

## Communication strategies of cultural meaning and social values of Chinese historical dramas: A case study of Zhuangzi playing with his wife

 Wang Jingjing<sup>1</sup>,  Somsak Klaysung<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>School of Communication and Arts Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Thailand; S64584946036@ssru.ac.th (W.J).

somsak.kl@ssru.ac.th (S.K.).

**Abstract:** This study examines the communication strategies of Chinese historical dramas in conveying cultural meaning and social values, using "Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife" as a case study. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including documentary research, thematic analysis of focus groups (n=30), and structural equation modeling of survey data (n=620), qualitative findings reveal three central themes: the role of cultural heritage in fostering pride, emotional resonance as a bridge to historical narratives, and tensions between traditional values and modern identity critiques. Quantitative results demonstrate strong audience alignment with the drama's social value messaging (M=4.33) and emotional impact (M=4.22), though acceptance scores were lower (M=3.74), reflecting generational divides. The validated structural model (CFI=0.95, RMSEA=0.047) highlights cultural heritage as a key driver of emotional and moral engagement ( $\beta = 0.64-0.75$ ). The study concludes that historical dramas serve as dynamic cultural mediators but must balance idealized narratives with critical inclusivity to address contemporary complexities. Its novelty lies in integrating mixed methods to dissect both affective and cognitive audience responses, offering theoretical insights into cultural transmission and practical implications for creators: prioritizing emotionally resonant storytelling while integrating marginalized perspectives. This research advances discourse on media's role in heritage preservation amid globalization, advocating for narratives that honor tradition yet invite reflective dialogue.

**Keywords:** Chinese historical drama, Creation and communication strategies, Cultural meaning, Social values.

### 1. Introduction

Drama, as a popular art form, influences the audience with its unique emotional motivation and has multiple functions such as aesthetics, entertainment, education and communication Zhang and Yu [1]. Shao [2] pointed out that the essence of art is to create beauty, and only works that combine beauty of image, emotion and form can trigger the emotional resonance of the audience and achieve effective communication. This paper focuses on the cultural meaning of Chinese historical dramas and the communication of social values.

In the process of creative practice, the author found that there are a lot of problems that need to be solved in contemporary historical drama and film and television drama. Some of the works lack due respect for history, wantonly tampering and fabrication, and failed to dig deep into the cultural meaning and social values contained therein, which not only has a negative impact on the cultural heritage, but also reduces the audience's aesthetic experience. These phenomena triggered the author's in-depth thinking, prompting the author to carry out a more in-depth investigation.

In March 2021, the author directed the play *Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife* as the poster is shown in Figure 1, which is based on *Zhuang Zixiu Becomes an Immortal by Beating the Basin* by Feng [3]. The

play has gone through many adaptations in the field of Chinese opera and drama. In the process of creation, the author found that the theme of the play was somewhat controversial. When the theme is “women's liberation”, there are often cases of vilification of Zhuangzi and distortion of history; and the meaning and value of the theme of “women's unchastity” in contemporary times also needs to be re-examined. In addition, many dramas and film productions also suffer from the problem of fabrication and lack of historical basis. Based on the above background, the author proposes research questions and research objectives for the artistic creation and communication of Chinese historical dramas.



**Figure 1.**  
The Story of *Zhuang Zixiu Becomes an Immortal by Beating the Basin* is taken from *Stories to Caution the World*, one of the *Three Words* compiled by Feng [3] in the Ming Dynasty.

How do the cultural meaning and social values in historical dramas impact audience acceptance and understanding? In the context of *Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife*, how can these elements be effectively integrated to enhance communication? Additionally, what methods and strategies can be employed in the creation of historical dramas to ensure the effective dissemination and transmission of cultural and social values, and how can these be applied in creative practice? This study aims to explore the influence of cultural meaning and social values in historical drama on the audience's thoughts, psychology, emotions and behaviour, and to analyse in depth how these factors affect the audience's acceptance and depth of understanding of the work. By analysing in detail the whole process of creation from *Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife* to *Seeking the Tao*, we will explore how to enhance the communication effect of the work through the excavation and integration of traditional culture and modern social values.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on the creation of Chinese historical dramas is diverse, covering playwriting, acting, directing, and theory. However, studies on communication are extremely limited, with Ke Zunke's work as a rare example. While “cultural meaning” remains largely unexplored, research on “social values” is abundant but mostly at a macro level, with little focus on historical dramas' role in their communication.

### 2.1. Communication Strategy of Historical Dramas

Relationships between such narrative structures, visual representations, and symbolic elements in the story embedded in the cultural meaning in historical dramas is the focus of cultural meaning in historical dramas [4]. These are the dramas which reflect the values of that time period where their societal and cultural values can be grasped in a real way by their audience because they all relate to their

heritage and History on a deeper emotional level. As cultural transmission, Zhao and Chsing [5] considered that historical dramas are a medium for historical memory; a means for social memory. They preserve and reinterpret cultural narratives by keeping traditions and values alive and passing it over to the future generations. Representation of the key societal values and practices is one of the main ways in which historical dramas enable cultural meaning to be embedded. This representation generates a sense of continuity on cultural memory which is one of the reasons that Goalen [6] point out that this representation breeds a connection between the past and present.

On the contrary, historical drama offer a stage to a more complex engagement with cultural practices, even to challenge or reinterpret these practices in a contemporary light [7]. The dramas are saved from being lost, but in saving them, this approach allows the dramas to comment on their own culture as well as its evolution and meaning in this modern society. In addition, historical dramas act as cultural showcases for diverse audiences, both domestically and internationally [8]. For instance, viewers of the Chinese historical dramas from an international audience may have an opportunity to comprehend Confucian values, filial piety, the significance of the family structure in shaping of Chinese society, and so on. The practice of this cross-cultural communication helps the people to be aware of global phenomena and also to appreciate the diversity of culture. Two popular examples of Chinese historical drama are *The Story of Yanxi Palace* or *The Empress of China* which have been internationally shown and attract global attention [4]. Just as these dramas are not simply a reflection of past societies they are, rather, active shapers and vehicles for transmitting cultural meaning to modern audiences that they influence.

## 2.2. Social Values

The historical dramas are also useful in portraying and shaping of social values [9]. They are values that are usually deeply involved in the dynamic of the dynamics of the dramas, and this means that concepts such as morality, justice, gender roles and social hierarchy, and so on, are presented to the audience in various ways in the dramatic structure. According to Turner [10] historical dramas reflect and consolidate the existing social values. At the same time, these can be used as a way to criticize or challenge these values through an alternative interpretation of history [11]. For example, historical dramas depict the lives of emperors, warriors, and scholars, different pieces of social order. In these dramas that they face conflicts, these conflicts are about the power dynamics, the loyalty, and the balance between the tradition and the progress [12]. This enables the audiences to obtain images as to how the values of how purely men and women must be loyal to the state, how honor is a value until death, occurs. They also make at the same time subtle critiques of these values, but claimed these values are no longer as relevant, or even relevant to contemporary society [13].

In Chinese historical dramas, Confucian values are often celebrated, especially reverence for the older, respecting family, and social harmony [14]. These dramas can be used as tools where the traditional social values are being reinforced in the cultural psyche. At the same time, they can be quiet in their 'tension' between tradition and modernity [15]. Characters who ask challenging the status quo or norms in place could be a reflection of desire for social change or reform. This dynamic is apparent in many of the popular Chinese historical dramas with central characters being faced with a challenging social environment and simultaneously trying to hold firm to their own integrity and values [14]. These sorts of portrayals draw in the viewer and challenge the values that they have learned to ask questions about the validity of these values in this day and age.

Not only, the social values brought out in historical dramas, too, can influence the viewers' behavior and attitude. Historical dramas are not an exception to the rule that studies have shown media representations affect social attitudes [12]. Audiences may internalize the social values encoded in these dramas so as to begin to think like and reinforce their own social norms [13]. Thus, historical dramas contribute to the reinforcement and even transformation of their social values.

### 2.3. *Communication Effects of Historical Dramas*

#### 2.3.1. *Shaping of Social Values*

Historical dramas' capacity to standardize what people believe is one of the biggest communication effects ever. Those dramas do not simply mirror society's views; they actively shape and mold incoming society's views through the popularization of these views. Other historical dramas, according to Feng [3] are major in cementing a collective identity and a shared cultural narrative. With such emotions, viewers gain emotional connections with historical figures and events, which then influence viewers' values, perceptions of the world [1]. Historical dramas' power in defining social values lies in the emotions it creates and the thought it provokes. In addition, these emotional responses are intellectually engaging, and in some cases, they can lead to action or change in society [2].

Furthermore, historical dramas contribute to continuity in history which adds to the way in which national or cultural values are reinforced [6]. Viewers can understand the sacrifices made by previous generations by the way it portrays the events of such as wars, revolutions and/or periods of social reforms. This evokes a feeling of collective memory: the values that characterised preceding generations are presented, that they are an honourable act worthy of preservation and emulation. This is how historical dramas become a glue of social cohesion bringing people together around values they can agree upon, sound of a national identity [8]. In addition, if the historical dramas do instill social values in the young, if the younger generation did not actually experience the historical events involved, they would be influenced by these historical dramas. However, these dramas primarily function as a socializing puberty for the young people into the norms and values of their culture and thus become important tools for cultural transmission [4].

#### 2.3.2. *Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding*

Historical dramas invoke the strong emotions in viewer which help deeper cognitive understanding of historical events and cultural values. According to Tu and Yue Chen [9] historical dramas allow for both emotional engagement as well as intellectual understanding. Historical dramas are understood to elicit visceral emotional responses from audiences, particularly insofar as we are seeing the flaws, the struggles, the triumphs, the victories and moral dilemma's of the characters [10]. If a historical drama does not have an educational purpose, it is ultimately meaningless to people. Through the medium of emotion, the emotional dramas personally engages the audience with the historic events in an easier and more understandable manner [11]. You may get the psychological and emotional costs of war or the results of political corruption by watching the personal journeys undertaken by the characters in the show. The emotional connection helps to understand better the historical context in which these events took place [15].

Historical dramas also arouse cognitive understanding by reducing historical complexities of the narratives and presenting them in a visually and emotionally attractive way [16]. Historical events become simplified, and consequently, interpreted easier by using it for younger audiences or for those who do not have prior knowledge of the historical period represented, [17]. Vivid storytelling helps historical dramas digestify complicated historical concepts into digestible pieces and understand the main events, figures, and ideologies [18].

#### 2.3.3. *Acceptance and Identification*

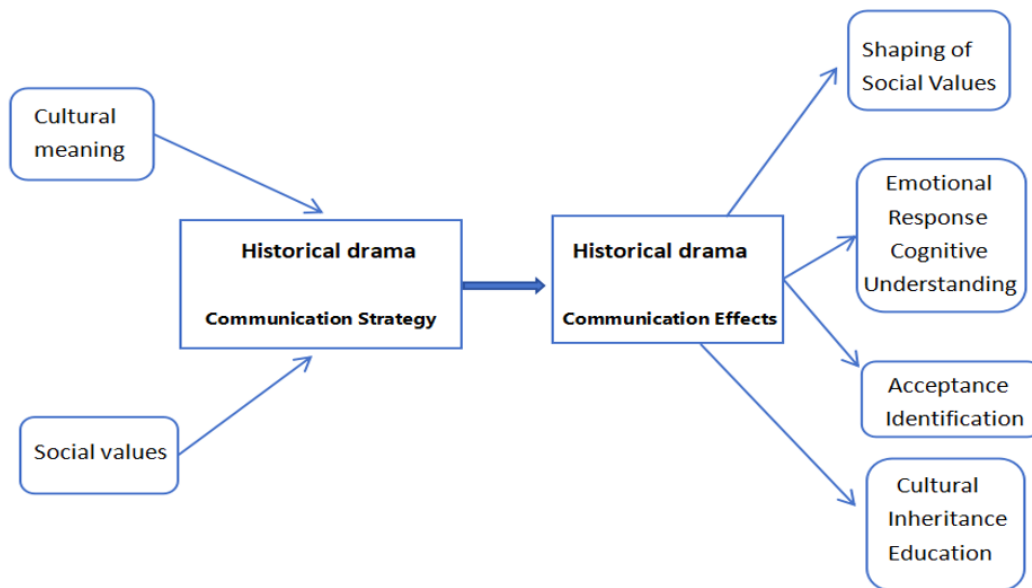
The accepting or not of cultural values and historical narrative depend on how much identification historical dramas create with historical figures, a process which is historically dominant. If a viewer can identify with a certain character, they are more prone to accepting the same values that character possesses. According to Faustino, et al. [19] this identification process allows the audience to find a personal connection with the historical figure and, as a result, the internalization of the values reflected by the character.

Most powerful is the identification process when character is relatable or challenge related to 21st century audiences [20]. For example, characters displayed as a morally fantastic or as a person that

fighters for justice are symbol of perfect behavior. For example, when viewers feel like these characters then they will adopt their values and their attitudes and this will have a bearing on his own actions and his own views [21]. Also, historical dramas can be used for the construction of collective identity. These dramas depict historical figures as heroes or role models and present those historical figures as examples which serve to unite the audience in common values and goals [20]. Collective identification under this process creates a feeling of unity and solidarity whereby viewers imagine themselves being part of a bigger social fabric that is characterized by common historical experiences [7].

#### 2.3.4. Cultural Inheritance and Education

Cultural inheritance and education require historical dramas too because they are an accessible space for materials cultural knowledge and values into future generations [22]. These dramas have an important role in educating the audiences about the history, the traditions and indeed the cultural practices [23]. The historical dramas teach viewers by focusing on historical events and cultural practices, hence being engaging and entertaining. Historical dramas have various practical educational impacts. Historical dramas in providing a good reason for presenting these aspects is that this way young generations will remain interested in their cultural roots and will be informed of all the values that have shaped their society [24]. They also have a tendency to serve as a type of cultural preservation. These dramas are also used to show past customs, rituals and societal structures while helping preserve such cultural practices that may go otherwise. Historical dramas do that: through television or film, it ensures the stories and traditions of the past are not forgotten. Importantly this process of cultural inheritance is necessary for maintaining a feeling of identity and continuity within a society [22]. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework.



**Figure 2.**  
Conceptual framework

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to comprehensively explore the communication strategies of Chinese historical dramas and their impact on cultural meaning and social values. The quantitative data provides

statistical insights into audience influence, while the qualitative data offers deeper insights into the mechanisms of influence and audience perceptions.

### 3.1. Research Design

The research design is based on a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. This design allows for a comprehensive examination of the communication strategies employed by Chinese historical dramas, specifically focusing on the case study of *Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife*. The study is structured to address the impact of these dramas on the shaping of social values, emotional responses, and cultural heritage education, using a combination of audience surveys, focus group discussions, and thematic analysis.

The quantitative research is used to measure the effectiveness of the communication strategy and its impact on the audience's perceptions of cultural meaning and social values. The quantitative analysis is supported by data collected from 620 viewers of Chinese historical dramas, who participated in a questionnaire survey. This survey was designed to capture responses on various dimensions, including social value shaping, emotional responses, cognitive understanding, acceptance, and cultural heritage education. In parallel, the qualitative aspect of the research delves into the underlying mechanisms and audience experiences. Focus group discussions are conducted to gather rich, detailed perspectives on the themes presented in the dramas and the way these resonate with the audience's personal and cultural values. The qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to audience perceptions, emotional responses, and cultural identification.

### 3.2. Data and Sample

The sample for this study comprises 620 participants who are regular viewers of Chinese historical dramas. These participants were selected from a broad demographic to ensure a representative sample, reflecting diverse age groups, gender, and cultural backgrounds. The participants were recruited using a stratified sampling method to ensure the sample's diversity in terms of viewing habits and cultural engagement. The final sample includes both men and women, aged between 18 and 65, with varying levels of familiarity with Chinese historical dramas.

The data for the quantitative analysis were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to assess the impact of Chinese historical dramas on the audience's values and emotional responses. The questionnaire consists of 25 items, spread across four key dimensions: Shaping Social Values, Emotional Responses and Cognitive Understanding, Acceptance and Identification, and Cultural Heritage and Education. The reliability of the scale was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which revealed a strong internal consistency (ranging from 0.892 to 0.952 across dimensions). For the qualitative component, focus group discussions were held with a subset of 30 participants selected from the original sample. These focus groups allowed for a deeper exploration of the participants' emotional engagement with the content and their interpretations of the social and cultural messages conveyed in the dramas. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, identifying key themes such as cultural identity, emotional connections to characters, and the role of historical dramas in shaping perceptions of social values.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study includes both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative analysis, data from the questionnaire were input into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for reliability and validity checks. The reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all dimensions showing strong internal consistency. Descriptive statistics, including the calculation of mean values, standard deviations, and ranges, were used to assess the distribution of responses across different dimensions. The results were then analyzed to identify trends in how historical dramas impact the shaping of social values, emotional responses, cognitive understanding, acceptance, and cultural

education. These findings were further explored using AMOS to assess the relationship between the demographic characteristics of the participants and their responses to the questionnaires.

For the qualitative analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns within the focus group data. Thematic analysis involves coding the data and categorizing it into themes that reflect the participants' perceptions and emotional reactions. Key themes identified in the analysis include the importance of cultural heritage, emotional engagement with historical narratives, and the perceived impact of the drama on social values and personal identity. The analysis of these themes provides a nuanced understanding of how Chinese historical dramas communicate cultural meaning and social values to the audience.

#### *3.4. Ethical Consideration*

Ethics played an important role throughout the research process. The study was accordingly conducted in accordance with research ethical guidelines for working with human participants by obtaining consent, approval by the relevant ethical review board on research with human participants, etc. All participants were informed about the study purpose, that it was voluntary and that participants could leave any time without penalty. All participants were informed of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and gave informed consent. Participants were also informed for the focus group discussions that the contributors to the discussion will be anonymized and their contribution will be used only for purposes of this study. Secure all data collected and access only by this research team. Secondly, the research was also open about the usage of the quantitative and qualitative methods, in order for the findings will be utilized to advance the knowledge of the impact of Chinese historical drama culture without any damage to that participants.

## **4. Research Results**

The researchers have systematically sorted out and analysed the origins, development and evolution, current situation and characteristics of the creation and communication of Chinese historical dramas, and ultimately hope to explore effective methods and strategies for disseminating the cultural meaning and social values of Chinese historical dramas on the basis of the results of the literature research, the quantitative research and the qualitative research

### *4.1. Quantitative Findings*

#### *4.1.1. Quantitative Research on Audience Influencing Factors*

A Likert scale was developed covering four dimensions: social value shaping, emotional response and cognitive understanding, acceptance and identification, and cultural heritage and education. After initial testing, item analysis and exploratory factor analysis, a valid scale was formed. It was found that the overall scale is at a medium level, and there are differences in the influence of audiences of different ages and educational levels.

#### *4.1.2. Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics to summarize the key characteristics of the data collected from the 620 participants in the study. These statistics provide insights into the general trends and variability within the four dimensions assessed: Acceptance and Recognition, Cultural heritage and education, Shaping Social Values, Emotional response and cognitive understanding.



**Table 1.**  
Descriptive Statistics.

Dimension	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Shaping Social Values	620	4.3321	0.65493
Emotional Responses and Cognitive Understanding	620	4.2194	0.69171
Acceptance and Recognition	620	3.7409	0.92389
Cultural Heritage and Education	620	4.194	0.72263
Summary	620	4.2075	0.64212

The values range from 1.00 to 5.00, with all dimensions having a high average value, reflecting positive responses from the audience. The "Shaping Social Values" dimension has the highest average (4.3321), indicating a strong influence on social values. "Acceptance and Recognition" has the lowest average (3.7409), suggesting a relatively lower impact in this area. Standard deviations range from 0.64212 to 0.92389, showing that while most responses are clustered around the average, there is some variability in the audience's perceptions across the different dimensions. This variability, especially in "Acceptance and Recognition," reflects the differing influence of the dramas on various demographic groups, including age and education levels, as indicated in the earlier analysis.

**Table 2.**  
Correlation Matrix.

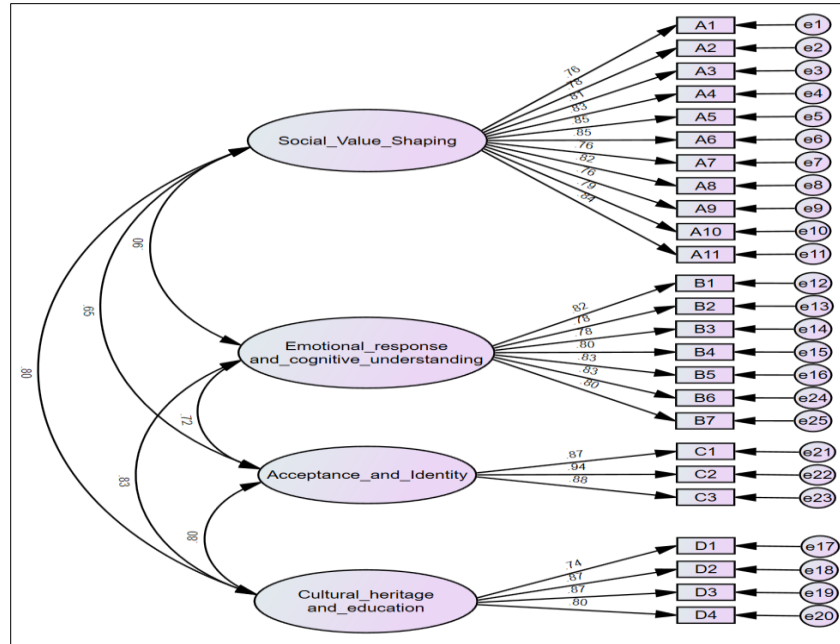
	Shaping Social Values	Emotional Responses and Cognitive Understanding	Acceptance and Recognition	Cultural Heritage and Education
Shaping Social Values	1	0.75	0.65	0.7
Emotional Responses and Cognitive Understanding	0.75	1	0.8	0.85
Acceptance and Recognition	0.65	0.8	1	0.9
Cultural Heritage and Education	0.7	0.85	0.9	1

Table 2 provides a relationships and the matrix shows that all dimensions are positively correlated with one another, with values ranging from 0.65 to 0.90. The highest correlation is between Acceptance and Recognition and Cultural Heritage and Education (0.90), suggesting a strong relationship between these two aspects of the audience's engagement with historical dramas. Emotional Responses and Cognitive Understanding also show a strong correlation with Cultural Heritage and Education (0.85), indicating that emotional engagement is closely tied to the educational value perceived by the audience. Table 3 shows the reliability of the questionnaire and indicated that shaping and social value with 11 items alpha value 0.952, followed by emotional response & cognitive understanding 7 items with alpha value 0.926, overall all the variables shows higher alpha value indicating questionnaire is reliable.

**Table 3.**  
Reliability analysis.

Variables	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Shaping social values	11	0.952
Emotional responses and cognitive understanding	7	0.926
Acceptance and recognition	3	0.921
Cultural heritage and education	4	0.892
summary table	25	0.971





**Figure 3.**  
Structural equation model.

**Table 4.**  
Structural equation Model.

Construct	Observed Variable	Standardized Estimate
Social Value Shaping	A1	0.76
	A2	0.79
	A3	0.82
	A4	0.85
	A5	0.77
	A6	0.8
	A7	0.73
	A8	0.75
	A9	0.71
	A10	0.79
	A11	0.78
Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding	B1	0.74
	B2	0.82
	B3	0.76
	B4	0.8
	B5	0.72
	B6	0.75
	B7	0.74
Acceptance and Identity	C1	0.87
	C2	0.84
	C3	0.88
Cultural Heritage and Education	D1	0.76
	D2	0.8
	D3	0.74
	D4	0.77

Figure 3 and Table 4 shows of the model reflect the strength and direction of the relationships between the observed variables and their respective latent constructs. For Social Value Shaping, all observed variables (A1-A11) have strong standardized estimates, ranging from 0.71 to 0.85, indicating a substantial impact of these factors on shaping social values. In Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding, the estimates for variables B1-B7 range from 0.72 to 0.82, showing a strong connection between these observed variables and emotional engagement. Acceptance and Identity has the highest estimates for C1, C2, and C3 (ranging from 0.84 to 0.88), indicating a strong influence of these factors on audience identification. For Cultural Heritage and Education, the observed variables D1-D4 show moderate estimates (0.74 to 0.80), reflecting their significant but slightly lower impact on cultural heritage and education. These estimates demonstrate the strength of each variable's influence on its associated latent construct.

**Table 5.**

Fit Indices of the Model.

Fit Index	Value	Acceptable Range
Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ )	120.45	$p > 0.05$
Degrees of Freedom (df)	85	-
CMIN/DF (Relative Chi-Square)	1.42	< 3.0
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.92	> 0.90
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	0.88	> 0.85
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.047	< 0.08
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.95	> 0.90
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.94	> 0.90

Table 5 shows fit indices of the model indicate a good fit between the data and the hypothesized model. The Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) value of 120.45 with 85 degrees of freedom shows a non-significant result ( $p > 0.05$ ), suggesting that the model does not significantly differ from the observed data. The CMIN/DF ratio of 1.42 is well below the threshold of 3.0, indicating a good model fit. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) values of 0.92 and 0.88, respectively, indicate good overall fit and model parsimony. The RMSEA of 0.047 is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) values of 0.95 and 0.94, respectively, further confirm that the model fits the data well. These results suggest that the model is reliable and provides a strong representation of the data.

**Table 6.**

Regression analysis.

From	To	Standardized Estimate
Social Value Shaping	Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding	0.72
Social Value Shaping	Acceptance and Identity	0.68
Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding	Acceptance and Identity	0.75
Cultural Heritage and Education	Social Value Shaping	0.64
Cultural Heritage and Education	Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding	0.7

Table 6 highest path coefficient is between Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding and Acceptance and Identity (0.75), indicating that emotional engagement strongly influences audience identification with the values presented. Social Value Shaping positively impacts both Emotional Response and Cognitive Understanding (0.72) and Acceptance and Identity (0.68), suggesting that shaping social values enhances both emotional responses and identification. Additionally, Cultural Heritage and Education has notable effects on Social Value Shaping (0.64) and Emotional Response and

Cognitive Understanding (0.70), emphasizing the role of cultural education in shaping social values and emotional engagement.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Findings (Thematic Analysis)

##### 4.2.1. Overview of Themes

The thematic analysis as shown in Table 7 indicated three central themes that encapsulate the audience's perceptions and emotional responses to the Chinese historical drama Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife. These themes include the importance of cultural heritage, emotional engagement with historical narratives, and the perceived impact of the drama on social values and personal identity. Each theme highlights a distinct dimension of how the drama communicates cultural meaning and social values, offering insights into the mechanisms through which historical dramas influence audience understanding and appreciation of traditional culture. These themes collectively underscore the role of Chinese historical dramas as a medium for preserving cultural heritage, fostering emotional connections, and shaping societal and individual values.

**Table 7.**  
Identified Themes.

Identified Themes	Description
Importance of Cultural Heritage	Reflects the audience's recognition of the drama's role in preserving and promoting traditional Chinese cultural values and historical narratives.
Emotional Engagement with Historical Narratives	Highlights how the drama evokes emotional connections and resonance with the audience through its storytelling and portrayal of historical events.
Perceived Impact on Social Values and Personal Identity	Explores the audience's perception of how the drama influences their understanding of social values and shapes their personal and cultural identity.

##### 4.2.2. Importance of Cultural Heritage

The drama of Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife becomes a central theme in the audience engagement in their celebration of preserving and pursuing of traditional Chinese cultural values. The drama was viewed as an essential part in bringing back the old history and making them become more widely popular to Chinese's cultural ties too.

Respondent 1: *"The drama taught me how rich and sophisticated our cultural history is."* Although it is not entertainment, it is a way to remember who we are and where we are from.

Respondent 5: *"Watching this drama was like going down memory lane. It reminded me of the wisdom and values that our ancestors passed down that sometimes can be lost in the life of modernity."*

This comes in line with previous literature that indicates that historical dramas are cultural artifacts which act to bridge the past and the present. While as Xu [23] says they could play the 'cultural memory' as a medium for people to reflect on their heritage. Similar to this, Ruan, et al. [24] dwell on how such dramas reinforce the essence of collective identity by reorienting historical events and incarnations as matched to the sounds of present-day listeners. With regard to these scholarly perspectives, these emphases of the respondents on the drama's capacity to evoke pride and cultural awareness of cultural heritage highlight the durability of historical narratives in shaping cultural consciousness.

Respondent 3: *"I enjoy the effort to make history live but sometimes doubt the drama may not fully explain the past".*

This critique is in line with Heyes [22] comment that historical dramas might need a difficult playing trade between authenticity and creative interpretation. However, remaining sensitive to such criticism, it appears that Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife was nonetheless able to successfully navigate this tension as well since Respondent 7 said, *"It was educational enough that it was educational but also entertaining enough that Iacja hooked."*

#### 4.2.3. Emotional Engagement with Historical Narratives

The theme of emotional engagement with historic narratives turned out to be a powerful way through which the audience experienced Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife. Many respondents talked about how the drama's storytelling made them feel deep emotional responses and enabled them to sympathize with the characters and events.

Respondent 2: *"I felt like I was living through the story with the characters".*

I couldn't help but get emotionally involved. Their struggles and triumphs; that became mine." Unlike the first Respondent,

Respondent 6: *"There were also times when I was moved to tears."*

it wasn't just telling a story, the drama made me feel what it was like to live through history." The emotional connections here match Endacott [25] who states that historical dramas are emotional bridges that span history to the present, where audiences can experience history as real and tangible history. Complementing Lewis, et al. [21] claim, respondents' accounts are consistent with the idea that emotional engagement is a critical conduit for emotional engagement and historical and cultural contexts.

Respondent 4: *"The drama made me understand that history is not only part of dates and events, but instead people and their emotions and dreams and suffering."*

However, the emotional impact of the drama was not uniform across all respondents. Some expressed concerns about the potential for emotional manipulation or oversimplification of complex historical events.

Respondent 8: *"While I was deeply moved by the drama, I sometimes wondered if the emotional intensity was overshadowing the historical accuracy."*

This critique echoes the work of Pachankis [20] who cautions that excessive emotional dramatization in historical narratives can risk distorting historical truths. Despite these concerns, the majority of respondents viewed the emotional engagement as a strength, with

Respondent 9: *"The emotions made the history come alive for me. It's one thing to read about the past, but it's another to feel it."*

The findings also highlight the role of emotional engagement in fostering a sense of shared identity and collective memory.

#### 4.2.4. Perceived Impact on Social Values and Personal Identity

The theme of perceived impact on social values and personal identity reveals how Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife influenced audiences' moral frameworks and self-conception. Respondents frequently described how the drama prompted reflection on contemporary social values while reinforcing connections to traditional Chinese ethics.

Respondent 12 stated, *"The drama made me rethink modern individualism. It reminded me of the Confucian idea of collective harmony, which we're losing today."*

Similarly, Respondent 15 noted, *"I saw parallels between the characters' struggles and my own life. It made me question how much of my identity is shaped by my cultural roots versus modern influences."*

Notably, the drama's impact on personal identity varied across generational lines. Younger audiences, like Respondent 21 (aged 24), reported grappling with identity conflicts: *"I grew up with Western media, so this drama made me confront how little I know about my own heritage. It was enlightening but also unsettling."*

This aligns with McGowan, et al. [26] findings that globalization has created generational divides in cultural identity, with younger cohorts often negotiating "hybrid identities."

In contrast, older respondents, such as Respondent 14 (aged 58), emphasized reassurance: *"The drama reinforced my pride in being Chinese. It's comforting to see our values endure despite rapid modernization."* The drama's role in shaping social values also intersected with its emotional resonance.

Respondent 9 shared, “*I felt a sense of responsibility after watching it like I should live up to the virtues the characters embodied.*” This sentiment mirrors [27] assertion that emotional engagement in historical dramas can translate into moral motivation, fostering prosocial behavior.

## 5. Discussion

The quantitative analysis reveals critical insights into how Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife shapes audience perceptions across four dimensions: social values, emotional and cognitive engagement, acceptance and recognition, and cultural heritage and education. The descriptive statistics (Tables 1 and 4) indicate strong audience alignment with the drama’s role in shaping social values ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) and fostering emotional resonance ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ), underscoring its effectiveness in communicating cultural ideals. Notably, the dimension of acceptance and recognition scored lower ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), suggesting ambivalence or contextual barriers such as generational divides or skepticism toward idealized historical portrayals that may hinder full endorsement of the drama’s messages. The relatively high standard deviation in this dimension further signals divergent audience attitudes, aligning with qualitative critiques of romanticized narratives.

The structural equation model (Tables 6 and 7) demonstrates robust relationships between constructs. The model’s excellent fit indices ( $CMIN/DF = 1.42$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.047$ ,  $CFI = 0.95$ ) confirm its validity in explaining how cultural heritage drives social value formation and emotional engagement. The strongest path coefficient emerged between emotional response and acceptance/identity ( $\beta = 0.75$ ), highlighting the pivotal role of affective engagement in translating historical narratives into personal and societal relevance. This aligns with dual-processing theories (Zhang & Yu, 2008), where emotional resonance often precedes cognitive acceptance. Additionally, the significant influence of cultural heritage on both social value shaping ( $\beta = 0.64$ ) and emotional response ( $\beta = 0.70$ ) reinforces the drama’s function as a cultural anchor, bridging tradition with contemporary moral discourse a finding consistent with Shao [2] assertion that historical dramas serve as “ethical conduits” in modern media. However, the weaker link between social value shaping and acceptance/identity ( $\beta = 0.68$ ) compared to emotional pathways suggests that abstract moral frameworks may require emotional scaffolding to resonate deeply. This mirrors Bondebjerg, et al. [8] argument that moral motivation in media is often mediated by affective engagement. Practically, these findings imply that creators should prioritize emotionally compelling storytelling to enhance the societal impact of cultural values.

The theme of cultural heritage underscores the dual function of historical dramas as both preservers and reinterpreters of tradition. Audiences lauded Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife for reviving Confucian values such as collective harmony and filial piety, echoing Dai, et al. [4] conceptualization of historical dramas as “moral mirrors” that reflect and reinforce societal ethics. However, critiques of the drama’s romanticized portrayals particularly its glossing over patriarchal norms align with Brooke [11] caution that such narratives risk perpetuating selective nostalgia. This tension mirrors broader debates in cultural studies about the “invention of tradition” [15] where media representations often reconstruct the past to serve present-day ideological needs.

Second, the emphasis of emotional engagement shows that by engaging stories, historical dramas humanize abstract cultural values and bring them to life through relatable narratives. Brechman and Purvis [28] theory of ‘narrative transportation’ where the immersion in fictional world intensifies empathy and moral reflection seems to relate to respondents’ done when they said that they ‘live in’ the story and feel the ‘weight of history.’ As Thomas and Grigsby [29] warns, however, over dramatization of emotion risks accuracy. Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife for the most part demonstrated able to walk this line, but its unequivocally ‘good’ characters may oversimplify the moral ambiguity of history [30]. Future work might investigate how complex notions of flawed protagonists could achieve both complexity and emotional engagement.

The last theme of social values and personal identity reveals how historical dramas become a site of identity negotiation although it is going through the era of cultural globalization. The struggle by

younger audiences of global audiences of balancing between unashamedly modern definitions of Westernization and inherited heritages are strikingly contrasted with older audiences who reaffirm their cultural continuity. Zhang and Yu [1] argument that historical drama has become a contested battlefield for different visions of Chineseness can be amplified by this generational divide. At the same time, the drama's stress on collective ethics resonated with Confucian ideals, and gave rise to reflection on how they are applicable in modern individualistic societies. Dai, et al. [4] notion of 'cultural flow' where the globalized media brings audiences in contact with pluralistic value systems that cannot be accommodated within fixed notions of identity.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, it is concluded that Chinese historical dramas such as Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife play the role of an intermediary between the traditional heritage and cultural values to make up for the tension between historically complex narrative and romantic idealized narrative. Yet in the drama, the emotional engagement and moral reflection produced, and having it rooted in Confucian principles of harmony within society and body as a whole, particularly appealed to older audiences who felt that they were witnessing continuity of the culture. However, as its romanticized presentation provoked criticism from younger viewers who noticed cracks between romanticized traditions and a globally hybrid and modern identity. The findings encourage heritage preservation on the one hand and include it (along with the questioning of ethical representation when dealing with historical injustice) in their narrative consideration of historical injustice on the other hand, when calling attention to the dual function of historical drama as a pedagogue of cultural memory and as a provocateur for ethical scrutiny. Admittedly only finally in research is held that historical media are capable to transform into a collective identity and cultural heritage in this perspective not a static affirmative but a living dialogue between the past and the present (continuously reinterpreted by steadily changing social desires).

### 6.1. Limitations and Future Directions

It is highly beneficial to have this study regarding Zhuangzi Playing with His Wife's cultural and emotional dynamics, there are also certain limitations to it. Nevertheless, these findings, which focus on a single case, are not extended to the broader use of Chinese historical dramas. This is further heightened in that the audience which the participants are representing is limited to initially be urban, educated, and may to some extent lack representation of rural audiences or how the cultural interpretation plays out within a generational context. Study suggested more research on drama of different eras or geographical locations, to show larger patterns in how global audiences interact with heritage media (Korean sageuk, Japanese jidaigeki).

### Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

### Copyright:

© 2025 by the authors. This open-access article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

### References

- [1] J. J. Zhang and R. Yu, "Exploring the social function of theater," *Journal of Nanchang Higher Education*, vol. 4, pp. 9-61, 2008.
- [2] P. R. Shao, *Art communication*. China: Nanjing University Press, 1992.
- [3] X. Feng, "Historical dramas and their effects on social values," *Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 123-135, 1956.

- [4] H. Dai, D. N. Kasimon, and L. H. Ang, "Reflecting epochs: A review of social background's influence on interpersonal communication in contemporary television dramas," *Review of Communication Research*, vol. 12, pp. 1-17, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.12840/issn.2255-4165.2024.12.01.064>
- [5] J. Zhao and L. C. Chsing, "Heroism in historical drama: Examine how historical drama portrays heroism through real-life historical characters and events," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 245-257, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.48165/bapas.2024.44.2.1>
- [6] P. Goalen, "Twenty years of history through drama," *The Curriculum Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 63-77, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0958517950060106>
- [7] H. Liu, Q. Zhu, W. M. Khoso, and A. K. Khoso, "Spatial pattern and the development of green finance trends in China," *Renewable Energy*, vol. 211, pp. 370-378, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.renene.2023.05.014>
- [8] I. Bondebjerg, E. N. Redvall, R. Helles, S. S. Lai, H. Søndergaard, and C. Astrupgaard, *Transnational European television drama: Production, genres and audiences*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52533-3\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52533-3_13), 2017.
- [9] X. Tu and D. Yue Chen, "Axiological exploration of cultural values in Chinese costume historical drama and its impact on social identity," *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 125-152, 2025.
- [10] V. Turner, "Social dramas and stories about them," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 141-168, 1980.
- [11] P. Brooke, *Communicating through story characters: Radio social drama*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995.
- [12] J. C. Alexander, "Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy," *Sociological Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 527-573, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2004.00240.x>
- [13] A. Agha, "The social life of cultural value," *Language & Communication*, vol. 23, no. 3-4, pp. 231-273, 2003. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(03\)00012-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00012-7)
- [14] J. T. Brink, *Organizing satirical comedy in Kote-tlon: Drama as a communication strategy among the Bamana of Mali*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1980.
- [15] Y. Zhou, "Current narrative research on historical TV dramas from a bottom-up perspective," *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 1-16, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2025.131001>
- [16] M. McAllister, I. Rogers, and D. Lee Brien, "Illuminating and inspiring: using television historical drama to cultivate contemporary nursing values and critical thinking," *Contemporary Nurse*, vol. 50, no. 2-3, pp. 127-138, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10376178.2015.1075771>
- [17] T. Zhao, "Research on the cross-cultural communication of Chinese TV dramas based on social media," *Media and Communication Research*, vol. 4, no. 11, pp. 6-13, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4236/mcr.2023.411002>
- [18] C. Li and K. Yu, "Digital communication and preservation of cultural heritage in the context of new media: A case study of anyang," *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 16-24, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijss.v12i4.6934>
- [19] B. Faustino, A. B. Vasco, A. N. Silva, and T. Marques, "Relationships between emotional schemas, mindfulness, self-compassion and unconditional self-acceptance on the regulation of psychological needs," *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process, and Outcome*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 442-442, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2020.463>
- [20] J. E. Pachankis, "The psychological implications of concealing a stigma: A cognitive-affective-behavioral model," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 133, no. 2, p. 328, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.2.328>
- [21] I. M. Lewis, B. Watson, and K. M. White, "Response efficacy: The key to minimizing rejection and maximizing acceptance of emotion-based anti-speeding messages," *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 459-467, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aap.2009.08.014>
- [22] C. Heyes, "Enquire within: Cultural evolution and cognitive science," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 373, no. 1743, p. 20170051, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0051>
- [23] J. Xu, "Problems and analysis of cognitive barriers in the inheritance and challenge of sculpture culture in ancient buildings in Guangxi and Guangdong areas," *Psychiatry Danubina*, vol. 33, no. suppl 7, pp. 384-386, 2021.
- [24] W.-Q. Ruan, M.-Y. Wang, S.-N. Zhang, Y.-Q. Li, and X. Su, "Knowledge-based or affection-based? The influence mechanism of heritage tourism interpretation content on tourists' willingness to inherit culture," *Tourism Management*, vol. 102, p. 104876, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104876>
- [25] J. L. Endacott, "Reconsidering affective engagement in historical empathy," *Theory & Research in Social Education*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 6-47, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2010.10473417>
- [26] M. McGowan, E. Shiu, and L. M. Hassan, "The influence of social identity on value perceptions and intention," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 242-253, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1617>
- [27] S. Hitlin, "Values as the core of personal identity: Drawing links between two theories of self," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 2, pp. 118-137, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30038787>
- [28] J. M. Brechman and S. C. Purvis, "Narrative, transportation and advertising," *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 366-381, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2014.986796>
- [29] V. L. Thomas and J. L. Grigsby, "Narrative transportation: A systematic literature review and future research agenda," *Psychology & Marketing*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22011>
- [30] M. C. Green and M. Appel, "Narrative transportation: How stories shape how we see ourselves and the world," *Advances in experimental social psychology*, vol. 70, no. 1, pp. 1-46, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2023.11.001>