

An Introduction to Drum Rhythm on Peking Opera Stage

Abstract

Drum rhythm played by percussion instruments in Peking opera—by drums and gongs—refers to “Luo Gu Jing,” a record of the various percussion playing methods. The percussion instruments consist of a small wooden drum, a small gong, a large gong, a pair of cymbals and a pair of clappers. Drum rhythm in Peking opera is not an independent beat and meter but a rhythm sequence and /or pattern, which is also a *rhythm keeping* (or *rhythm processing*). Drum rhythm on the Peking opera stage also cannot independently order and refer to the performance processing. It therefore combines with the other performing elements such as performing gestures, performing props and costumes, performing background and even Venus. On the Peking opera stage, drum rhythm is rhythm processing or patterns (/sequences) which frame the communication happening on the stage. These rhythm patterns not only can control the interplay between all the other stage elements but also conduct, organize or facilitate the communication within their performing framework.

Linguists James Paul Gee in his *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (2001:10)¹ states that “Whenever we speak and write, we always and simultaneously construct or build up six areas of “reality”. And these six areas of “reality” are altogether called ‘building tasks’”. Compare with the building tasks of Discourse analysis, Drum rhythm is treated as a non-speech communicative system also engaged in the six building tasks: 1. The meaning or significance: drum rhythm into the building tasks can put forward the question: what and how makes the performance meaningful and significant? Drum rhythm on the stage cannot dependently make the performance on the stage meaningful and must connect with other performing methods (as gestures, props, and performing routines) to make the whole performance meaningful and going on; 2. Activities: Peking opera use drum rhythm to constitute and reconstitute their performing activities and practices. That is, drum rhythm can build up what the performance on the Peking opera stage is going on? 3. Identities and relationship: Peking opera use drum rhythm to engage actors and audiences into the performance on the stage. What relationships and identities seem to be relevant to the performing situation? How are these relationships and identities stabilized or transformed in the performance? That is in term of identities, activities, and relationships, what are relevant (and irrelevant) in the ongoing performance? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what ways? 4. Politics (the distribution of social goods): What social goods (e.g. status, power, aspects of gender, race, and class, or more narrowly defined social network and identities(Gee 2001:91) are relevant (and irrelevant) in the performance on the stage? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what way? 5. Connections: On Peking opera stage, drum rhythm can connect with (or disconnect with) ongoing performance. The question is how drum rhythm constructed and deconstruct these relationships on Peking opera

¹ James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, London and New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2001

stage? 6. Sign systems and knowledge: on Peking opera stage, drum rhythm connect other performing sign systems and make the whole performance going on. The questions are what sign systems are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation (e.g. speech, writing, imagines, and gestures)? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what way? Drum rhythm on Peking opera stage through the six building tasks to constitute relationships (actors, audiences and other performing methods, such as props, gestures and routine) within the performance. Drum rhythm can make us understand singing languages, performing routines, actors' thoughts, performing actions and gestures and the interaction on the stage.

I mainly aim to describe in this book the special semantics of drum rhythm, further to explore the time module on the stage as it pertains to Peking opera. In order to avoid misunderstanding, I will begin with laying out series of performing scenes and data to categorize and specifically explain them in detail. Once these data is described, the fixed limits, comparisons and correlations can be applied to define a method of systemic analysis of drum rhythm on the Peking opera stage. Such analysis in this book is an attempt to formulate the communicative and interactive function on Peking opera instead of in terms of "signifier" or "significant." Drum rhythm sequence uses completely different methods of articulation to transcend the written (or the speech system) and to form effective communication and interaction within the performing framework. Drum rhythm, apart from its primary role of musical accompaniment, also can be used to direct, conduct and narrate the interaction of the actors on stage. Drum rhythm, in the process of performance, first sets up a structure and then prompts, cues and guides the actors within this structure once it is established. Drum rhythm use it own semiotics system altogether to form communication and direct or guide the interaction on a stage. In Peking opera, drum rhythm first constructs a communicating space where other performing objects form relationships to each other and resonate with the experience and knowledge to communicate their innermost essence to the audience. Drum rhythm underlies two cores: first, of structure (spatiotemporal structure, communicative structure and etc.); secondly, of a semiotics system. The "structure" here can not divert from the representation of a semiotics system. And "significant" of drum rhythm is constantly changing, flexible and dynamic. People cannot find its signification in any stationary or rigid way.