *Zhenggu Tower*, together with contemporary drama works, served as key samples; fieldwork was conducted with the Chengdu Theatre and Sichuan Opera Troupe.

The findings show, first, that Sichuan Opera emerged through the convergence of Nuo mask traditions with five vocal styles, furnishing the cultural ground from which face-changing arose. Second, and centrally, face-changing constitutes a three-element system in which facial symbol, performance movement, and stage accompaniment operate in mutual determination; the third element has been neglected in existing scholarship, and its recovery revises the standard account. Third, this system accomplishes characterization across five dimensions image, personality, emotion, action, and mythological characterization rendering interior states as immediately perceptible visual form and achieving characterization without recourse to speech.

The study further finds that transfer into modern drama is symbolic rather than technical: spoken drama seldom reproduces the full mask-pulling operation, retaining instead the semiotics of color and pattern. Face-changing thus emerges not as ornamental skill but as a transferable dramaturgical instrument. Against this, the study identifies a condition of entertainment-alienation in contemporary practice, in which the technique's growing visibility has been purchased at the cost of its characterizing function.

Keywords: Sichuan Opera; face-changing (*bianlian*); character creation; Chinese drama (*huaju*); traditional performing arts; dramaturgy; intangible cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Chinese opera (*xiqu*) is among the world's three ancient theatrical traditions, alongside Greek tragedy and Sanskrit drama. Across its long evolution from ritual song-and-dance to comprehensive stage art, it developed an aesthetic grounded in codified, symbolic expression: the role types of *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, and *chou*; the conventions of water sleeves, stage steps, and posture; and the freehand (*xiayi*) principle by which a whip stands for a horse and an oar for a boat (Zhang & Guo, 2006). Meaning, in this system, is not represented but conventionalized the audience completes the image.

Sichuan Opera occupies a distinctive place within this tradition. Formed through the immigration movements of "Huguang filling Sichuan" in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, it absorbed five vocal styles Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Huqin, Bangzi, and the local Dengxi into a single system, acquiring an open and syncretic cultural character from its inception (Hu, 1985; Li, 2010). Formally named in 1924 and inscribed on China's first national list of intangible cultural heritage in 2006, Sichuan Opera is defined as much by its repertoire of special skills (*juehuo*) as by its vocal music. Chief among these is face-changing (*bianlian*).

Face-changing is popularly received as spectacle: the instantaneous, seemingly impossible substitution of one painted face for another. This reception is not unfounded the technique's virtuosity is real, and its lineage guarded but it is incomplete, and it has shaped the scholarship. Existing studies attend predominantly to the technique's material history and operational mechanics: the shift from paper-shell masks to Cao Junchen's grass-paper faces, Kang Zilin's silk-thread mechanism enabling nine successive changes, the later substitution of silk for paper (Lan, 2005; Yu, 2012). What such accounts leave under-examined is the question of dramatic function what face-changing does to a character.

The premise of this study is that face-changing is not stage magic but a dramaturgical device. Its operative principle is the externalization of interiority: at the moment a character's psychological state alters beyond what speech can carry terror, fury, despair, the collapse of a concealed identity the change is made visible on the face itself. As Lan (2005) argues, face-changing is properly understood as the externalization of a character's inner emotion rather than a display of skill; the vitality of these techniques lies not in their difficulty but in their capacity to portray character and advance plot (Du, 2005). Zijin Raobo's transformation in *The Legend of the White Snake* is not an interruption of the drama for the sake of display; it is the dramatic event. Read this way, face-changing represents the fullest realization of the "emotional visualization" that governs *xiqu* performance aesthetics generally (Zhu, 2019).

This premise carries a consequence for Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*). Introduced from the West in 1907 and realist in orientation, *huaju* has for over a century stood in a relation of mutual reference and mutual distance from traditional opera, and the search for a nationalized theatrical idiom remains a live problem in the field (Wu, 2010; Liu, 2015). If face-changing is understood as a device rather than a trick a means of psychological externalization, identity transformation, and social metaphor then it becomes, in principle, transferable. Whether and how that transfer has actually occurred, and what is retained or lost when it does, has not been systematically examined.

This study therefore pursues three objectives: (1) to clarify the origins and constituent elements of Sichuan Opera; (2) to analyze the face-changing techniques employed in Sichuan Opera; and (3) to examine the application of Sichuan Opera face-changing techniques in character creation in Chinese drama. The three objectives are cumulative rather than parallel, moving from *what Sichuan Opera is*, to *how face-changing operates within it*, to *how it functions when carried into another dramatic form*.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese opera aesthetics and the codified body

Scholarship on *xiqu* has long converged on three defining properties: comprehensiveness (*zonghexing*), virtuality (*xuninxing*), and codification (*chengshixing*). Wang Guowei's foundational definition in *A History of Song and Yuan Opera* opera as "the performance of stories through song and dance" established the unity of narrative and lyric that subsequent theory has elaborated (Wang, 1913). Wang's related concept of *yijing* (artistic conception) locates the value of opera not in mimetic fidelity but in the fusion of feeling and event, a position that has framed a century of Chinese opera criticism (Zhu, 2019). Sun (2012) situates this within a broader account of drama's comprehensiveness, stagecraft, and dialogic qualities, arguing that these have continuously evolved through the development of Chinese theatre.

The genealogy of this aesthetic is long. Kang (2004) traces the comprehensiveness of *xiqu* from song and dance in ancient sacrificial ceremony, through the absorption of storytelling and acrobatics in the Tang and Song, to a mature theatrical form a development he reads as the successive incorporation of diverse cultural materials rather than the elaboration of a single tradition. The consequence for performance theory is significant. Where realist acting proceeds by psychological interiorization, *xiqu* proceeds by codified exteriorization: the water sleeve, the orchid finger, the circling walk that signifies a journey (Zhu, 2017). Meaning is carried on the surface of the body, in conventional signs the audience is trained to read. This is the aesthetic ground on which face-changing must be understood not as an anomaly within *xiqu*, but as its logic pressed to an extreme.

2.2 Sichuan Opera and the special-skills repertoire

Studies of Sichuan Opera emphasize its syncretic formation (Hu, 1985; Liao, 2012). The "Huguang filling Sichuan" migrations brought Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Huqin, Bangzi, and local Dengxi into shared performance, producing a genre whose openness is constitutive rather than incidental. Li (2010) reads this regional character as culturally sedimented: face-changing, he argues, carries the connotations of Bashu culture, its regional customs and spiritual temperament legible from facial color through to the manner of the change itself. The literature identifies four regional schools and a role system of unusual granularity, with the *chou* (clown) role bearing distinctive local character (Guo, 2018; Xiao, 2014).

Within this system, the special skills (*juehuo*) fire-spitting, lamp-rolling, face-changing occupy an ambivalent position in the scholarship. They are acknowledged as the most recognizable features of the genre while simultaneously being treated as peripheral to serious analysis, as though virtuosity were the opposite of meaning. Sichuan Opera theorists themselves have resisted this: the vitality of these skills lies not chiefly in technical difficulty but in creativity of characterization and plot advancement (Du, 2005; Sichuan Provincial Academy of Chuan Opera Arts, 2018). Yu (2012) makes the semiotic claim explicit, holding that the facial mask signifies a character's disposition, identity, and fate through the combination of color and pattern. This position, however, is asserted more often than it is demonstrated.

2.3 Face-changing: technique documented, function under-theorized

Existing work on *bianlian* is predominantly historical and technical. Lan (2005) provided the first systematic account, dividing the technique into three categories wiping (*mo lian*), blowing (*chui lian*), and pulling (*che lian*) and setting out for each the essentials of movement and the construction of the properties, including the pasting process and thread mechanism of the pulled mask. The material lineage is well established:

origins in Nuo mask ritual; the paper-shell masks of Qing-era performance; Cao Junchen's substitution of grass paper; Kang Zilin's thread-pulling mechanism permitting up to nine successive changes; and post-1949 refinement from paper to silk (Lan, 2005; Yu, 2012). Zhou (2008) reads this developmental sequence as a microcosm of the wider innovation of Chinese theatrical technique.

Crucially, Lan (2005) did not stop at mechanics. He insisted that face-changing is not merely a display of skill but the *externalization of a character's inner emotion*, the rapid transformation of facial color presenting psychological change in visible form. Du (2005) likewise argued that the technique's contemporary survival depends on preserving the precision of traditional method while innovating in step with modern stagecraft and aesthetic expectation. Yet these are statements of principle rather than demonstrations of it. The literature documents *how* face-changing is done with considerable precision; it says markedly less about *what it accomplishes dramatically*. The distinction matters because the two readings license different conclusions: if face-changing is spectacle, it is genre-bound and non-transferable; if it is a device for externalizing interiority, it is a dramaturgical resource in principle available to other forms.

A further omission is more specific, and this study takes it as its point of departure. Where scholarship treats face-changing as an integrated practice at all, it treats the coupling as one of mask and body. The role of stage accompaniment enters the literature only obliquely. Liu (2018) comes closest, observing that the rhythmic changes of Sichuan Opera percussion furnish rhythmic support for face-changing performance, coordinating with the actor's movement and with the timing of the change to heighten its dramatic effect; Peng (2014) characterizes the aesthetic properties of the music melodic gentleness, rhythmic liveliness, regional accent but as a property of the music rather than of the technique. Neither brings accompaniment inside the analysis of face-changing itself. The present study argues that this omission is consequential: what is described in the music literature as *support* is more accurately understood as *constitution*.

2.4 Huaju and the problem of nationalization

Chinese spoken drama, introduced from the West in 1907, has developed for over a century in a relation of mutual reference and mutual distance from traditional opera (Niu & Zhang, 2024; Zhou, 2025). Its realist and dialogue-based orientation sits awkwardly against *xiqu*'s codified exteriorization, and the search for a nationalized theatrical language a *huaju* that is Chinese in idiom and not merely in subject remains an unresolved problem. Wu (2010) frames this as a dual imperative of nationalization and modernization, requiring the essence of national culture to be joined to contemporary aesthetic conception. Hu (2024) advances the stronger claim of "local transformation": that the development of Western drama in China has proceeded through the continuous absorption of *xiqu* aesthetics, instancing Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, in which Fanyì's letter-tearing draws on the emotional amplification of water-sleeve technique. He cautions, however, that the modern expression of traditional skill requires stripping away the outer shell of the technique to reach its expressive principle.

2.5 Precursors to a theory of transfer

Two scholars have approached the question this study addresses. Liu (2015) analyzes Lin Zhaohua's *Orphan of Zhao*, in which operatic technique is used to externalize a character's interior conflict, and derives from it three principles of "skill grafting": that the technique must fit the character's disposition, coordinate with the dramatic action, and serve the work rather than display itself. Fu (2023) supplies the counter-case. Examining the cross-border use of face-changing in contemporary drama, he finds it frequently arrested at the level of "cultural wonder" instancing a espionage drama in which a spy's change of identity is signaled by a face-change that decorates the plot without deepening the character.

Between them, Liu and Fu establish that transfer is possible and that it commonly fails, but neither specifies what, precisely, is being transferred when it succeeds. That is the gap this study addresses. Face-changing scholarship treats the technique as Sichuan Opera's property and dwells on its mechanics; *huaju* scholarship seeks a nationalized idiom without systematic attention to the *juehuo* repertoire as a source of one. Neither has examined which of the technique's dimensions survive the crossing into spoken drama, which are discarded, and whether what remains is the technique or only its semiotics. The present study addresses this by treating face-changing as a device of character creation and tracing its operation across both dramatic forms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative design, appropriate to research questions concerned with meaning, function, and interpretation rather than measurement. Because the object of inquiry the dramatic function of a performance technique is not directly observable in isolation from the performances that carry it, the design triangulated three principal data sources: documentary research, in-depth interviews, and practice-based records, supplemented by an audience questionnaire. Documentary sources supply historical and technical grounding; interviews supply practitioner and expert interpretation; practice records supply embodied knowledge of the technique's execution and constraints.

The practice-based component warrants explicit statement. The researcher is a trained performer and undertook the face-changing technique directly, generating first-hand knowledge of what each method

permits and forbids. This access is methodologically consequential: the constraints a technique imposes on the body are not reliably recoverable from observation alone.

3.2 Scope

Content scope. Three domains, corresponding to the three objectives. Temporal scope. 1907–2025, from the introduction of spoken drama into China to the present. Field scope. Chengdu Theatre and the Sichuan Opera Troupe, Sichuan Province, China. Period of study. October 2025 – April 2026.

3.3 Informants

Informants were selected purposively, on the criterion of direct professional engagement with either Sichuan Opera performance or face-changing transmission.

Group 1 Experts and scholars ($n = 3$). An Associate Professor and Director of a university performance department; a professor specializing in opera; and a second-generation inheritor of Sichuan Opera face-changing. The inheritor's inclusion is methodologically significant: face-changing is transmitted through guarded lineage, and an inheritor's account provides access to technical and interpretive knowledge unavailable in published sources.

Group 2 Performers ($n = 3$). Professional opera and drama actors, selected to include practitioners working across both traditional and modern forms.

Group 3 General audience ($n = 20$). Selected to span differences in gender, age, and occupation. Given the limited scale and closed-item format of the audience instrument, reception data are treated throughout as indicative rather than as an independent evidentiary base.

3.4 Key samples

Traditional repertoire. Classic Sichuan Opera excerpts in which face-changing performs identifiable characterization work, principally *The Legend of the White Snake* (Jinshan Temple scene) and *Zhenggu Tower*. The Zijin Raobo sequence in the former was treated as the central case, since the character is non-speaking and mythological face-changing is therefore not one expressive means among several, but the primary one.

Modern drama. Contemporary works and rehearsal excerpts drawing on the face-changing concept, including short-form drama, collegiate productions, and named directors' works.

Practice-based material. Experimental fragments developed and performed by the researcher, generating applied instances of the technique.

3.5 Analytic framework

Face-change sequences were examined movement by movement and coded for the dimension of characterization served. The five-dimension scheme image, personality, emotion, action, and mythological characterization was derived inductively from the first pass of coding and then applied systematically across the sample; it was not imposed a priori. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically. Findings from the three principal sources were cross-checked against one another, so that no claim rests on a single evidentiary base.

4. Findings

4.1 Sichuan Opera: formation and constituent elements

Sichuan Opera's formation was cumulative and syncretic. Its deepest stratum is Nuo opera (*nuoxi*), the masked exorcistic ritual in which priests danced to communicate with deities before the form devolved into post-labor entertainment. It is from Nuo that the mask enters Sichuan performance the material precondition without which face-changing could not have arisen. Successive layers followed: Ba-Yu dance and comic sketches of the Qin and Han; Tang miscellaneous plays; the cross-regional circulation of Song troupes. The decisive event, however, was migratory. The "Huguang filling Sichuan" resettlements, following catastrophic depopulation, brought migrants from Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, Jiangxi, and Anhui, each establishing guilds and importing home-region troupes. Four external vocal styles met the indigenous Dengxi on shared stages, initially performed separately and later merged under the practical pressures of touring.

The finding to draw from this is not chronological but structural: Sichuan Opera's openness to absorption is constitutive, not incidental. A form assembled from five imported idioms is not one that resists foreign matter. This bears directly on the third objective a genre that was itself produced by transfer is unlikely to prove untransferable.

Four elements compose the performance system: actors, music, costume, and scenery. Roles are finely subdivided (*xiaosheng*, *huadan*, *mojiao*, *huamian*, *choujiao*). Music is drum-led, percussion driving conflict and plot while strings and winds carry lyric feeling. Costume follows the principle of "wearable, no mistakes" color and pattern declare identity, disposition, and fate directly. Scenery is minimal and freehand: the traditional "one table, two chairs" generates diverse locations through convention.

4.2 Face-changing as a three-element system

Face-changing is standardly presented as a repertoire of tricks, and where it is treated as an integrated practice, as a coupling of mask and body. The evidence indicates that both accounts are inadequate. Face-changing is a three-element system in which facial symbol, performance movement, and stage

accompaniment operate in mutual determination. None is intelligible alone, and the third has been consistently overlooked.

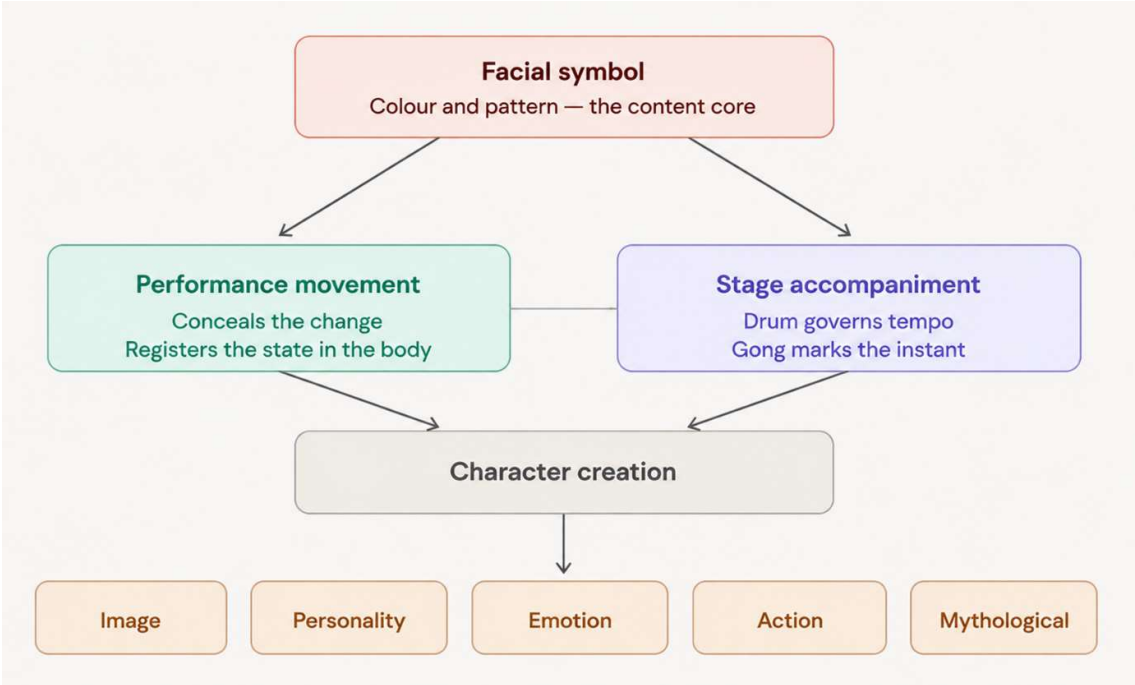


Figure 1 The three-element system of Sichuan Opera face-changing
Source: Author (2026)

(1) **Facial symbol: the content core.** Masks divide into two classes. *Character-type* masks are organized around a single dominant color paired with restrained patterning, with a stable and legible semantics: red for loyalty and courage, black for integrity and boldness, white for cunning, green for resolve. *Mythological-type* masks abandon the single-color principle, deploying exaggerated contrast, complex patterning, and concrete totemic figures immortals rendered predominantly in silver, buddhas in gold, demons in darker and cooler registers. Because the facial symbol fixes what is to be expressed, it functions as the **baton** of the system: it sets the expressive direction to which movement and accompaniment must conform. A mask is not decoration awaiting a performance; it is an instruction to one.

(2) **Performance movement: the presentational vehicle.** All pulling methods share a single underlying process: masks are applied in layers with low-viscosity plant adhesive at forehead, cheek, and chin; silk threads are secured to wrist or waist; the face is momentarily occluded; the thread is pulled and the discarded mask concealed within the costume. The four methods differ only in how occlusion is achieved:

Table 1 Four pulling methods classified by means of occlusion and demand on the performer

Method	Means of occlusion	Demand on performer
Rapid removal	Turn, sleeve, body screen	Basic; most widely used
Turning change	180° rotation	Coordination of posture with thread timing
Bare-handed change	Head-shake alone, no prop	Extreme speed; most difficult
Prop-assisted change	Fan opening and closing	Balances technique with visibility; most common in performance

Difficulty scales with the reduction of available cover. Movement discharges two duties simultaneously: it conceals the mechanism, and it registers in the body the same state the face declares. Crucially, the movement must be one the character would plausibly make within the plot, not an action inserted to enable the change. What the technique's developmental history reveals is that it has been governed throughout by a single problem how to hide the change while remaining in character and that is a *dramatic* problem, not a mechanical one.

(3) **Stage accompaniment: the temporal and affective ground.** The third element is not atmosphere added to a completed action; it is constitutive of the action's legibility. The drum functions as the system's conductor, governing the tempo of transformation and thereby the pace of both mask-switch and bodily

movement. Gongs and cymbals mark the instant of the change and the point of exertion, amplifying the impact of both. Strings and winds erhu, suona, flute establish the emotional ground on which the face becomes readable. When the mask pulls to red or black, percussion is dense and driving; when it softens, erhu and flute take over. The auditory does not accompany the visual. It co-determines it.

The system may therefore be stated as a proposition, drawn from analysis of performance sequences and corroborated in expert interview:

A face-change without coordinated movement is magic, not theatre. A movement without coordinated facial change is empty stage business. And either without accompaniment lacks the temporal architecture that renders the change readable as drama.

This is the study's answer to the spectacle reading. Face-changing is not virtuosity that drama happens to accommodate; it is a device whose entire technical architecture exists to serve characterization while remaining invisible as technique.

4.3 Five dimensions of character creation

(1) Image. Mask color and pattern are matched to the character's identity and attributes; rapid substitution accomplishes instantaneous transformation of the perceived figure. In *The Legend of the White Snake*, the Zijin Raobo (Purple-Gold Alms Bowl) is rendered in black patterning on gold, establishing the sacred and forbidding character of a Buddhist implement.

(2) Personality. Disposition is conveyed through the *rhythm and amplitude* of change rather than its content. Rapid, frequent changing indicates volatility and impetuosity typically villainous; slow changing signals composure; a single unchanging face signals obstinacy. The distinction is significant: here the technique's temporal properties, not its chromatic ones, do the characterizing work.

(3) Emotion. This is the technique's core expressive function, and the point at which it most clearly exceeds speech. Emotion is short-term and immediate where personality is durable. The correspondences are systematic: anger in red, black, or blue with large, forceful movement and dense percussion; tenderness in soft, pale faces with slow movement and lyric strings; authority in gold with calm, weighted movement; terror in white or green with rapid, evasive movement. The intensity of the emotion governs the visibility of the change: strong feeling produces conspicuous transformation, subtle feeling concealed transformation.

The Jinshan Temple confrontation demonstrates the full progression. Zijin Raobo enters composed solemn face, steady bearing, the equanimity of a heavenly power. As the White and Green Snakes refuse submission, anger rises: the actor turns, swings the sleeve, exerts, and the face pulls to red. As combat intensifies, stamping and cloaking occlude a further pull to green and black, the percussion driving with each transformation. The audience apprehends the entire emotional arc without a line of dialogue.

(4) Action. Face-change is integrated with posture, stage step, and prop handling reciprocally: bodily movement grounds the change, and the change in turn intensifies the dramatic charge of the movement. When Zijin Raobo turns red, the five fingers splay and the bowl is thrust forward, the gesture carrying the same excitation the face declares.

(5) Mythological characterization. Here face-changing is not one means among several but, in certain cases, the only one. Zijin Raobo is a personified implement anthropomorphic and non-speaking. Deprived of dialogue, the character can be constructed only through the face. Divine power is figured as *instantaneity* (the speed of the pull) and *gradation* (progressive chromatic escalation): from slow black lines, to urgent red, to rapid yellow-blue flame patterning three colors and three rhythms mapping a legible hierarchy of power from weak to strong.

4.4 Transfer to modern drama: symbolic, not technical

Comparison of traditional and modern application yielded the study's most consequential finding. *Traditional Sichuan Opera* deploys face-changing comprehensively: the full pulling operation is executed, integrated with body, prop, and accompaniment, across all five dimensions, plot-motivated throughout.

Modern spoken drama does something different. It attenuates the operation and retains the semiotics. The complete pulling sequence is rarely performed. What is carried across is the symbolic system the significations of mask color and pattern, matched to character image and mood. Mythological characterization is largely abandoned: modern drama produces the uncanny through lighting and scenography instead.

What transfers, therefore, is not the technique but its *grammar*. This is not a failure of transfer. It is what transfer looks like when a device crosses into a form whose conventions cannot accommodate its full apparatus and it confirms the study's central claim from the opposite direction. If face-changing were spectacle, only the spectacle could migrate, and nothing would remain once the mask-pulling was removed. That the semiotics survive the loss of the operation demonstrates that meaning, not mechanism, was the technique's substance all along.

5. Discussion

5.1 Dual attribute: technique in the service of its own disappearance

Face-changing possesses a dual character it is at once a technical accomplishment and an artistic device and these are not in tension but in dependency. The technical architecture exists entirely in order to

disappear. Every refinement in the historical record, from Cao Junchen's grass paper to Kang Zilin's thread mechanism to the modern substitution of silk, addresses one problem: how to accomplish the change without the audience perceiving the accomplishing. Technique that draws attention to itself has failed as *technique*, precisely because it has failed as art.

This resolves an ambivalence long present in the scholarship, which has treated the *juehuo* as simultaneously the genre's signature and its least serious component. The dichotomy is false. Virtuosity in face-changing is not the opposite of meaning; it is the condition of meaning's delivery.

5.2 Implications for the nationalization of *huaju*

If the technique's substance is grammar rather than apparatus, face-changing is genuinely transferable, and the century-long search for a nationalized idiom in Chinese spoken drama has, in the *juehuo* repertoire, a resource it has scarcely used. The point is not that *huaju* should stage mask-pulling. It is that *huaju* already possesses, in the semiotics it has borrowed, a means of psychological externalization that its realist inheritance otherwise denies it and that this borrowing has proceeded without theoretical account. Naming it permits it to be extended deliberately rather than incidentally.

5.3 Entertainment-alienation: the technique against itself

The study's most critical finding inverts the optimistic framing with which such research usually concludes. Face-changing today is flourishing and failing simultaneously. Its visibility has never been greater commercial performance, cultural-tourism spectacle, short-form video and in precisely these settings it has severed itself from the function that produced it. What circulates is visual display: the speed of the pull, the count of the masks, novelty of design. Panda-motif masks attract attention while abandoning the constitutive logic that color determines attribute and pattern constructs character. Non-professionals perform after brief training. The technique's operation has become the content of the performance rather than its concealed means.

This is not a neutral drift in taste. It is the reversal of the technique's governing principle. Lan's (2005) insistence that face-changing is the externalization of a character's inner emotion, not a display of skill, has become a description of what *bianlian* no longer does. Fu's (2023) charge that the technique is now treated as a "cultural wonder" a visual embellishment names the same collapse. When the change no longer serves a character, the movement that hides it is no longer motivated by the plot, and by the criterion established in this study, what remains is magic, not theatre.

Three causes may be identified. Public taste favors immediate visual impact, which is more readily commodified. The transmission of the technique's *integrative logic* is far more difficult than transmission of its mechanics, and has not been widely secured. And some practitioners have traded artistic core for short-term return a departure from the principle of holding to tradition's essence while innovating in modern terms (Du, 2005). Nor is the problem confined to commercial settings: even within theatrical practice, new productions have underused face-changing's characterizing potential, treating an available dramaturgical instrument as decoration.

The finding should be stated plainly: the primary threat to face-changing is not neglect but popularity. A technique can be preserved in the sense of being widely performed while being lost in the sense that matters.

6. Conclusion

This study asked whether Sichuan Opera face-changing is spectacle or dramaturgy, and what follows for Chinese spoken drama if it is the latter. The evidence supports the latter, and three conclusions may be stated.

First, face-changing is a three-element system, not a trick. Facial symbol, performance movement, and stage accompaniment operate in mutual determination. The facial symbol is the content core a rule-governed semantic apparatus in which color and pattern encode identity, disposition, and fate (Yu, 2012) and it functions as the baton to which the other two elements conform. Performance movement is the presentational vehicle, concealing the mechanism while registering in the body the state the face declares. Stage accompaniment is the temporal and affective ground: the drum governs the tempo of transformation, percussion marks the instant of change, and strings and winds establish the register on which the face becomes legible. This third element revises the standard account. Lan's (2005) foundational analysis, which remains the most systematic treatment of the technique, is organized around mask and body; Liu's (2018) observation that percussion furnishes rhythmic support for face-changing stops short of admitting accompaniment into the technique itself. The present study finds that what the music literature describes as support is more accurately understood as constitution: remove the accompaniment and the change loses the temporal architecture that renders it readable as drama.

Second, this system accomplishes characterization across five dimensions image, personality, emotion, action, and mythological characterization. This gives specific content to a claim that has circulated in the literature as principle without demonstration. Lan (2005) held that face-changing externalizes a character's inner emotion; Du (2005) that its survival depends on retaining that expressive core. Neither showed how. The five dimensions identified here specify the mechanism. In the limiting case of the non-speaking mythological character, face-changing is not one expressive means among several but the only one: Zijin Raobo is constructed entirely through the face, and an audience apprehends his complete emotional arc

composure, rising anger, fury, resolve without a line of dialogue. This is not a supplement to characterization. It is characterization, achieved by other means.

Third, face-changing is transferable, because its substance is grammar rather than apparatus. Modern spoken drama attenuates the mask-pulling operation while retaining the semiotics of color and pattern. That the signification survives the loss of the mechanism is decisive evidence that meaning, not mechanism, was the technique's substance throughout. This finding meets Hu's (2024) requirement directly: the modern expression of a traditional skill demands that the outer shell of the technique be stripped away to reach its expressive principle, and the transfer observed here is precisely that stripping. It also supplies what Liu's (2015) three principles of skill grafting presuppose but do not specify an account of what is being grafted. The century-long search for a nationalized idiom in Chinese spoken drama (Wu, 2010) thus has, in the *juehuo* repertoire, a resource it has scarcely used.

Against these findings stands a warning, and it is the study's most urgent conclusion. In much contemporary practice the operation has become the content of the performance rather than its concealed means which is to say, by the criterion established here, it has ceased to be theatre. Fu (2023) diagnosed the symptom, finding face-changing in drama arrested at the level of "cultural wonder," decorating plots it does not deepen. This study specifies the pathology. What is lost in such uses is not fidelity to tradition but the coordination on which the technique depends: a change unmotivated by character is a change whose concealing movement has no dramatic warrant, and whose accompaniment marks nothing. The primary threat to face-changing is therefore not neglect but popularity. A technique may be widely performed and yet lost in the sense that matters. Its future depends less on dissemination than on the recovery of its function on returning it, as Du (2005) urged, to the precision of traditional method as the precondition rather than the obstacle of innovation. Only so can face-changing be inherited as a living dramaturgical instrument rather than preserved as a cultural curiosity.

7. Limitations

Single-performer focus. The analysis addressed face-changing as executed by an individual performer. Coordinated transformation across multiple characters the interactive dimension of the technique was not examined.

Narrow case base. The application analysis rests substantially on *The Legend of the White Snake*, supplemented by *Zhenggu Tower*. While the Zijin Raobo sequence is exceptionally well suited to the argument, a single central case cannot bear the full weight of a general claim about characterization.

Under-specified modern samples. The claim regarding transfer into spoken drama arguably the study's most original contribution is supported by modern materials not analyzed at the same depth as the traditional repertoire. No modern production is examined with the granularity accorded to Jinshan Temple.

Limited field corpus. The interview base comprised three experts and three performers. The audience instrument, employing a small number of closed items, yields data too thin to sustain independent claims about reception; findings on reception are accordingly indicative rather than established.

8. Future Research

Multi-performer and comparative-context study. Face-changing across different performance environments should be examined comparatively, tracing the interaction and frequency of transformation between characters in varying contexts, extending the account from the individual performer to the ensemble.

Expanded cross-genre application. Application should be traced into modern theatrical forms not addressed here musical theatre, stage plays, children's theatre, experimental performance to establish the rules governing transfer in each and to test the limits of the technique's cross-generic portability.

Empirical comparison across productions. Systematic comparison of face-changing usage across a broad repertoire, incorporating the judgments of practitioners in adjacent arts, would establish which features are invariant to the technique and which are production-specific.

Strategies against entertainment-alienation. The most urgent line of inquiry concerns the condition this study identifies. Research should examine the causes of the technique's detachment from characterization commercial incentive, the difficulty of transmitting integrative logic, shortened training pathways and propose strategies for protection and transmission that hold to the artistic core rather than merely expanding circulation.

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