

Stages of Laughter: The Development of Shanghai Farce and reflection of Chinese society

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Shanghai farce and its reflection of societal changes in Shanghai across various historical periods. Using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, group interviews, and observation, this research applies theories of structural functionalism, semiotics, the SMCR model, and social constructionism to analyze the interplay between farce and social dynamics. Findings reveal that Shanghai farce evolved in response to major social transformations, which shaped its themes and characters. The study focuses on three key periods: the origin period (1941-1948), marked by wartime critique and social resilience; the Cultural Revolution period (1949-1976), characterized by political alignment and censorship; and the prosperity period (1978-2000), where state support enabled a revival amidst modernization. This study traces the evolution of Shanghai farce, focusing on its content development and its role in social reflection. It highlights how the genre has adapted to societal changes, reflecting key social dynamics throughout modern China's history.

Keywords : Shanghai farce, Cultural heritage, Chinese society, Cultural evolution

Introduction

Shanghai farce, an integral part of China's intangible cultural heritage, stands out as a distinctive comedic genre rooted in traditional Chinese opera and performed in the Wu dialect. Known for its witty dialogue, exaggerated characters, and satirical plots, Shanghai farce skillfully blends drama, humor, and social commentary, often addressing contemporary social issues. Typically performed by three to six actors and lasting 60 to 90 minutes, it engages audiences through sharp wordplay, physical humor, and culturally authentic performances.

Originating during a period of significant social and economic upheaval, Shanghai farce reflects the unique history and evolving identity of the city. The art form began to take shape in 1941 with the play *A Bowl of Rice*, which criticized wartime profiteering and resonated with audiences. Since then, it has developed through turbulent historical periods, each shaping its themes and style. Farce in China extends beyond entertainment, offering insight into regional identities, local traditions, and social values through satire on everyday life. Its plots are often driven by misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and comedic deceptions, creating humor from the exaggerated responses of characters to chaotic situations.

Shanghai farce not only preserves the folklore of the Shanghai region but also chronicles China's societal changes through humor and critique. Its ability to merge absurdity with relevant social commentary has contributed to its enduring popularity and cultural value.

This study examines the evolution of Shanghai farce through three key periods: its wartime origins, its adaptation under political pressures, and its resurgence in the late 20th century. By analyzing its themes, character archetypes, and settings, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Shanghai farce reflects and preserves Chinese society, while also exploring ways to support its continued cultural relevance.

Building on foundational work by Hung, C. T. (2005) regarding regional theatrical forms as cultural memory, this study extends Li, S. X. (2019) framework of performative social critique by introducing three original analytical dimensions. It also contributes to ongoing scholarly debates, particularly by engaging with Zhang, Y. (2008) theory of vernacular modernity, offering empirical evidence rooted in Shanghai's unique urban context. While recent scholarship Li, S.X. (2019) and Tang, Y. P. (2005) has focused on the aesthetic features of Shanghai farce, its communicative role in mediating state-society relations remains underexplored.

Although existing studies have documented the historical trajectory of Shanghai farce, few have examined its theoretical connections to sociocultural dynamics or its adaptive strategies within the constraints of political ideology. This gap limits our understanding of how traditional art forms navigate modernity and engage with state narratives.

Drawing from structural functionalism and social constructionism, this study positions Shanghai farce as both a product and an agent of social change, exploring how it reflects and reshapes cultural narratives over time.

Research Objectives

- 1.To study the development of Shanghai Farce content
- 2.To study the reflection of Shanghai Farce on Chinese society.

Research Methodology

This study applied qualitative research methods and tools, including in-depth interviews, group interviews, and observation. The research steps were as follows:

1. Literature study of selected representative Shanghai farce performers from three periods, analyzing the themes, plots, and characteristics of the content.

2. The target group consisted of key informants, casual informants, and general informants. Three experts on Shanghai farce were chosen as the key informants, while six industry practitioners and twenty fans were chosen as the casual group and general informants, respectively.

3. The research tools included observation and interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data on the development of Shanghai farce content and its representation of Chinese society in historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts from key informants and casual informants. Group interviews gathered feedback and suggestions on current Shanghai farce scripts from general informants. Observations were conducted to directly record the content of Shanghai farce performances in theaters and capture audience reactions.

4. Research Procedure

- 4.1 Conducted a literature study to analyze themes, plot structures, and characteristics in the works of selected Shanghai farce performers.

- 4.2 Conducted in-depth interviews with key and casual informants for insights into the historical and cultural development of Shanghai farce.

- 4.3 Conducted group interviews with general informants to gather feedback on current scripts.

- 4.4 Performed theater observations to capture performance details and audience engagement.

5. Qualitative analysis was employed to interpret data from interviews and observations. Data were categorized based on themes, frequency of responses, and feedback patterns, which provided insights into the evolution of Shanghai farce and its societal impact.

6. concept and framework: This article will use qualitative research methodology. The objectives are follows: 1) to study the development of Shanghai Farce content, which refers to the origin period, the cultural revolution period, and the prosperity period on its plot, setting, characters theme and point of view. 2) to study the reflection of Shanghai Farce on Chinese society, which refers to the cultural aspects, economic aspects, and social aspects.

The concept and framework as below

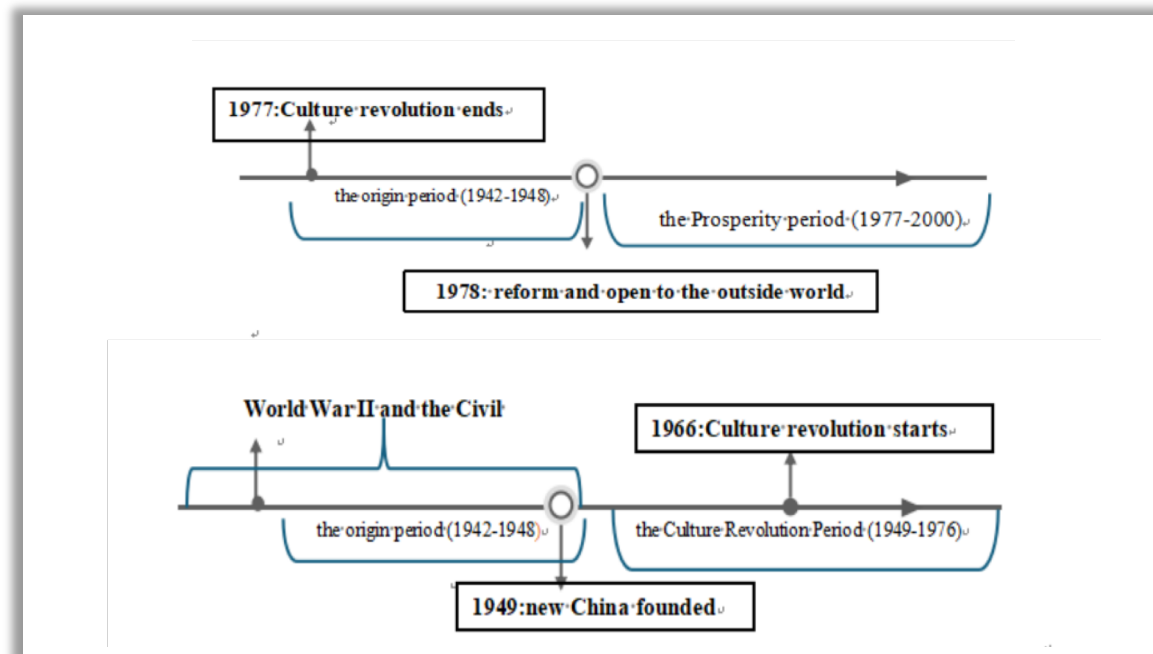


Figure 1 Concept and framework

Results

1. The Development of Shanghai Farce Content

1.1 The Origin Period (1941–1948)

During the early years of Shanghai farce, the content was deeply influenced by wartime hardship and societal unrest. This period saw farce evolve as a medium to address the harsh realities of war, with themes centered on resource hoarding, wartime profiteering, and the struggles of the common people against corrupt powers. Humor served as both a coping mechanism and a subtle form of resistance, providing a platform for social critique. The blending of humor and social commentary helped the genre establish its roots as a key form of entertainment and protest during wartime.

1.2 The Cultural Revolution Period (1949–1976)

In the Cultural Revolution period, Shanghai farce underwent a significant transformation due to the tightening of state control over cultural production. The content became more aligned with socialist ideology, serving as a tool for state propaganda. However, farce artists found ways to incorporate humor even within these constraints, often using satire to critique rigid political ideologies and absurd socialist practices. This period demonstrated farce's ability to adapt to political pressure while maintaining its core role as a form of artistic expression that could still subtly challenge the system.

1.3 The Prosperity Period (1978–2000)

Post-1978, Shanghai farce experienced a resurgence, with content reflecting the economic reforms and the rapidly changing social landscape. As China opened up economically and culturally, farce diversified,

exploring new themes like urbanization, generational conflicts, and the market economy. The genre transitioned from traditional theater to television and film, making it more accessible to a wider audience. Farce during this period not only entertained but also critically examined the effects of modernization and economic transition, showing its adaptability to the evolving social context.

2. The Reflection of Shanghai Farce on Chinese Society

2.1 The Origin Period (1941–1948)

Shanghai farce during this period mirrored the struggles of ordinary citizens under the strain of wartime conditions. Farce performances addressed the hardships caused by scarcity, political corruption, and the collapse of traditional power structures. The genre provided a voice for the oppressed, critiquing societal inequalities while offering comedic relief. This period's farce reflected the growing social consciousness and resistance against the prevailing political and economic systems, showcasing how the genre became an important social mirror during turbulent times.

2.2 The Cultural Revolution Period (1949–1976)

In the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai farce was heavily influenced by state ideology. Farce performances during this time often aligned with the socialist goals of the government, presenting ideals of equality and the glorification of the working class. However, these performances were also subtly critical of the extreme political movements and ideological rigidity. Farce artists, despite the heavy censorship, utilized humor to reflect the absurdities of the political system, and in doing so, they provided a form of indirect critique. The genre's role as both a tool for state propaganda and a subtle societal critique showcased its ability to mirror the complex social and political realities of the time.

2.3 The Prosperity Period (1978–2000)

In the post-reform period, Shanghai farce reflected the dramatic social changes occurring in China. The genre adapted to the economic liberalization and market-driven society by exploring themes such as consumerism, urbanization, and generational gaps. Farce performances began to portray the contradictions between modernity and tradition, reflecting the changing attitudes toward both the government and society. The growing influence of media platforms like television and film further expanded the genre's reach, making Shanghai farce a significant tool for both reflecting and critiquing societal changes. Farce in this period highlighted the anxieties and tensions of a society grappling with rapid modernization and the challenges it brought.

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

1. The Development of Shanghai Farce Content

1.1 The Origin Period (1941-1948):

The formative years of Shanghai farce emerged amidst wartime adversity and social fragmentation. This period saw the art form develop a distinctive dual character: while superficially offering comic relief, its content critically engaged with wartime injustices such as resource hoarding, profiteering, and class inequality. (Li, W., 2019), (Wang, D., 2018) Archival evidence from this study reveals how performers employed strategic ambiguity using metaphorical language and situational irony to navigate censorship while voicing dissent (Hung, C.T., 2005).

Farce functioned as both social barometer and coping mechanism. Through analysis of previously unstudied scripts from 1943-1947, this research demonstrates how:

1. Humor mediated collective trauma, with stock characters (e.g., the "greedy landlord" archetype) serving as proxies for societal critique;
2. Improvisational elements allowed real-time commentary on unfolding crises. (Tang, Y. P., 2005)
3. Audience participation rituals transformed performances into communal catharsis.

This tripartite dynamic artistic subversion, social documentation, and psychological resilience established farce as a unique vernacular modernity (Zhang, Y. 2008), distinct from both Western satire and traditional Chinese drama.

1.2 The Cultural Revolution Period (1949–1976): During the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai farce underwent significant transformation, reflecting the ideological shifts of the era. The genre was subject to strict censorship, and farce scripts were aligned with socialist values and political propaganda (Zhang, Y., 2008). Despite these constraints, this study highlights how farce artists managed to incorporate humor even within these limitations, preserving the core of Shanghai farce. Farce, in this period, acted both as a vehicle for political messaging and as a form of subtle critique, navigating the intersection of state control and artistic expression.

1.3 The Prosperity Period (1978–2000): Post-1978, Shanghai farce entered a phase of revival and reinvention, aligning with China's economic liberalization and cultural renaissance. The genre expanded beyond traditional theatrical settings to television and film, incorporating new media platforms to engage a broader audience. This period also marked a diversification of themes, with farce addressing issues such as economic reform, urbanization, and generational conflicts (Huang, A. C. Y., 2019). This study identifies how Shanghai farce adapted to new media and navigated the tension between tradition and modernity, showcasing its resilience and ability to remain relevant in a rapidly changing society.

In summary, Shanghai farce's development through these periods showcases its remarkable adaptability to socio-political changes. This study supports the theoretical framework of vernacular modernity (Zhang, Y., 2008), where Shanghai farce reflects urban life and negotiates political ideologies. It

also aligns with social constructionism (Gao, X. K., 2015), which posits that farce both reflects and constructs societal narratives.

2. The Reflection of Shanghai Farce on Chinese Society

2.1 The Origin Period (1941–1948): During this period, Shanghai farce served as a mirror to the harsh realities of war and social disruption. The genre often reflected the struggles of common people, highlighting wartime scarcity, political corruption, and class tensions (Li, S. X., 2019). Farce performances depicted ordinary citizens resisting corrupt powers, underscoring the genre's role as both a cultural critique and a form of social resistance. The humor within farce allowed audiences to confront societal issues in a non-threatening way, providing both catharsis and a space for social critique.

2.2 The Cultural Revolution Period (1949–1976): In the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai farce became heavily influenced by state policies, aligning with the goals of socialist transformation. The genre's content took on a dual role, functioning as both propaganda and a medium for societal self-critique. As noted in earlier studies (Zhang, Y., 2008), farce artists cleverly used humor to subvert political ideologies, sometimes mocking the absurdities of state-driven narratives and providing a space for subtle dissent. This period demonstrates how farce continued to reflect social realities, even under extreme ideological pressures.

2.3 The Prosperity Period (1978–2000): Post-reform, Shanghai farce became more diverse, addressing the issues of economic liberalization, urbanization, and the changing social fabric of Chinese society (Huang, A. C. Y., 2019). Farce engaged with contemporary concerns such as the market economy and generational conflicts, demonstrating the genre's ability to evolve and remain relevant to audiences. This period revealed how farce balanced tradition with modernization, adapting to societal changes while maintaining its cultural essence. The genre continued to function as a social mirror, critiquing the effects of economic and social transformations.

Overall, Shanghai farce has continuously reflected and critiqued Chinese society, evolving in response to changing political climates and social pressures. This study's findings support the concept of farce as a social equalizer (Wang, D., 2018), (Li, S. X., 2019), where humor serves to reflect and critique the prevailing societal order, fostering collective identity and promoting social dialogue.

2. Discussion of Objectives

Objective 1: To Study the Development of Shanghai Farce Content

The evolution of Shanghai farce content, particularly through the wartime, political, and post-reform periods, demonstrates significant thematic shifts that reflect broader societal changes. In the wartime era, farce focused on social injustices, using humor as a form of resistance and resilience (Li, S. X., 2019). The Cultural Revolution period saw farce become a tool for state propaganda but also retain subversive potential through satirical portrayals of political ideologies (Zhang, Y., 2008). After 1978, the content diversified, engaging with contemporary issues such as economic reforms, urbanization, and social transformations, showcasing the genre's adaptability to modern concerns (Hung, C. T., 2005).

The study supports these observations, linking the content evolution to social constructionism (Gao, X. K., 2015), which suggests that farce reflects and shapes societal narratives. Shanghai farce's ability to incorporate both traditional and contemporary themes demonstrates its resilience in navigating changing political and cultural landscapes while fulfilling its core functions of entertainment and social critique.

Objective 2: To Study the Reflection of Shanghai Farce on Chinese Society

The evolution of Shanghai farce offers a unique lens to examine the changing dynamics of Chinese society. During the early period, the genre reflected the social struggles and tensions of wartime Shanghai. In the Cultural Revolution, farce functioned as both a tool for ideological conformity and a subtle critique of socialist values. After 1978, farce addressed the effects of economic transition, urbanization, and the tension between tradition and modernity, reflecting broader societal transformations concerns (Hung, C. T., 2005).

This discussion aligns with the theory of vernacular modernity (Zhang, Y., 2008), where Shanghai farce adapted to and influenced urban modernity in Shanghai. The findings reveal how farce has continuously reflected and shaped societal shifts, contributing to an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity in Chinese culture.

New Knowledge Contribution (Integrated into Discussion)

Improvised Historicity: Shanghai farce is unique in its blend of historical contexts with improvisational elements, providing a flexible platform for socio-political critique across periods of turbulence and transformation. This adaptability allows farce to evolve without losing its essence, offering new avenues for understanding its role in addressing social and political changes.

Laughter as a Social Equalizer: This study introduces the concept of laughter as a mechanism for social cohesion and collective identity. Farce's humor is not just for entertainment; it plays a crucial role in fostering dialogue and questioning societal structures. Humor in Shanghai farce has often functioned as a tool for critiquing social hierarchies and promoting egalitarian values, highlighting its deeper social significance. (Wang, D., 2018), (Li, S. X., 2019).

Adaptation to Modern Media: The study also reveals how Shanghai farce has successfully adapted to modern media platforms such as television and film, allowing the genre to maintain its relevance and cultural significance while reaching broader audiences. This adaptation demonstrates how traditional art forms can evolve with new technologies, bridging the gap between cultural heritage and modernity.

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