

Attitudinal Resource Analysis of the Film *Song of the Phoenix*

WU Shujing^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor, Foreign Languages Department, Binzhou University, Binzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by Science Research Program for Colleges and Universities in Shandong Province, China (J14WD13).

Received 4 January 2017; accepted 3 March 2017
Published online 26 April 2017

Abstract

The film *Song of the Phoenix* is a piece of posthumous work of Wu Tianming, a Chinese famous film artist in the film industry. Since released in May, 2016, the film has attracted the critics' attention. This paper analyzes the film *Song of the Phoenix* from the perspective of the attitudinal resources which is the core subsystem of the Appraisal System, the latest development of Systemic Functional Linguistics. On this account, this paper probes into the impact of the market economy as well as challenges of commercial civilization that traditional Chinese folk arts are faced with and delves into the inheritors' struggle, perseverance and their affect, appreciation and judgement, intending to provide a new perspective for readers to interpret and appreciate the film.

Key words: Wu Tianming; *Song of the Phoenix*; Attitudinal resources; Culture inheritance

Wu, S. J., (2017). Attitudinal Resource Analysis of the Film *Song of the Phoenix*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 13(4), 28-31. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/9647>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9647>

INTRODUCTION

As a piece of posthumous work of Director Wu Tianming, the film *Song of the Phoenix* tells the story of the master and apprentice who inherit and stick to Suona,

one of the traditional folk arts. It aims to inspire people to ponder on how to maintain the excellent traditional Chinese culture which is in peril of extinction and make it flourish in the market economy. Just as the Director explains, "I always believe that films, which are like novels, are not evaluated by gaudy forms but the deep insight into the society".

This paper analyzes the film *Song of the Phoenix* from the perspective of the attitudinal resources which are the core subsystem of the Appraisal System, aiming to provide a new perspective for interpretation and appreciation of the film.

1. FILM SYNOPSIS

The film is set in the mountain road with Wushuang village. It portrays the stories between the master and apprentice as well as their growth with the changing society. It expresses the concept of culture "inheritance" and recalls the "rules" dismissively abandoned by the people. When Master Jiao who was commanding on the fauteuil beats the drum after gulping down the blood, when Lan Yu who was always looking upon Suona as a dispensation of one's destiny shakes head bantering, when the members of Jiao's ensemble pack their bags with a lost stare, when You Tianming sighs deeply with disappointment to the Suona musicians who are living a dog's life in modern cities where the respect from the public due to the Suona musicians no longer exist, all of the inheritors' perseverance bursts into the collapse. According to their attitude towards the Suona art, the film reveals the fact that traditional Chinese folk culture on the decline clings to its nature under the background of changing times and social transformation. The faith and conviction in the movie lead to each Chinese person to reflect on their attitude towards the traditional Chinese folk arts and how to pass on the cultural heritage.

2. THE ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDINAL RESOURCES IN THE FILM *SONG OF THE PHOENIX*

The Appraisal System is the latest development of the interpersonal function of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994). Attitudinal resources, as the core of the Appraisal System, are the meaning resources used for intersubjective evaluation of the value system that is with reference to affective reaction and under the background of cultural restraint on participants and the process, including the three parts: affect, appreciation and judgement. This paper focuses on the analysis of attitudinal resources of the film (Martin & Rose, 2003, 2007).

2.1 Affective Resource Analysis

Affective resources refer to affective reaction to the value of things, whether positive or negative, direct or connotative. The realistic affective resources cover three evaluative dimensions, happiness or unhappiness, safety or unsafety, and satisfaction or dissatisfaction while non-realistic affective resources cover two evaluative dimensions, fear and desire (Wang, 2003; Wu, 2014).

Affective resources appear in the film for many times. The affect of the apprentice, You Tianming, is described negatively and indirectly. At the beginning of the film, You Tianming always feels unsafe and unwilling to communicate with others actively before the apprenticeship and lacks confidence when he meets his master Jiao for the first time as his eyes are filled with awe and veneration. He does everything cautiously. He begins to eat quietly during the meal time instead of making noises. Even after Lan Yu, the junior fellow apprentice, comes, he still looks at his master in reverence, afraid to express himself. The only thing he does is telling his grievance, desire and gratefulness with tears. It is laterally indicated that You Tianming is low and slightly inferior to his partners in playing the Suona. However, he becomes the sole heir of *Song of the Phoenix* even if he is a mere nobody, not the best one in the art. It is such a seemingly unusual decision made by the master that initiates the reverie and reflection of the audience.

In contrast, Lan Yu's affect is described more positively and directly. Of all the apprentices, he is always delighted and full of desire. He is delighted for his great talent in Suona, for the appreciation from his master and for opportunities to perform provided by his master, and meanwhile he has a strong desire. He is longing for mastering the art of *Song of the Phoenix* which is the highest level of the Suona art and becoming the heir of Jiao's ensemble.

Non-realistic affect is generated from external things, so the affective resources in the film are brought about by something external. Suona in the film *Song of the Phoenix* symbolizes the excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Song of the Phoenix is used for revering forefathers especially those with great virtue and high prestige. Prior to the flourish of the market economy, You's ensemble was respected and admired by people for its identity of Chinese national root. But with the social transformation, people's attitudes towards consumption and money have changed. It is the same with the people's values. The Western Band in the film symbolizes the values, aesthetic and moral values as well as the standard of aesthetic appreciation of western culture. At the advent of bewildering and tempting of the Western Band, the public are attracted by the performance, gradually acknowledge the western culture, behave in accordance with the values of western culture, and even discard the traditional Chinese culture as soon as possible.

Affective resources are repeatedly used in the film to reflect Chinese people's attitudes towards different cultures. The master's resolutely and determinedly appointing You Tianming as the sole heir of the Suona art indicates that he approves of the traditional Chinese culture: emphasis on integrity of virtue and talent and taking morality in the first place, which is consistent with the traditional Chinese values. While the Western Band, distinct from You's ensemble, is transplanted from abroad without the soul of Chinese culture. Master Jiao is displeased and discontented when he finds people are crazy about the Western Band. With no track of fear in his mind at that time, he expresses his great determination to pass on the traditional Chinese culture with his utmost efforts.

2.2 Judgement System Analysis

Judgment refers to the evaluation of one's characters and morals, which are based on a series of institutionalization including social esteem and social sanction. According to Martin and Rose (2007), social judgment includes norms of behavior, ability and perseverance, involving worship and criticism. Social sanction includes authenticity and appropriateness, involving praise and condemnation. Social esteem and social sanction can be positive or negative, direct or indirect. The judgment evaluation in the film mainly involves the aspect of social esteem which covers the behavior norms of the evaluated, and his/her ability and determination. You's father makes indirect and positive comments on You Tianming. When You Tianming feels wronged for not obtaining the Suona he desires, he cries to return home only to hear his father talking to others: "Whether you believe it or not, I believe anyway." It is the father's trust, expectation and positive comments that encourage him to continue to learn the Suona from the master. The master gives You Tianming direct and positive comments. The master appoints You Tianming as the sole heir on account of a teardrop—dropping out from You Tianming's eyes at the sight of his father's bleeding forehead when he supports the old man who falls down. The tear contains a son's heartfelt love

to his father, which is exactly the admirable virtue and morals of traditional Chinese culture, and also reflects You Tianming's benevolence and kindness in nature. Although he is not the most talented, You Tianming is engraved with the traditional Chinese virtues—he is persevering, firm and unyielding to external temptation, which can also be shown by Lan Yu's comments. When people are flocking to the Western Band, You Tianming, with the perseverance and loneliness in his heart, is devoted to keeping the traditional Chinese folk arts alive and inheriting the national excellent traditional culture—where lies the profound meaning of the film. On Master Jiao's funeral ceremony, Tianming plays the *Song of the Phoenix* for his master, alone, which implies his firm belief and real courage of flourishing traditional Chinese culture.

In contrast, the master gives Lan Yu direct comments: the most talented of all the disciples. But when confronted with a big fire, the first thought of Lan Yu is his Suona which reminds him of pleasure after performance without considering You Tianming's safety at all. When in the face of setbacks and temptations, he discards his beliefs and even infuses his norms of behavior into You Tianming. Driven by the impetuous mentality in the economic tide, he gives up inheriting the national culture, just as the majority of disciples do, and lives the big-city life, ready to start his own company. In pursuit of materials, he seals off, freezes and finally erases his initial and inmost dream. Even worse, he gives the final blow to the scarred national culture with contempt, in order to show and enjoy his great sense of superiority.

Master Jiao is typical for defending and inheriting traditional Chinese culture. He is able to imitate the wonderful sounds of nature, distinguish different sounds of birds and date the heritage history of Suona back to over three generations. Suona is a part of his life. He understands the Suona culture and its essence and enjoys himself during the Suona performance. As he puts it: "We play the Suona not for the appreciation from others but from ourselves". He still stays unwavering, full of self-confidence against the Western Band. His belief in Suona's indispensable status to Wushuang village is the mirror of his firm belief in traditional Chinese culture. Even when he is compromised by terminal cancer, in the face of all disciples with wavering belief including You Tianming and the contempt in the eyes of the crowd, he plays *Song of the Phoenix* resolutely—still plays even when blood gushes from his mouth and runs through the instrument. On the verge of death, the impoverished master sells the cattle he feeds and entrust You Tianming to replace for new instruments. It is his firm recognition of traditional Chinese culture that helps You Tianming out of the cultural identity dilemma.

2.3 Appreciation System Analysis

Appreciation system refers to the evaluation of process and phenomenon, including reaction, composition and

value. Reaction is interpersonal, including impact and quality, which respectively refer to the extent of process attractiveness and how much the process influences affect, including balance and detail. Value refers to judgement related to the importance and the worth of process by the social standard. Appreciation can be positive or negative. There are many sources of appreciation in the film. Master Jiao appreciates five things: The first thing is the Suona passed on by the previous masters; the second is sound of birds in the nature; the third is the performances of the Western Band; the fourth is disciples' working elsewhere and the fifth is people's indifference to "rules". As the head of the Jiao's ensemble, he is proficient in playing the Suona with spirituality in superb skills. With understanding of the traditional Chinese culture, he is deeply in love with the cultural heritage and treats it as the most valuable thing in life with careful preservation. He has a positive attitude and appreciation of Suona, a symbol of cultural heritage, so as to influence and touch the audience. Particularly, his appreciation of the sound of birds in nature reflects the essence of Suona art and shows a harmonious unity and coexistence between man and nature. It reflects people's longing for a better life, and thus forming the aesthetic interaction with the audience.

Master Jiao cherishes the national culture. At first he is unfamiliar with the Western Band, but after observation, he knows the fact and finds it unsuitable for Chinese culture and the nation should stick to the traditional culture instead. So he calls upon the disciples to stick to playing the Suona, which puzzles the people who blindly follow western culture and money worship. Instead of pursuing fame, fortune or sensationalism, they are playing the soul and spirit of the traditional folk arts, which will be rare and commendable in the society dominated by market economy. Isn't it insufficient to alert the nation? How can the traditional Chinese folk arts stand and flourish in the market economy today? Will the Western Band be acclimatized in China or does it have circumstances for the development in China?

You's ensemble begins to disband as all members must find work elsewhere to make ends meet. People are indifferent to "rules". Master Jiao does not approve of their behavior. In the face of the dilemma of traditional Chinese folk arts, he has to face the reality, upset, but always hold the Suona art spurned by people. When he finally decides to sell the cattle for new instruments with disregard for his own safety, it is shown that Suona plays a key role in his heart, and that he values arts most. It also indicates Director Wu Tianming's appreciation on the traditional Chinese folk arts. The director transfers personal feelings onto the heir of Suona art, showing his identity of traditional Chinese culture and attention to how to treat the traditional cultural heritage. He believed that the Suona art, born in Guanzhong Plain, is the crystallization of the wisdom of the Chinese nation

for hundreds of years, which should not be ignored and discarded but people must seek what has been lost and cherish it more than ever. The Suona art should be passed on from generation to generation with continuous innovation over the years, and thus the real national root of culture will come back. The film is ended in a way that can comfort the audience—You Tianming plays the *Song of the Phoenix* for his master. The master can have a good rest in peace on heaven while the respect, gratitude and commitment to the master and the perseverance to the Suona art will always be in the heart of You Tianming, by whom the national cultural root will survive and be passed on. The film makes the audience filled with infinite reverie, expectation and reflection.

CONCLUSION

The film *Song of the Phoenix* has rich attitudinal resources and outpouring of Director Wu Tianming's rich affect on the traditional Chinese folk arts. By using the Appraisal System, this paper makes a preliminary analysis on attitudinal resources and its operation in the film. It shows

that any subsystem of attitudinal resources, whether systems of affect, appreciation or judgment, has a positive effect on revealing the film characteristics, inventing the characters, and highlighting the profound connotation and social significance. In a word, attitudinal resources, as the core of the Appraisal System, provide a new perspective for interpretation and appreciation of films.

REFERENCES

- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Arnold.
- Martin, J. R., & D. Rose. (2003). *Working with the discourse: Meaning beyond the clause*. Sydney; Hong Kong: Continuum Press.
- Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2007). *Working with discourse*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Wang, Z. H. (2001). Appraisal systems and their operation: A new development in the systemic functional linguistics. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (6), 13-18.
- Wu, S. J. (2014). A study of attitude systems of English classical novel everyday use. *Journal of China Civil Aviation Flying College*, (6), 71-74.