A Corpus-Based Multimodal Appraisal Analysis of Social Media Discourse on Chinese and Italian Operas

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Abstract

This study investigates how Chinese and Italian operas are evaluated and emotionally constructed in English-language social media discourse, addressing the broader question of how intangible cultural heritage is recontextualized in global digital environments. Drawing on Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), the research examines evaluative language, affective positioning, and intercultural meaning-making across platforms.

Three research questions guide the study: (1) What linguistic and multimodal features characterize English-language posts about Chinese and Italian operas? (2) What evaluative patterns emerge in audience comments? (3) What similarities and differences can be identified in the appraisal of these two operatic traditions?

The dataset consists of 50 purposively sampled posts from YouTube and TikTok, each accompanied by 20 first-level English comments. The study integrates quantitative and qualitative methods. Corpus linguistic tools (AntConc, Voyant, Wordsmith) are used to identify keyword patterns and collocations, while Appraisal resources (Attitude, Engagement, Graduation) are annotated using UAM Corpus Tool. The analysis is complemented by discourse analysis and multimodal examination of emojis as evaluative resources.

Findings reveal that both Chinese and Italian operas are predominantly evaluated positively, reflecting shared appreciation of artistic and cultural value. However, significant differences emerge in evaluative intensity and discourse elaboration. Italian opera discourse is characterized by frequent and explicit expressions of Affect, often articulated through narrative and metaphor, indicating deeper emotional immersion and cultural familiarity. In contrast, Chinese opera is primarily evaluated through Appreciation, focusing on visual aesthetics, performance techniques, and cultural uniqueness, with comparatively less elaborated emotional expression. Engagement resources in comments on Chinese opera often signal curiosity and cultural distance.

Platform affordances also shape evaluative practices. TikTok comments tend to be shorter, more emoji-dense, and affectively immediate, whereas YouTube comments allow for more extended and reflective evaluation. Emojis function as key multimodal resources, reinforcing or substituting verbal appraisal and intensifying evaluative meaning.

This study contributes theoretically by extending Appraisal Theory to multimodal digital discourse, particularly through the integration of emoji analysis. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of combining corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis in examining online cultural reception. Empirically, it provides comparative insights into how different operatic traditions are interpreted within global digital publics. Overall, the findings highlight how social media platforms mediate intercultural evaluation and reshape the perception of traditional performing arts in transnational communication.