

The Narrative Functions of the Nuo Mask in the Physical Theatre Production *Aquatique*

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Abstract

The Nuo mask occupies a central place within the tradition of Chinese Nuo ritual theatre (nuoxi), where it functions simultaneously as a religious artefact and an artistic device (Wang, 2004; Fischer-Lichte, 1992). In contemporary Chinese theatre, a number of directors have sought to negotiate the boundary between Eastern ritual heritage and Western physical theatre, generating a body of work that foregrounds intercultural theatrical innovation. *Aquatique*, produced by Theatre Santuoqi in 2012 and directed by Zhao Miao, exemplifies this cross-cultural negotiation: the production integrates Nuo masks with the physicalized vocabulary of European-influenced physical theatre, adapting a ghost story from Pu Songling's classical collection *Liaozhai Zhiyi* into a non-verbal performance language accessible to international audiences.

The present article examines the modern narrative deployment of the Nuo mask — a traditional non-verbal sign — within *Aquatique*. Drawing on content analysis of performance footage and semi-structured interviews with the director and a principal cast member, and informed by the semiotic frameworks of Fischer-Lichte (1992) and Pavis (1992, 1998), the study identifies three interrelated narrative functions realised by the Nuo mask in this production. First, the mask constructs an intercultural system of character identification, providing international audiences with clear visual anchors for role recognition. Second, through its interaction with ritualized physical movement, the mask advances plot narration, operating as a non-linguistic grammar that transcends language barriers. Third, the mask achieves emotional resonance by catalysing cross-cultural empathic engagement, working in concert with bodily expression to trigger affective responses grounded in universally shared human experience.

The findings suggest that the integration of the Nuo mask into physical theatre constitutes a significant and replicable model for the contemporary transformation of traditional cultural symbols, offering a sustainable practice for intercultural theatrical exchange and providing a precedent for the global circulation of Chinese performance heritage.

Keywords: Nuo mask; physical theatre; *Aquatique*; narrative function; intercultural communication; theatre semiotics

1. Introduction

The Nuo mask is an indispensable element of Nuo Opera, one of the oldest continuous ritual performance traditions in China, in which sacred, exorcistic, and theatrical functions are inseparably fused (Wang, 2004; Mackerras, 1992). The mask's capacity to embody supernatural forces — to turn the performer into a god, a demon, or an ancestor — has sustained its cultural relevance across more than three thousand years of Chinese civilisation (Lin & He, 2001). In the early twenty-first century, however, its artistic life was extended in an unexpected direction: the emergence of physical theatre (*xingti xiju*) as a creative practice in mainland China opened new possibilities for the Nuo mask as a theatrical sign capable of communicating across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Physical theatre arrived in China largely through the influence of European practitioners and theorists — Lecoq, Decroux, Gaulier — and quickly attracted Chinese directors seeking to renew their artistic vocabulary (Pitches, 2007; Xue, 2023). Theatre Santuoqi, founded in December 1996 by director Zhao Miao, became one of the foremost companies exploring the intersection of physical performance and Chinese traditional culture (Zhao, 2022). The company's landmark production *Aquatique* (2012) — staged under the French title that evokes both the watery setting of Pu Songling's ghost narrative and

the universalist aspirations of the project — represents the most fully elaborated instance of this hybridisation.

In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised the importance of innovation in artistic creation, stating that outstanding works are the most important embodiment of a nation's cultural creativity (Ma, 2021). The integration of the Nuo mask with contemporary physical theatre is precisely such an instance of cultural innovation. Yet, despite the production's critical acclaim — five-star reviews from the French press in 2012, multiple awards at the 5th Shandong International Small Theatre Festival in 2013, and selection as one of the forty most influential Chinese small-theatre works of the past four decades in 2022 (Santuoqi, 2022) — academic scholarship has not yet offered a sustained analysis of how the Nuo mask performs its narrative functions within the non-verbal dramaturgy of Aquatique.

This article addresses that gap. By applying the semiotic frameworks of Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992) and Patrice Pavis (1992, 1998), the study investigates how the Nuo mask — as a "frozen" sign — interacts with the dynamic corporeal text of physical performance to construct character, to drive plot, and to generate emotion in culturally diverse audiences. The analysis draws on close reading of performance documentation, critical reviews, and original semi-structured interviews with Zhao Miao and principal actor Wu Di.

2. Problem Statement

Contemporary Chinese society is undergoing rapid diversification, digitalisation, and commercialisation, transformations that have fundamentally altered patterns of cultural consumption and aesthetic preference. The traditional audience for Chinese Opera (opera forms) — comprising primarily retired cadres, senior intellectuals, and a small number of university students — has given way to a far larger demographic of younger urban consumers who demand novelty, cross-disciplinary experimentation, and emotional directness from the performing arts (Han, 2006). This demographic shift creates both a challenge and an opportunity for traditional forms: the challenge of retaining their ritual and aesthetic integrity in the face of changing tastes, and the opportunity to reach new audiences precisely by leveraging the visual and corporeal power of inherited symbols.

The integration of traditional Chinese theatrical elements into physical theatre has attracted the attention of practitioners and scholars alike, emerging as one of the most productive research areas in contemporary Chinese performance studies (Tang, 2010). The Nuo mask, as both a culturally specific sign and a visually potent object, has drawn particular scholarly interest; yet research into Nuo culture has historically faced significant obstacles. Primary sources are fragmentary and geographically dispersed, performances are ephemeral and difficult to document fully, and during certain historical periods, Nuo culture was suppressed as "feudal superstition" — masks destroyed and practitioners silenced (Liu, 2013; Yang, 1994). Since the mask's inscription on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006, a new wave of institutional support and scholarly inquiry has emerged (Geng, 2015), but this scholarship has concentrated predominantly on historical, religious, and heritage-conservation dimensions, with comparatively little attention to the mask's functions as a dramaturgical and communicative device in contemporary creative contexts.

In particular, the question of how the Nuo mask can serve as a vehicle of intercultural narrative — how it communicates character, plot, and affect to audiences who have no prior knowledge of Chinese ritual tradition — remains substantially underexplored. This study addresses this lacuna by examining Aquatique as a case study in which the Nuo mask's narrative potential is most fully and self-consciously realised.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Nuo Mask: Historical and Cultural Dimensions

The roots of Nuo culture lie in the shamanic traditions of ancient China, constituting what Li (2018) identifies as the earliest stratum of Chinese religious and cultural practice. The ritual exorcism at the core of Nuo performance — the driving away of malevolent spirits to protect the community — can be traced to the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE), where oracle-bone inscriptions already record the use of large masked performers in exorcistic ceremonies (Mackerras, 1992). By the Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE), the Nuo ritual had become institutionalised within state ceremonial life, and the "four-golden-eyed" bear-skin mask of the Fangxiangshi exorcist had become a standardised

feature of official court practice (Wang, 2004).

The leading Nuo scholar Qu Liuyi (1990) defines Nuo Opera as a theatrical form that has evolved from sacrificial ritual activity, synthesising religious culture and folk art across a timespan stretching from high antiquity to the modern era. Within this evolutionary trajectory, the mask emerged as the most visually potent and symbolically resonant element, functioning simultaneously as a "tool of divine power" — enabling the wearer to embody supernatural agency — and as a system of theatrical signs differentiating role types, moral orientations, and supernatural hierarchies (Tuo, 1997; Wang, 2014). The mask's capacity to transform identity — to render the human performer into a deity, a demon, or a ghost — is not merely theatrical convention but is grounded in a cosmological logic in which the boundary between human and spirit world is performatively traversable (Guo, 2018).

Research into Nuo Masks has accelerated since their heritage designation in 2006, with scholars examining their aesthetic morphology (colour, material, carving technique), their regional variations across Guizhou, Jiangxi, Hunan, and other provinces, and their functions in village ritual life (Huang & Deng, 2023). However, as the present study argues, this body of scholarship has yet to interrogate the mask's deployment within contemporary professional theatre as a narrative device operating in intercultural contexts.

3.2 Physical Theatre: Theory and Chinese Adaptation

Physical theatre, as theorised in the Western tradition, is defined by its reliance on the performer's body — its movement, gesture, rhythm, and presence — as the primary medium of theatrical meaning-making (Pitches, 2007). Unlike text-based drama, where language anchors interpretation, physical theatre demands that the body itself constitute a legible text, one whose meanings are generated through trained corporeal discipline, spatial intelligence, and kinesthetic empathy (Murray & Keefe, 2016). The theoretical genealogy of physical theatre passes through the work of Jacques Copeau, Étienne Decroux, and Jacques Lecoq in France; through Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics in Russia; and through Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre" in Poland — a tradition in which the body of the performer becomes the sole irreducible theatrical resource (Grotowski, 1968).

Eugenio Barba's concept of "pre-expressivity" — the notion that certain bodily techniques, independent of their cultural context, generate a heightened quality of presence and energy that affects spectators at a pre-cognitive level — has been particularly influential in intercultural performance research (Barba & Savarese, 1991). Barba's Theatre Anthropology, developed through the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and through sustained engagement with Asian performance traditions, argues for a common "decided" bodily quality that underlies such diverse practices as Kathakali, Balinese dance, Japanese Noh, and Chinese Opera (Barba & Savarese, 1991; Schechner, 1985). This framework provides important theoretical support for the claim — central to the Aquatique project — that the Nuo mask, grafted onto the physical theatre body, can operate across cultural boundaries.

In China, physical theatre initially developed as an imitation of Western models, but it quickly evolved through the incorporation of indigenous performance traditions — opera movement vocabulary (*shenfa*), shadow puppetry, and Nuo Masks — into a distinctively hybrid practice (Xue, 2023). Theatre Santuoqi has been at the forefront of this hybridisation, developing a performance methodology in which the Nuo mask is not a decorative addition but a constitutive element of the dramaturgical system.

3.3 Theatre Semiotics: The Sign System of the Stage

The theoretical framework for this study draws primarily on the theatre semiotics of Erika Fischer-Lichte and Patrice Pavis. Fischer-Lichte's landmark work *The Semiotics of Theatre* (1983/1992) offers a comprehensive taxonomy of theatrical signs, organising them according to the actor's activities (linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, mimic, gestural, and proxemic signs) and the actor's appearance (mask, hairstyle, costume). The mask, in Fischer-Lichte's framework, belongs to the category of "signs of the actor's appearance" and functions both as an external visual signifier and as an indicator of role identity, moral character, and narrative function. Fischer-Lichte's distinction between "denotation" (the surface, objective referent of a sign) and "connotation" (the broader cultural and emotional associations the sign activates) is particularly applicable to the analysis of the Nuo mask, which carries both a specific theatrical denotation (a particular character type) and a rich field of cultural and

emotional connotations (ancestral power, supernatural danger, moral allegory).

Pavis (1992, 1998) extends this semiotic approach through his model of "intercultural performance," which theorises the processes by which theatrical materials are transferred, transformed, and received across cultural boundaries. His concept of the "hourglass" of intercultural transmission — whereby source-culture materials are filtered through the sensibility of the target culture and emerge in transformed, hybridised form — provides a productive model for understanding how the Nuo mask, extracted from its ritual context in southern Chinese villages, is re-contextualised within international physical theatre. Pavis also contributes the insight that theatrical signs must be analysed not only as isolated elements but as components of an integrated performance text, in which meaning emerges from the interaction of multiple sign systems simultaneously (Pavis, 1998).

Richard Schechner's (1985, 2002) performance theory offers a complementary perspective, situating theatrical performance within a broader field of cultural ritual, play, and everyday behaviour. His concept of "restored behaviour" — the idea that performance consists of rehearsed, twice-behaved strips of action that carry cultural memory — is directly relevant to the analysis of the ritualized movement vocabulary in *Aquatique*, where the actors' gestural language draws on the "body memory" of exorcistic performance traditions.

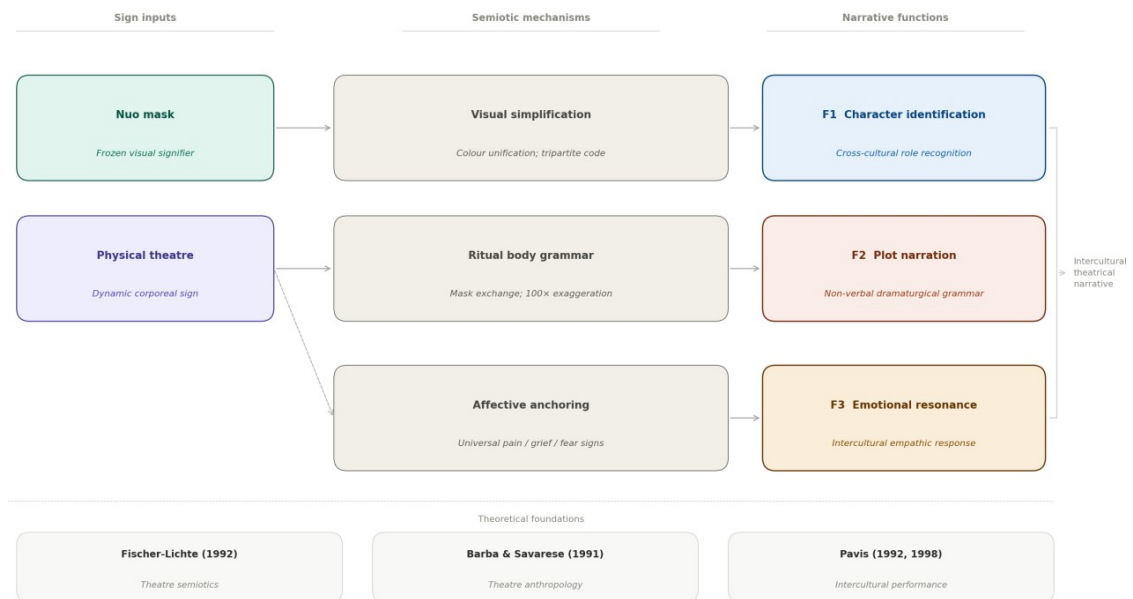


Figure 1. The Three Narrative Functions of the Nuo Mask in *Aquatique*: A Semiotic Framework

3.4 Intercultural Theatre and Non-Verbal Communication

Research on intercultural theatre has grown substantially since the 1980s, driven by the rapid globalisation of performance and the proliferation of festival circuits such as the Festival d'Avignon — the very context in which *Aquatique* first appeared (Knowles, 2010; Lo & Gilbert, 2002). Scholars including Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Tadashi Suzuki have explored the potential of intercultural theatrical exchange, though their work has also attracted criticism for its appropriative tendencies and its tendency to flatten cultural specificity into a decontextualised universalism (Fischer-Lichte et al., 2014; Bharucha, 1993).

A more nuanced account of non-verbal communication in intercultural performance emphasises the distinction between "universal" bodily signs (facial expressions of primary emotions, broad gestural indicators of pain, grief, joy) and "culturally specific" signs that require prior knowledge to decode (Ekman, 1999; Hall, 1976). The challenge for intercultural theatre is to design a sign system that is sufficiently universal in its emotional registers to reach diverse audiences, while retaining sufficient cultural specificity to convey artistic distinctiveness and authenticity. As the present study demonstrates, the Nuo mask in *Aquatique* navigates this tension through a deliberate process of semiotic simplification and emotional universalisation.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, taking Aquatique as its primary case. The methodological approach combines content analysis with semi-structured interviewing, following the integrated qualitative methodology recommended by Patton (2002) for the analysis of performance phenomena.

Content analysis focused on the extant performance documentation of Aquatique, including high-definition video recordings of performances from multiple venues between 2012 and 2022, production photographs, set design schematics, costume and mask construction records, and published critical reviews. The analytical framework applied to this material was derived from Fischer-Lichte's (1992) taxonomy of theatrical signs, with particular attention to the visual signifiers of the Nuo Masks (morphology, colour, material, positioning), the kinesic signs generated by the actors' physical movement, and the proxemic relationships between mask-wearing performers and other stage elements. The analysis tracked the co-presence and interaction of these sign systems across key dramatic sequences, with a focus on the three narrative functions identified in the research findings: character identification, plot advancement, and emotional resonance.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two primary participants: director Zhao Miao and lead actor Wu Di. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, recorded with participants' informed consent, and transcribed in full. The interview schedule for the director addressed creative rationale, the decision-making process surrounding mask design and colour revision, the relationship between Nuo mask conventions and the physical theatre vocabulary, and reflections on intercultural audience reception. The actor's interview addressed embodied experience, rehearsal practice, the process of internalising mask-based movement, and the emotional and cognitive relationship between mask-wearing and character construction. Interview data were analysed thematically, with key passages cross-referenced against the content analysis findings.

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. The case study design, while enabling depth of analysis, necessarily limits the generalisability of findings to other productions or mask traditions. The semi-structured interview sample is small; a broader study would benefit from additional interviews with other cast members, designers, and audiences from multiple cultural backgrounds. These limitations are acknowledged as directions for future research.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Building Intercultural Character Identification

The primary narrative function of the Nuo mask in Aquatique is the construction of a visual system of character identification legible to culturally diverse audiences. Fischer-Lichte (1992) notes that the mask, among all theatrical signs of the actor's appearance, is uniquely capable of "freezing" character identity into a stable, repeatable visual form — a quality that acquires special significance in a non-verbal performance without the resources of linguistic characterisation. Director Zhao Miao articulated the theoretical underpinning of this design strategy in interview: "Traditional Chinese masks have a relationship with performance and with life and death. Nuo Masks are intimately bound to this production's themes. Chinese audiences find something traditional yet not entirely traditional; international audiences find it very traditional yet can still understand. I think this is a particularly interesting aesthetic distance."

This "aesthetic distance" reflects the semiotic principle of cultural indexicality: the mask is indexically linked to a specific Chinese cultural tradition, yet its visual grammar — the exaggerated features, the stark colour contrasts, the clear differentiation of types — operates according to a visual logic that transcends cultural specificity. This is consistent with Barba and Savarese's (1991) argument that certain theatrical forms of the actor's presence generate meaning at a pre-cognitive, intercultural level.

A particularly significant moment in the production's development came when the creative team revised the original polychromatic mask design in response to international audience feedback. As Zhao recalled: "At first we made the masks in the traditional Nuo colours — very vivid, many

colours. After touring, we found that international audiences had difficulty distinguishing the character groupings, because multiple colours represented a single faction. Audiences prefer colour to be concentrated. We eventually discovered that audiences can generally register three important pieces of visual information on stage, so we unified the colour system of the masks. This made things much clearer." This iterative refinement demonstrates the production's conscious engagement with the principles of visual semiotics: reducing the complexity of the signifier system to strengthen the signifier–signified correlation (Pavis, 1998; Hall, 1976).

In the final version of the production, the mask system operates through three primary visual codes. The Fisherman's mask deploys a natural wood-tone palette with a wrinkled brow, white eyebrows and beard, and gently smiling eyes — signifiers that collectively connote an elderly, honest, and enduring labouring figure, a character archetype whose visual grammar crosses cultural contexts (Ekman, 1999). Wang Liulang's ghost mask employs a grey-white base, a twisted facial expression, and red tear-lines running beneath the eyes — signifiers that connote tragic, tormented liminality between life and death. The Evil Ghost mask uses a blue base with protruding eyes and prominent fangs to signify menacing supernatural authority. This simplified tripartite system — human, tragic ghost, malevolent spirit — creates what Lo and Gilbert (2002) term a "legible intercultural text," one that provides sufficient orientation to sustain narrative comprehension without requiring prior cultural knowledge.

Reception Dimension	International Audience Reception	Domestic Audience Reception	Theoretical & Evidentiary Grounding
Character Recognition	Five-star press reviews in France (2012) praised immediate legibility of roles without programme notes (Zhao, 2013). Festival d'Avignon audiences followed character transitions without verbal cues (Santuoqi Theatre Company, 2022).	Domestic critics noted the tripartite colour system enabled instant role identification; reviewers at the 5th Shandong Intl. Small Theatre Festival (2013) awarded three prizes partly on this basis (Santuoqi Theatre Company, 2022; Chen, 2018).	Mask as frozen visual sign of role identity: Fischer-Lichte (1992). Visual simplification for intercultural legibility: Pavis (1998). Colour as cross-cultural identity marker: Hall (1976); Ekman (1999).
Plot Comprehension	Non-verbal dramaturgy enabled comprehension without linguistic knowledge; director's interview confirms international touring strategy premised on purely corporeal narrative (Zhao, 2013; Zhao, 2022).	Production received critical praise for narrative clarity at National Performing Arts Centre Beijing and Shanghai International Arts Festival (2013) (Santuoqi Theatre Company, 2022; Ji, 2016).	Body as primary narrative medium: Pitches (2007); Murray & Keefe (2016). Ritualized movement as non-linguistic grammar: Schechner (2002); Grotowski (1968). Mask-kinetic dialectic: Fischer-Lichte (1992).
Emotional Engagement	Director Zhao Miao reports audiences across France, UK, and other touring venues exhibited visible emotional responses; 'bodily language is cross-species' (Zhao, 2022 interview, cited in present study).	Critics described emotional intensity of torture sequence as key strength; production listed among 40 most influential Chinese small-theatre works for emotional impact (Santuoqi, 2022; Chen, 2018).	Universal primary emotions via bodily expression: Ekman (1999); Turner (1982). Transformative theatrical event: Fischer-Lichte (2008). Pre-expressive bodily presence: Barba & Savarese (1991).
Cultural Appreciation	Zhao notes growing comprehension across decade of international touring (2012–2022): 'audiences can understand more and more of it' (Zhao, 2022 interview). Consistent return festival invitations evidence sustained appreciation.	Selection as one of 40 most influential Chinese small-theatre works (2022) reflects sustained domestic critical appreciation across ten years (Santuoqi Theatre Company, 2022; Ma, 2021).	Metacultural production & heritage amplification: Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004). Horizon of expectation / growing audience literacy: Jauss (1982). Intercultural hourglass model: Pavis (1998).

International audience reception (critical reviews & director interviews) Domestic audience reception (critical reviews & festival records) Theoretical & evidentiary grounding (cited literature)

Note. Evidence synthesised from: critical reviews (Zhao, 2013; Chen, 2018), production archive (Santuoqi Theatre Company, 2022), semi-structured director interviews (Zhao, 2022; present study), and theoretical frameworks (Fischer-Lichte, 1992; Pavis, 1998; Ekman, 1999; Barba & Savarese, 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Jauss, 1982). No primary quantitative survey was conducted; the figure presents qualitative evidence synthesis following Patton (2002).

Figure 2. Qualitative Synthesis of Audience Reception Across Cultural Contexts in *Aquatique* (2012–2022)

5.2 Advancing the Plot Narrative

The second narrative function of the Nuo mask in *Aquatique* is the advancement of plot through a system of ritualized, non-verbal theatrical grammar. This function emerges from the productive tension between the mask's static semiotic character — its frozen visual identity — and the dynamic, temporal character of physical performance. Where the mask establishes fixed semantic poles (this is the ghost; this is the fisherman), the actor's physical movement generates narrative momentum, creating a dialectic between stable identity and transformative action that constitutes the dramaturgical engine of the production (Schechner, 2002; Murray & Keefe, 2016).

This dynamic is most fully realised in the central plot sequence involving the "People Become Ghosts, Ghosts Become People" narrative cycle — the thematic heart of Pu Songling's original story and the structural core of Zhao's adaptation. The sequence begins with the establishment of the Evil Ghost's narrative authority through its mask signifiers (blue base, protruding eyes, fangs), which, in Fischer-Lichte's (1992) semiotic terms, constitute a cluster of visual signifiers connoting malevolent supernatural power. Within this established frame, the actor deploys ritualized arm-sweeping movements and forward-pushing gestures that physically enact the narrative event of "pushing the

victim to drown" — a kinesic sign whose signifier is the specific body movement and whose signified is the narrative event of violence and death.

The subsequent mask-exchange sequence — in which a drowning victim removes a human mask and dons a ghost mask — constitutes one of the most semiotically rich moments in the production. The physical act of mask removal functions as a kinesic sign of identity dissolution, while the donning of the ghost mask signifies the acquisition of a new supernatural identity. This sequence translates a complex narrative transition — death, transformation, and supernatural incorporation — into a purely visual and corporeal vocabulary accessible to audiences with no prior knowledge of either Chinese literary tradition or Nuo ritual practice.

This design reflects the rehearsal methodology described by actor Wu Di in interview: "We had to wear the masks while eating, while conversing with others. We had to fully domesticate the mask's behaviour into our daily lives." This process of embodied internalisation, which echoes Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of bodily intentionality and Mauss's (1973) "techniques of the body," transforms the mask from an external prop into an integrated element of the actor's corporeal self. Wu Di also described the director's requirement that "all our movements must be exaggerated one hundred times beyond everyday life movement" — a process of stylisation that converts ordinary action into the ritualized corporeal grammar of physical theatre (Barba & Savarese, 1991; Grotowski, 1968).

Mask Type	Key Visual Signifiers	Character Identity (Signified)	Emotional Connotation
Fisherman Mask	Natural wood tone, wrinkled forehead, white eyebrows, smiling eyes	Elderly, honest laboring man	Warmth, kindness, tenacity
Wang Liulang Mask (Ghost)	Grey-white base, twisted expression, red tear-lines under eyes	Tragic, tormented spirit	Suffering, longing, inner conflict
Evil Ghost Mask	Blue base, protruding eyes, prominent fangs	Malevolent supernatural authority	Fear, oppression, dark power
Human Masks	Warm earth tones, neutral expression	Mortal world figures (villagers, women)	Ordinariness, fragility, vulnerability

Source: Content analysis of performance footage and director interviews (Zhao, 2013; 2022)

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of Nuo Mask Types in *Aquatique*: Signifier–Signified Relationships and Emotional Connotations

Mask Type	Visual Signifiers	Narrative Denotation	Cultural Connotation	Emotional Register
The Fisherman	Natural wood-tone base; wrinkled brow; white eyebrows and beard; gently upturned eyes; calm expression	Elderly, honest labouring figure; benevolent human protagonist; moral anchor of the narrative	Filial virtue; moral endurance; Confucian righteousness; folk heroism (Wang, 2004; Lin & He, 2001)	Warmth; moral sympathy; paternal protectiveness; audience identification (Ekman, 1999)
Wang Liulang (Ghost)	Grey-white base; asymmetrically twisted expression; red tear-lines beneath eyes; sunken cheeks	Tragic liminal figure; soul trapped between life and death; morally conflicted supernatural being	Liminal suffering; Chinese ghost lore; moral ambiguity between duty and compassion (Guo, 2018; Tuo, 1997)	Grief; tragic irony; pity; empathic sorrow; emotional ambivalence (Fischer-Lichte, 1992; Turner, 1982)
The Evil Ghost	Deep blue base; protruding eyes;	Malevolent supernatural	Demonic power in Chinese ritual	Fear; dread; awe; moral revulsion; heightened

Mask Type	Visual Signifiers	Narrative Denotation	Cultural Connotation	Emotional Register
	prominent fangs; exaggerated brow furrows; high-contrast markings	authority; antagonist enforcing underworld law; agent of death and punishment	cosmology; exorcistic tradition of Nuo Opera (Wang, 2004; Mackerras, 1992)	theatrical tension (Ekman, 1999; Barba & Savarese, 1991)

Note. Visual signifier descriptions are based on content analysis of production footage and mask documentation (Zhao, 2013; Santuoqi Theatre Company, 2022). Cultural connotations and emotional registers are theorised with reference to Fischer-Lichte (1992), Pavis (1992, 1998), Ekman (1999), and Barba & Savarese (1991).

5.3 Achieving Emotional Resonance

The third and deepest narrative function of the Nuo mask in Aquatique is its capacity to generate emotional resonance across culturally heterogeneous audiences. This function operates through a two-stage process: the mask establishes a stable "emotional key" — a frozen affective orientation — within which the actor's physical expressivity can generate nuanced emotional dynamics that are simultaneously grounded in cultural specificity and universally comprehensible (Ekman, 1999; Turner, 1982).

The torture sequence in which Wang Liulang is punished by the Evil Ghost for his failure to drown a victim and for his forbidden assistance to the Fisherman — a sequence involving ritualized eye-gouging and bodily restraint — exemplifies this function. Wang Liulang's mask, with its grey-white base, red tear-lines, and twisted expression, establishes the affective ground: suffering, tragic irony, and the anguish of a being trapped between moral aspiration and supernatural obligation. Within this established frame, the actor's physical vocabulary generates affective specificity: hands covering the face externalise the acute physical pain of eye-gouging; body convulsions externalise uncontrollable emotional eruption; backward arching and trembling enact the final release of suppressed affect. This combination of frozen semiotic sign (the mask) and dynamic corporeal expression produces what Fischer-Lichte (2008) calls a "transformative" theatrical event — one in which aesthetic experience modulates into genuine emotional response.

Director Zhao Miao reflected on the intercultural dimension of this emotional design in interview: "Bodily language is not only intercultural; it is cross-species. When an audience quietly 'reads' the details of an actor's body on stage, they can feel the character's psychology — even their subtle calculations." This observation aligns with the intercultural emotion research of Ekman (1999), which demonstrates that certain primary emotions — pain, grief, fear, longing — are expressed through broadly consistent bodily and facial configurations across human cultures. The Aquatique production design consciously exploits this universality: the eye-gouging sequence draws on the symbolic vocabulary of ancient punishment, using tears to signify grief and trembling to signify extremity of emotion in ways that require no cultural translation.

Zhao also noted the temporal dimension of this emotional communication: "This production has been running for over ten years, and contemporary audiences can understand more and more of it. This is connected to the growth of the audience's cultural experience." This observation is consistent with reception theory's account of the "horizon of expectation" (Jauss, 1982): as audiences develop familiarity with the conventions of physical theatre and Chinese performance traditions through international festival circulation, the semiotic density of the Nuo mask becomes increasingly legible, generating progressively richer emotional engagement.



Figure 3. Production Timeline and Key Milestones of *Aquatique* (2012–2022)

6. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to several interconnected areas of scholarly inquiry: the semiotics of theatrical masks, the theory and practice of intercultural theatre, and the contemporary transformation of Chinese intangible cultural heritage.

With respect to theatre semiotics, the analysis of *Aquatique* demonstrates that the Nuo mask operates not as a single, monolithic sign but as a dynamic sign system whose meanings are constituted through interaction with other sign systems — physical movement, spatial configuration, costuming, soundscape. This finding extends Fischer-Lichte's (1992) semiotic model by showing how a "sign of the actor's appearance" can, in the context of physical theatre, acquire narrative agency, driving plot development through its interaction with kinesic signs. It also confirms Pavis's (1998) insight that theatrical signs must be read relationally, as components of an integrated performance text.

With respect to intercultural theatre, the *Aquatique* case study offers a nuanced counterpoint to accounts of intercultural exchange as inherently appropriative or reductive. The production's iterative refinement of the mask colour system in response to international audience response demonstrates a reflexive, audience-oriented approach to intercultural communication that respects both the integrity of the source tradition and the interpretive needs of global audiences (Lo & Gilbert, 2002). The director's deliberate selection of "universally legible" emotional signifiers — pain, grief, the frozen expression of suffering — reflects a sophisticated understanding of the conditions under which cultural specificity and intercultural intelligibility can coexist productively (Ekman, 1999).

With respect to intangible cultural heritage, the study suggests that the Nuo mask's inscription on the National Heritage List in 2006 has been accompanied by an equally important, if less institutionally visible, process of creative reinvention. The *Aquatique* project exemplifies what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) calls "metacultural production" — the reflexive re-framing of heritage objects and practices in new contexts that simultaneously preserves their integrity and extends their cultural life. The mask's migration from village ritual to international physical theatre is not a dilution of its cultural significance but an amplification of its communicative range, consistent with Xi Jinping's call for cultural innovation that expresses the creative capacity of the Chinese nation (Ma, 2021).

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the narrative functions of the Nuo mask in the physical theatre production *Aquatique*, produced by Theatre Santuoqi and directed by Zhao Miao. The analysis, grounded in the theatre semiotics of Fischer-Lichte (1992) and Pavis (1992, 1998) and supported by original interview data, has identified three interrelated narrative functions through which the Nuo mask operates in this production.

First, the mask constructs an intercultural system of character identification. Through a deliberate process of semiotic simplification — reducing the mask's traditional polychromatic complexity to a legible tripartite colour system — the production creates visual anchors for role recognition that

function reliably across diverse cultural contexts. This process exemplifies the principle, identified in intercultural theatre research, that intercultural communication requires the careful calibration of sign-system complexity to the interpretive resources of diverse audiences.

Second, the mask advances plot narration through its interaction with ritualized physical movement. The dialectic between the mask's "frozen" visual identity and the actor's dynamic corporeal expressivity generates a non-verbal dramaturgical grammar capable of conveying narrative transitions of considerable complexity — identity transformation, supernatural sanction, moral conflict — without recourse to language. This finding confirms the central claim of physical theatre theory: that the trained body is a sufficient vehicle for theatrical meaning-making.

Third, the mask achieves emotional resonance by combining culturally specific symbolic depth with universally accessible emotional registers. The production's deliberate use of bodily signs of pain, grief, and suffering — signs with broad intercultural intelligibility — ensures that the emotional logic of the narrative reaches international audiences regardless of their familiarity with Chinese ritual tradition.

Together, these three functions constitute a model of what this study proposes to call "intercultural semiotic transfer": the process by which a culturally specific traditional sign system is re-engineered for global theatrical communication through selective simplification, strategic universalisation, and creative hybridisation with a complementary performance language. This model has implications beyond the specific case of Aquatique, offering a transferable methodology for the contemporary transformation of other Chinese intangible cultural heritage elements into vehicles of intercultural artistic exchange.

The present study has several limitations. The case study design limits generalisability; future research should examine additional productions in which Nuo Masks or comparable Chinese traditional signs are deployed in intercultural contexts, enabling comparative analysis of the strategies of semiotic transfer employed. The interview sample is small, and future work should incorporate wider audience perspectives, including systematic reception studies with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite these limitations, the study makes an original contribution to the understanding of how traditional cultural symbols can be revitalised and re-functioned for contemporary intercultural theatrical communication, and to the broader project of theorising the global circulation of Chinese performance heritage.

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