

## *Emotional Interpretation of Funeral Symbols in Animations*

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### **Abstract**

Following the transition from the traditional Confucian funerals practiced by the ancient Chinese to the contemporary funeral culture in Taiwan, the new generation of animation directors have used symbolic translation to reinterpret and give new meanings to the funeral culture. On the basis of semiotic theories and the funeral culture of Taiwan, this study explored the use of funeral symbols in animations. Interviews were conducted with funeral service providers, and a literature review and case analysis were performed. The study cases focused on the funeral scenes of the short films *A Gong* (2018) and *—One After Another* (2020) and the feature film *On Happiness Road* (2017). In these films, the directors used visual symbols, shots, and scenes to convey characters' emotions and present the transformation of funeral practices in Taiwan. The films were observed to share common characteristics in the use of conventional symbols. Moreover, the directors reinforced the plot tension through character actions, lighting contrasts, camera angles, visual compositions, and soundtracks. Two objective forms were also arranged to interpret their corresponding symbolic meanings, namely the significance of ritual behaviors and family bonds. Specifically, joss papers were folded into the shape of motorcycle, and paper lotuses were converted to paper boats in the films. In the new generation of animation works, symbolic meanings are redefined or reinforced through character emotions, which in turn facilitate emotional resonance with the audience.

Keywords: Animation, Taiwanese Funeral, Funeral Symbol, Emotion

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## Introduction

The ceremonies of early Han immigrants to Taiwan were mostly extensions of Confucian rituals and customs. The Confucian concept that “the dead outrank the living” is deeply rooted in Taiwanese culture and, as such, among various cultural rituals, funerary rituals in particular carry profound meaning. Later, fusion with other groups led to a multicultural blend of diverse heritages, folk customs, ethics, and religious meanings that have shaped Taiwan’s unique funerary customs. In addition to ethnocultural connotations, funerary rituals have a social function, namely the creation of a space for cathartic grief and the satisfaction of the living’s emotional needs through complicated procedures (Yang, 2010). Death is no longer a taboo topic, and funerary customs are the subject of film adaptations such as *7 Days in Heaven* and *Little Big Women in Taiwan* and *Departures* in Japan. A new generation of animation directors have also leveraged animation as a vehicle for interpreting and reinterpreting death through the use of symbols, prompting a feeling of empathy among audiences. This study focused on how directors employ visual signs, shots, and scenes to convey the emotional expressions of characters, as well as the transformation of Taiwan’s funerary rituals.

Funerals, in the spirit of remembrance, are rituals through which the living say goodbye to the deceased. The entire process is a series of symbolic behaviors that manifest the feeling of losing a loved one and was developed to assist the living in coping with their emotions, as opposed to the regulation of external behaviors (Lin, 1997; Cheng, 2007). Early Taiwanese funerals were conducted according to conventions in Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Funerals in Taiwan generally follow procedures prescribed by the Ministry of the Interior, the most complicated of which are the *disposal of the remains* and the *ceremony*. These ritual practices also reflect Taiwanese people’s social values and views on life and death. From a family standpoint, the symbolic behaviors underlying the rituals can be viewed as compensatory toward the deceased, with the deceased’s family atoning for the lack of filial piety they demonstrated during the deceased’s life. The food, clothing, instruments, and layout used in a funeral have their conventional norms and taboos, and the ceremonial practices carry hidden meanings. For instance, the practice of weeping—demonstrated through wailing tearfully and crawling into the deceased’s home—represents the weeper’s regret for not being home to care for their parents, which is reflected and recompensed through excessive displays of grief.

Funerary customs in Taiwan comprise many symbols with rich cultural overtones that are recognizable and referential. As such, funerary customs can be seen as demonstrations of symbolic activity. Discussions of the symbolic meaning of funerary symbols and how these symbols are used must be based on an understanding of the dyadic nature of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) asserted that a sign is composed of the *signifier* and the *signified*. A symbol is a sign that relies on conventions and cultural understanding to be interpreted. This concept corresponds to the presence of symbolic meaning in the objects and practices of Taiwanese funerary customs. For example, *paper lotuses* are a signifier, and its signified is “prayers for the deceased.” On this basis, we incorporated Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1839–1914) theory that interpretations of a symbol vary according to the learned experiences and folk customs associated with an object. Over time, funerary customs in Taiwan incorporated local religions and folk beliefs, which are regional and unique. As such, the interpretation of symbols must account for the accumulation of long-term sociocultural experiences. Differences in cultural backgrounds lead to gaps in interpretations. Although paper lotuses have a direct association with funerals in Taiwan, they may be interpreted as simply

decorative paper flowers by those without the relevant cultural background. Consequently, the interpretation of funerary symbols must include the regional context to ensure that the meanings of the symbols are accurately conveyed. Regarding the definition of symbols, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) stated that gestures, sounds, and rituals can constitute systems of signs. Visible images, color choices, layout, and ritualistic behaviors all carry hidden meanings in religious and folkloric interpretations; that is, they comprise both signifiers and signifieds and have specific meanings for those with the relevant cultural background. Therefore, funerary food, clothing, instruments, and practices can be inferred to be a part of funerary symbols. Funerary rituals in Taiwan involve many complex symbols, and these symbols have been used by a new generation of animation directors to represent funerals and funerary processes in the context of the narrative. Different means of expression are also used in different funerary procedures to connect these symbols with the characters' emotions. Characters' emotions are not only displayed on their faces but also through character actions, lighting contrasts, camera angles, visual compositions, and soundtracks with vocal parts. These movie elements together inform the overall emotional tone, which further reflects characters' emotional states.

Character emotion is a major plot driver in animation. To encourage audiences to become immersed in the emotional atmosphere of the plot, directors often reinforce dramatic tension through expressive means, thus manipulating the audience's emotions. Emotional expressions in animation are based on those in film and therefore utilize the same techniques. Regarding methods for rendering emotion, Baudry (1992) argued that light and shadow, camera angles, and music in film subliminally influence the audience's perceptions. Directors convey emotions through tension generated using lighting contrasts, colors, and camera angles. *The Language of the Lens* examined the emotions expressed through the language of the lens in different films, specifically the differences in the emotional effects produced through the compression, expansion, translation, and lighting of the lens. Furthermore, Plutchik's wheel of emotions (1980) has been widely used in films; *The Color Pixar* chronicles Disney Pixar's use of color in the creation and reinforcement of strong emotions such as anger, nervousness, and danger through the use of red, which is considered a stimulating color. Animations involving funerals typically depict the bond between the living and the deceased or the impact that the death of a loved one has on the living, and, consequently, the expression of emotions is paramount. The factors affecting emotional expressions are quite extensive, and through manipulating these factors, even if the same scene is used in different films, the different techniques used by the directors result in different emotions being conveyed. This study conducted a semiotic analysis of animations depicting Taiwanese funerals to explore how funerary symbols in animation are interpreted on an emotional level through identifying the funerary symbols used in such films and through examining how emotions affect ritual behaviors in animation, as well as the influence on the signifieds of the original funerary symbols.

The animations examined in this study were chosen on the basis of whether their plots depicted a Taiwanese funeral from the perspective of the living. The animated feature film *On Happiness Road* (2017) and the animated short films *A Gong* (2018) and *One After Another* (2020) were chosen. These three films were released within a relatively narrow timeframe and can reflect contemporary rituals and etiquette in traditional Taiwanese funerals. *On Happiness Road* begins with the protagonist returning home to attend the funeral of her grandmother, who is a member of the Amis people, and follows the protagonist's journey of growth; by the end of the funeral, the protagonist finds direction in life and learns to cherish her relatives. *A Gong* portrays the funerary process from the perspective of a child. He is

initially confused about the meaning of funerary customs until he realizes that his grandfather is dead, and he weeps. The short film ends with the grandfather reincarnating as a dog to keep his grandson company. In the third case study, *One After Another*, the protagonist remembers his childhood and the paper boats that his grandfather folded for him as he now folds paper lotuses for his grandfather's funeral. Recalling each step of how his grandfather folded his paper boats, the protagonist offers a paper boat to his deceased grandfather and finally understands his grandfather's life philosophy. Influenced by the narrative and emotional tone, animation characters demonstrate different behaviors during the funerals, indirectly or directly affecting the signified meaning of funerary symbols in traditional cultures. These funerary symbols then develop new meanings through the audience's interpretations.

## Research Analysis

Because the emphasis of this study was on the reinterpretation of funerary symbols through character emotions in animation, nonfuneral scenes and plotlines were not discussed. First, all scenes displaying funerary symbols in the three animated films and the symbols depicted were described. Then, the emotional expressions in each of the three animated films were analyzed using case study techniques. Because the focus of this study was on symbolic meanings reinterpreted through character emotions, among the extensive techniques for describing emotions, sentiment analysis was chosen to analyze the characters' facial expressions and body language, which are the most directly observable demonstrations of emotions. Perceivable distinctions in color and lighting, camera angles, scene compositions, and soundtracks with vocal parts were secondary discussion points. Emotionally driven changes to ritual behaviors and the outcomes of the directors' reinterpretation of the original funerary symbols in the animated films were analyzed according to the Saussurean concept of dyadic signs (i.e., the signifier and the signified).

### 1. Commonality of Symbols

The three animated films have their differences in plot, narrative techniques, ritual sequences, and symbols. *A Gong* begins in the middle of a funeral, and nearly all of the film comprises scenes of funerary customs. Seven ritual behaviors are portrayed in this animation, namely professional mourning, gathering at a mourning hall, folding paper lotuses, offering food to the deceased, burning joss paper, holding a wake, and paying the "seventh day" respects. *One After Another* relies on flashbacks and narration to communicate the story, and the funeral scenes are concentrated at the end of the short film. The only ritual behaviors in this animation are folding paper lotuses and gathering at a mourning hall. In *On Happiness Road*, funeral scenes are used to transition between memories. The audience becomes acquainted with the protagonist's journey of growth through the people, events, and objects presented during the funeral. The ritual behaviors in this film are burning incense, holding a wake, folding paper lotuses, and meeting at a mourning hall. This summary demonstrates that all three animated films distinguish the funeral process into two stages, namely the *disposal of the body* and the *ceremony*. The most commonly represented ritual behaviors are *folding paper lotuses* and *meeting at a mourning hall*, and the most frequently displayed funerary symbols are the mourning hall, tower of canned goods, marquee, and paper lotuses.

The directors used funerary symbols and ritual behaviors to promote the audience's understanding of the story. Similar elements are present in different animated films, demonstrating that funerary symbols are conventions that can be recognized and interpreted by audiences with a high degree of commonality. However, different tribes may have

different interpretations of funerary customs. The late grandmother in *On Happiness Road* was a member of the Amis people, one of the 16 Indigenous peoples of Taiwan, and, as such, the funerary customs in this film differ from conventional funerals. Typically, the Han Chinese tend to follow a Buddhist vegetarian diet during the mourning period to accumulate merit for the deceased, but in this animation, the protagonist and her relatives are shown grilling meat outside the mourning hall (Figure 1). This behavior is related to traditional Amis sacrificial culture, but to Taiwanese audiences without an Indigenous cultural background, this animation scene would seem unintelligible and in conflict with their traditional views. However, because the scene also contains conventional funerary symbols such as paper lotuses and the tower of canned goods, Taiwanese audiences can still identify the scene as one depicting a funeral, even if they are ignorant of Amis sacrificial rituals. Although the interpretation of symbols is dependent on individuals' cultural background, audiences can share the same interpretation of some funerary symbols despite differences in culture and customs and can recognize animation film scenes as depicting a funeral. The funerary symbols remain identifiable across the animated films, indicating their commonality. The *On Happiness Road* director's insertion of traditional Taiwanese funerary symbols into the animation assists audiences in recognizing the funeral scenes while introducing the audience to aspects of Amis sacrificial culture. In other words, the funeral depicted in this animation is a demonstration of cultural integration between different ethnic groups.



Figure 1: Grilling meat outside the mourning hall

## 2. Emotional Expressions in the Films

To arouse audiences' empathy with the characters, in addition to the emotions displayed by the characters, directors may employ lighting contrasts, camera angles, visual compositions, and soundtracks with vocal parts to create an overall mood to effectively convey emotions and to advance the plot. All three animated films follow the funeral of a family member as experienced by the protagonist. However, the differences in age among the protagonists result in differences in perspective. The protagonist of *A Gong* is a child with no understanding of funerary customs, and throughout the funerary rituals, his facial expressions and body language generally convey hesitancy and timidity. He is also quiet and taciturn. By contrast, the protagonists of *One After Another* and *On Happiness Road* are adults, whose expressions and behaviors appear calm and at ease; they strike up conversations when meeting their relatives. In *A Gong*, to highlight the boy's uneasiness during the funeral, the director separates him from the people around him through the heightened contrast of light and dark (Figure 2); consequently, the protagonist seems out of place. The camera angle also assists in portraying him as weak and helpless, which together with his timid body language creates an

atmosphere of uneasiness and confusion. The absence of an animation picture soundtrack adds to a feeling of oppression, prompting the audience to share the protagonist's bewilderment with the funerary process. At the end of the film, the protagonist chases after the fading image of his grandfather, and the animation picture soundtrack echoes the gradual escalation of his behavior, which culminates with him alone in the darkness and crying for his grandfather. The emotional atmosphere of the animation begins in an understated manner, then climaxes toward the end. The other two animated films, depicted from adult perspectives, do not feature strong contrasts between light and dark, and the camera angles are parallel to the horizontal axis; consequently, both these films convey a relaxed and stable atmosphere. In *One After Another*, which employs flashbacks and narration, the protagonist does not demonstrate any exaggerated facial expressions or body movements, and his behavior is slow and steady. The animation picture soundtrack, composed of simple, low notes, and the warm color palette generate a calm and peaceful atmosphere, which has a pacifying effect on the audience. In the final scene in which the camera lingers on the back of the protagonist as he places a paper boat folded out of joss paper onto the coffin (Figure 3) evinces gentle sadness. By contrast, the earlier funeral scenes in *On Happiness Road* establish a happy and relaxed mood. Typically, death is viewed as a major life event in Taiwan, and its customs are both rigorous and solemn. However, *On Happiness Road* depicts the protagonist chatting with her relatives after arriving at the mourning hall and shows the relatives gossiping and laughing while grilling meat. Furthermore, children laughing during the funeral are not reprimanded. The camera angles, lighting, color palette, and animation picture soundtrack generate a relaxed, easy, and peaceful atmosphere, subverting the conventional Taiwanese impression of funerals. Halfway through the film, when the protagonist enters the mourning hall to see her grandmother for the last time, the aforementioned relaxed atmosphere is inverted, and the overall color temperature becomes cold when the protagonist collapses in front of the coffin, highlighting her emotional distress. Her helplessness is conveyed through a wide shot (Figure 4). This shift between emotions produces a strong contrast that further highlights the protagonist's reluctance to say goodbye to her grandmother.

These descriptions of the animated films indicate that the emotional depiction of the funeral is influenced by the protagonist's perspective. Furthermore, although the passing of a loved one is sad and mournful, the directors of all three animated films avoided direct portrayals of grief and instead used other moods—confusion and uneasiness in *A Gong*, gentle calmness in *One After Another*, and relaxed happiness in *On Happiness Road*—in combination with their own techniques to evoke grief at the end of the film and to convey the sadness and sense of loss felt by the living over the death of a loved one.

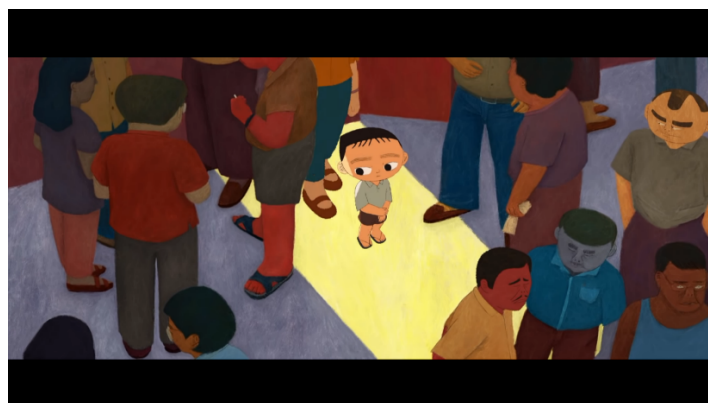


Figure 2: Disturbed in the mourning hall



其實只是翻了一面而已  
was nothing but flipping the boat inside out.

Figure 3: A paper boat folded out of joss paper onto the coffin



Figure 4: Crying in the mourning hall

### 3. Reinterpretation of Symbols

Character actions and emotions are shaped by the plot, and their changes and transformations indirectly alter ritual behaviors and influence the meanings of funerary symbols. In *A Gong*, the protagonist is confused by the folding of paper lotuses, and, in contrast to the sureness of adult hands, is only able to hold the paper in dazed silence. Originally in funerary culture, the folding of paper lotuses is a prayer for the deceased, ensuring their smooth journey to the afterlife; moreover, the repetitive action of folding can alleviate grief. However, this symbol has been reinterpreted by the director, twisting the positive imagery of praying for the dead into doubt perceived by the protagonist, and the paper lotus now signifies his inability to accept or understand that his grandfather has died. In addition to altering behaviors, the three animated films incorporate symbolic objects into their depictions of ritual behaviors, reinforcing the bond between the living and the deceased. The symbolic object in *A Gong* is a motorbike folded out of joss paper, representing the protagonist's impression of his grandfather. In *One After Another*, the symbolic object is a paper boat made from joss lotus paper, which signifies the protagonist's memories of his grandfather. The symbolic objects in *On Happiness Road* are the American chocolates and betel nuts placed on the altar, which symbolize the late grandmother's importance to the protagonist and the protagonist's impression of her grandmother. These symbolic objects were incorporated into original ritual behaviors, altering the original meaning of the funerary symbols. *A Gong* folds the joss paper, which typically signifies "helping the deceased on their journey," into the shape of a motorbike, which he then refuses to throw onto the fire; the joss paper then signifies his "refusal to confront the death of a loved one." Contrarily, in *One After Another* and *On*

*Happiness Road*, the offering of the paper boat and American chocolates not only retains the original meaning of “saying goodbye to the deceased” and “providing the deceased with a final feast” but also reinforces the strong grandparent–grandchild relationship. The protagonist’s offering of a paper boat in *One After Another*, paired with the narration of the folding process, enables the grown protagonist to realize that his grandfather’s paper boats were lessons about his life philosophy, and the last step in the paper folding signifies the finality of his grandfather’s passing.

These directors’ presentation of funerary symbols through the characters’ actions and expressions and the incorporation of symbolic objects indicate that the integration of emotions into symbols results in either the reinterpretation or reinforcement of the signified meaning. From these changes, two or more additional meanings can be derived. Both the reinterpretation and reinforcement can effectively convey the emotional bond between the living and the deceased within the funerary context, arousing empathy among the audience.

## **Discussion**

The animation case studies, each featuring depictions of Taiwanese funerary culture, have their own approaches to presenting funerary symbols through the narrative and cinematography. In *A Gong* and *On Happiness Road*, the plots are advanced by the progression of the funeral, whereas in *One After Another*, the funeral is the conclusion of the story. To convey the concept of a funeral, these animated films use funerary symbols and associated ritual behaviors that the audience can recognize. The paper lotuses and coffin were commonly used funerary symbols identified in this study. In particular, only these two symbols were used as indicators of a funeral in *One After Another*, demonstrating the strong symbolism, distinctiveness, and commonality of Taiwanese funerary symbols and the audience’s collective recognition of these symbols. These funerary symbols were also paired with the characters’ emotional expressions, enhancing the narrative drama. The characters’ emotions were portrayed through their facial expressions and body movements and through lighting contrasts, color palettes, camera angles, visual compositions, and the animation picture soundtrack. Examples include the use of strong contrast between light and dark to separate the protagonist from other characters in *A Gong*, highlighting the protagonist’s sense of isolation as well as his ignorance and uneasiness about the funeral. Centrality, the soft lighting in *One After Another* and *On Happiness Road* reflect the protagonists’ feelings of peace.

Through the use of symbolic objects in a ritual, the original and traditional ritual behaviors are altered to correspond to the characters’ emotions. Folding joss paper into a motorbike, folding lotus joss paper into a boat, and placing chocolates as offerings on the altar all represent the transformation of ritual behavior, which departs from the framework of traditional funerary customs and serves to display the emotional bonds between the characters in the animation. These indirect or direct influences on the signified of the original funerary symbol lead to the reinforcement or reinterpretation of the meaning of the symbol. The ritual behavior of gathering at a mourning hall signifies, in traditional funerary customs, “saying goodbye to the deceased,” but in *A Gong*, this behavior is reinterpreted through the character’s emotions and scene mood as signifying an “incomprehension and fear of death.” In *One After Another*, the basic concept of “saying goodbye” is extended to “the protagonist bidding a final farewell to his grandfather.” Despite the differences in signified meanings and interpretations in both of these films, the core concepts of the animation are still conveyed. The plot affects the characters and their emotions, which in turn influence their demonstration



of ritual behaviors. The signifieds of the funerary symbols are also transformed by the characters' emotions, humanizing the originally cold rituals and drawing them into the narrative. These reinforced or reinterpreted symbolic meanings enable the directors to effectively convey emotions to the audience, thereby stimulating empathy with characters and in their states of grieving among the audience through the medium of animation.

## **Conclusion**

Each country has funerary customs that conform to its local ethnicities and cultures, with rituals, layouts, and color schemes shaped by regional conventions. Funerals are the ritualization of mourning, and the sentiment underpinning this ritualization is the desire to say a final goodbye to our loved ones who have passed. In Taiwanese animated films depicting funerals, funerary symbols were imbued with emotions, lending warmth to originally sterile rituals and ensuring that the beliefs and sentiments in the narrative were effectively conveyed. Consequently, even audiences unfamiliar with Taiwanese funerary culture could empathize with the characters in the stories. *On Happiness Road* was selected to be screened in Paris as part of the 2022 Montreal World Film Festival and has been well-received internationally. Why non-Taiwanese audiences are able to comprehend Taiwanese funerary culture and how funerary symbols can drive audience sentiment are topics worthy of further research.

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