

# Narrative Construction of Pipa Props based on Body Media in Silk Road Flower Rain

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## ABSTRACT

This paper studies how the pipa prop in *Silk Road Flower Rain* serves as a vehicle for narrative construction through body media. The pipa is both a musical instrument and a cultural symbol in Chinese society, and it also functions as a prop used to create rhythm, stage space, visual effects, and narrative expression. The analysis shows that the props are employed to convey stories by changing the pose, motion, stability and way of use of the dancer's body. Based on studies of Dunhuang dance heritage, the cultural history of the pipa along the Silk Road, and performance theory for embodiment, this paper proposes that the pipa instrument acts as a medium for conveying mural images, stage choreography and audience interpretations. Based on the discussion so far, body-based narration may cause the audience to view props as culturally encoded performance signs rather than simply objects. In *Silk Road Flower Rain*, the pipa prop serves as a representative example of embodied narrative construction in Chinese dance drama.

## KEYWORDS

*Silk Road Flower Rain*; Pipa prop; Body media; Embodied narrative; Dunhuang dance; Performance symbolism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Silk Road Flower Rain* is one of the most well-known Chinese dance dramas that have been inspired by Dunhuang culture and the imagery of the Silk Road. Since its creation, the work has been well known for integrating mural art and Tang Dynasty styles, as well as for reconstructing narratives of historical imagination [1, 2]. All stage elements are carefully designed; among them, the pipa prop stands out because it is visually striking, produces sound effects, and can be physically manipulated during performance. Props are used as the background of the play and can be used in many ways by the actors during the performance.

The pipa in this work is also related to the well-known reversed-motion gesture found in Dunhuang murals. Scholars of Dunhuang dance have indicated that the performance tradition borrows visual materials from the grotto murals, and musicians and dancers are often depicted in dynamic, curved and suspended poses [2][3]. The images are not copied verbatim in the stage adaptation. Therefore, they can be re-embodied through choreography to serve as a link between visual heritage and live performance. This paper investigates how the pipa prop serves to create a narrative system in terms of the idea of body media.

The narrative meaning of the pipa prop emerges only when it is activated through bodily performance. In other words, through movement of the body, the object acquires a life and the body serves as a carrier for passing down cultural memory on stage. This paper first introduces the culture and history of the pipa, then adopts the theory of body media as a lens, and finally analyzes how the pipa prop constructs narrative meaning in *Silk Road Flower Rain*.

## **2. CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. The Pipa on the Silk Road**

The pipa has a long history of dissemination across Central Asia and China. Research on the dissemination of this instrument shows that it spread along the Silk Road through cultural exchange and, at that time, was already a plucking instrument in Chinese music [4]. Due to its history, the pipa is now a Chinese musical instrument that has absorbed and adapted various cultures during the course of historical changes. *Silk Road Flower Rain* uses a multi-layered identity of the pipa prop to show the continuity and exchange of cultures throughout history.

Connections of instruments with the Silk Road can be used to build a story and evoke a sense of history and culture in listeners' minds. Holding a prop and moving it behind one's back to show that one is an old person can make people feel that one has a long history. A prop is an object that moves in space and time for the audience, and thus its symbolic motion serves to add dramatic expression.

### **2.2. Dunhuang Imagery and Stage Adaptation**

Dunhuang murals provide the visual basis for many of the works in *Silk Road Flower Rain* [9,11]. In the past, this work has been linked to the aesthetic ideas and mural-inspired dance sections of the Tang Dynasty [1,2]. Murals of players from the pipa can offer visual ideas for music and dance. Stage choreography turns this picture into a live-action work, and thus makes the prop section of a performance-based cultural translation rather than a static reconstruction [3].

Therefore, there needs to be an adjustment; the stage will also be presenting a story of the mural's revival. Through costuming, body language and other attributes, the static picture on the wall can be made dynamic. Thus, the pipa prop can help the audience experience the past as a living story rather than an archaeological site.

## **3. BODY MEDIA**

### **3.1. The Body as Medium**

The body medium theory believes that the body has meaning and is not merely a biological object. Gesture, posture, movement and rhythm in a performance can all carry non-verbal meanings that are closely related to one's lived experience of life [5-8]. The pipa prop can be viewed as a silent object in this system that shows itself through motion. The dancer's body connects the object and the audience to create an understandable narrative sign of the pipa.

Performers use their bodies to organise the space on the stage around the prop in *Silk Road Flower Rain*. Raised arm, bent torso and a controlled backward arch can all be used to create a sense of visual tension and show the pipa as both an object and an extension of the body. The body is carrying the prop, but this is also how the story of the prop is shown. Therefore, the pipa should be seen as an expressive tool of the body rather than an isolated stage prop.

### **3.2. Gesture and Kinesthetic Narration**

Gestures constitute the core narrative mechanism of stage props. When the dancer plays the pipa behind their back, they are performing a movement that refers to the Dunhuang murals and shows a high level of skill and elegance [2, 3, 10]. The audience is familiar with the culture and therefore knows that this sign is in the style of the Silk Road. At the same time, gestures are embodied movements and balances that express affective states without relying on verbal or visual explanation.

Kinesthetic narration is the conveying of meaning through the felt logic of movement by the audience. The pipa prop helps establish a perceptible connection between the body and the object through this process. A prop is a means of telling stories by organising a series of actions, emotions and cultural references. Therefore, body media constitute a multisensory mode of storytelling.

## **4. NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS**

### **4.1. Character Identity**

The pipa instrument can also help people feel a stronger sense of identity in their historical and cultural roots. Musical instruments in Chinese opera often signify learning, elegance, and artistry. In *Silk Road Flower Rain*, a pipa prop is also used to identify a dancer as a member of a fictional Dunhuang world created by cultural exchange and artistic refinement [1][2]. Thus, the prop can serve to build the character and setting of the stage.

The performer enacts the pipa through bodily movement, thereby revealing identity. The performer's body position during prop manipulation, smooth movements, and coordination with other choreographic elements are all presented to the audience. Therefore, the character's own identity makes the story more relatable than words can express.

### **4.2. Spatial Storytelling**

The pipa prop contributes to the construction of stage space. By adjusting body position and altering direction within space, performers enable the prop to move and transform accordingly. A reverse-playing movement is spatially irregular and therefore quite striking; it reconfigures the typical use of instruments in a novel way [2, 3]. Thus, the body and the props work together to create a space that conveys the moving culture of the Silk Road to the audience.

This space has a certain function, and as such, *Silk Road Flower Rain* is also a story of travel, trade and connection. The pipa prop can be interpreted as symbolizing Dunhuang's roads, cave temples, and broader cultural pathways. Movement thus expresses the passage of time, and this temporal transformation becomes part of the visual language of performance.

### **4.3. Historical Memory**

Historical memory is formed when props evoke a sense of continuity in culture over time [11, 12]. The pipa prop in *Silk Road Flower Rain* does not present history through documentaries; rather, it presents historical references as beautiful pictures [1, 4]. Therefore, the prop functions as a medium of memory. This suggests that the Silk Road was a very long process and the result of various countries working together.

The body is the subject of this work of memory. Therefore, as a result of live-motion activation for the prop, memory is embodied and temporal rather than fixed and archivable. The audience sees a present body that bears the mark of history, and this simultaneity evokes a deeper sense of emotion in the story.

## **5. PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS**

### **5.1. Reverse-playing as Embodied Sign**

The most famous pipa-related image in Dunhuang culture is reverse-playing. In *Silk Road Flower Rain*, this figure is turned into choreographic actions that integrate flexibility, balance and expressive control [2][3]. The objects are to have a story told by their own language. The audience finds the

movement to be visually impressive, and such a quality often suggests the existence of cultural memory. Reverse playing also disrupts the conventional association between musician and instrument. Generally, the pipa is held in front of the body; however, here the performer has turned their body to form a visual frame around the instrument. Therefore, this change has produced a dramatic effect of fragility and skill in the body. A narrative thus emerges from this configuration.

## **5.2. The Prop as Cultural Translation**

Pipa is a stage prop with mural heritage. Dunhuang dance restoration studies have shown that many of the original visual materials have been modified in modern adaptations [1, 3]. Therefore, the pipa prop is not an old fossil but a way of expression. It has aesthetic codes for mural art and uses them in the communication system of modern dance drama.

Cultural translation is achieved through the body. A prop alone does not generate meaning; rather, it must be activated to convey affect across temporal and spatial dimensions. The audience perceives cultural meaning through the integrated system of body and prop.

## **5.3. Emotional Atmosphere**

Pipa props can also offer background music. The sound qualities can evoke feelings of elegance, antiquity, and nostalgia in the audience. In combination with the flow of dance, the prop helps to create a sense of lyricism that supports the emotions in the drama [1][2]. The mood is not for show; it also serves to support the story.

Emotional atmosphere is essential because body media operate at the levels of cognition and affect. The audience knows what a pipa is and, through music and dance, can be introduced to the culture. That feeling is why the props have been so popular.

# **6. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The pipa prop in *Silk Road Flower Rain* shows that narrative in performance is carried by the body, objects, pictures and memory. In general, distributed narrative theory is grounded in embodied and multimodal approaches, which argue that meaning is generated through interaction rather than within a single text [5-8]. It can be seen from the case that cultural props are not simply supporting items for the choreography. They are the agents of change in the development of drama.

Theoretically, the body as a medium transforms the object from a static image into a dynamic event. The object becomes an event when the performer activates it in the act of expression. An event-driven mode of thought is relatively suitable for dance; thus, narrative may be expressed in movement and posture rather than language. The pipa prop can thus be viewed as a kind of visual language.

Based on the above analysis, cultural heritage may be recreated through performative mediation rather than direct reproduction. In *Silk Road Flower Rain*, the pipa does not necessarily need to be historically authentic. Thus, it can help the current generation experience the past as a living work of art. It gives life to the stage props.

# **7. CONCLUSION**

The pipa has told the stories of various places in the past and is also used to tell tales about the human body by performers today. Gestures, postures, spatial organization, and reverse-playing all serve as means of carrying cultural memory embedded in props. Meaning is not in the object itself; instead, through movement and expression of the body, this object can be presented as a narrative sign.

Therefore, body media provide a framework for understanding the performative transformation of Chinese dance drama. Pipa prop links Dunhuang art and Silk Road culture to create a new form of contemporary stage performance. Therefore, Silk Road Flower Rain is a typical case study that shows how props can serve as active narrative tools in live performances.

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