



## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JIAO JUYIN'S "MENTAL IMAGE THEORY" FOR THE ROLE CREATION OF SPOKEN DRAMA ACTORS

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This study takes the character "Vera" in the play "And Then There Were None" as an example to analyze the significance of the "Mental Image Theory" in character creation. **Objective:** To explore the significance of Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" in shaping characters for stage actors in drama. **Methods:** 1. Literature review, systematically organizing Jiao Juyin's views on the "Mental Image Theory". 2. Interviews with professors to obtain reliable theoretical support. 3. Observation, immersing in the production team of \*And Then There Were None\*, observing actors' process of portraying "Vera," and analyzing how the "Mental Image Theory" aids actors in character development. **Conclusion:** By applying the "Mental Image Theory", the author successfully created the character "Vera". The "Mental Image Theory" not only offers actors a method to understand and integrate into a role from the inside out and in a comprehensive way, but also greatly enhances the authenticity and appeal of the performance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" is a significant achievement in modern Chinese dramatic theory and represents a Sinicized development of the Stanislavski performance system. It requires actors to begin from within, establish a "Mental Image(Xin Xiang)", and ultimately embody their characters, achieving a state of unity between form and spirit on stage (Jiaxu, 2024)<sup>[1]</sup> Current academic research on the "Mental Image Theory" has primarily focused on its theoretical origins comparisons with the Stanislavski system or its application in dance performance. However, there remains a lack of systematic exploration into how the "Mental Image(Xin Xiang)" specifically guides Spoken Drama actors through the entire process from textual analysis to stage realization. This gap not only reflects an academic shortcoming but also directly points to practical challenges in performance creation: when confronting psychologically complex characters, actors often struggle to effectively bridge internal experience and external expression, resulting in emotional overuse or mechanical imitation. Taking the character portrayal of Vera Claythorne in the play *And Then There Were None* as a case study, this paper systematically analyzes the dynamic process by which the "Mental Image(Xin Xiang)" evolves from inception to concrete embodiment. By examining how actors gradually shape vivid characters through external transformation (such as hairstyle and costume), life observation, and situational immersion, this study aims to reveal the internal logic of the "Mental Image Theory" as a method of character development and its significance for actors in shaping roles.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

To study the significance of establishing Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" in the shaping of stage characters by Spoken Drama actor.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" is a significant achievement in Chinese drama theory. Its core lies in resolving the contradiction between actors and their roles through the establishment and transformation of "mental images(Xin Xiang)", thereby creating vivid and three-dimensional character images.

National research:

### 1. Theoretical Origin: A Creative Transformation Blending Chinese and Western Elements

The formation of the "Mental Image Theory" is characterized by a distinct cross-cultural feature. Zou Hong pointed out in her article that Jiao Juyin initially constructed the concept of "mental image(Xin Xiang)" while translating Danikin's works, and later combined it with Stanislavsky's "inner vision" and Chinese opera aesthetics to form a unique theoretical framework (Hong, 2010)<sup>[3]</sup> Although "mental image(Xin Xiang)" is related to "inner vision" in terms of terminology, Jiao Juyin adjusted the experience path of the Stanislavsky system through practice, emphasizing "starting from life" rather than "starting from oneself", which reflects the localization of Western theory. Additionally, Meng Jiaxu noted that the term "mental image(Xin Xiang)" was Jiao Juyin's original creation, and its connotation not only includes the stylized performance techniques

of traditional opera but also integrates the logical thinking of materialist dialectics, achieving a modern transformation of traditional opera concepts (Jiaxu, 2024)<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2. The Significance of the “Mental Image Theory” for Actors in Character Development

2.1 The “Mental Image Theory” emphasizes that actors should establish a deep understanding of their characters by “rooting in life”, thereby guiding them to approach and understand the characters. This process breaks the traditional passive reliance on the script. For instance, in the adapted version of “The Orphan of Zhao - One Man’s Solemn Vow”, Zhang Chunlei required actors to consult historical materials and watch videos to avoid mechanical imitation of classic images, thus forming a “mental image prototype” that fits the style of the script. This transformation from “life truth” to “artistic truth” enables actors to break through the surface and truly approach the inner essence of the character (Chunlei, 2022)<sup>[4]</sup>

2.2 The “Mental Image Theory” promotes the training of both the “psychological action line” and the “physical action line”, guiding actors to shift from rational analysis to emotional experience, leading them to experience the inner world of the character and enhance the authenticity of their performance. Xuan’ang (2023)<sup>[5]</sup> believes that actors should use their imagination and emotional commonality to connect their own emotional memories with the character’s experiences, thereby activating the psychological logic of the character and ultimately achieving an authentic expression of “physical movement following emotional change (Xuan’ang, 2023)<sup>[5]</sup>

3. The ultimate goal of the “Mental Image Theory” is to achieve the unity of “actor and character”, ultimately creating a vivid character image. Ao Deng pointed out that the dynamic and variable nature of the “mental image(Xin Xiang)” gives actors the space to adjust their characters, allowing them to correct their performances in real time based on stage directions and interactions with co-actors, avoiding stereotyping (Deng, 2013)<sup>[7]</sup> For example, in the original drama “Red Flame”, actors used the “mental image(Xin Xiang)” methodology to retain the freedom of personalized creation (such as designing impromptu lines) while extracting the typical characteristics of the character through the “three realms of reproduction” (from life-like to typical to artistic) (Fanhao, 2022)<sup>[6]</sup> This integration of “form and spirit” makes the character both life-like and artistically compelling, ultimately presenting a “living person” on stage.

In conclusion, Jiao Juyin’s “Mental Image Theory” is a landmark achievement in the localization of Chinese drama theory, providing actors with a creative tool that is both scientific and artistic. Based on literature research and personal practical observations, the author believes that its profound assistance to actors in character portrayal is reflected in the following three aspects: 1. Guiding actors to approach and understand the characters. 2. Leading actors to experience the inner world of the characters, enhancing the authenticity of the performance. 3. Integrating actors with the characters to create vivid character images. Through the guidance of “mental images (Xin Xiang)”, actors can not only maintain the freshness of their performance but also accurately convey the character images. In the future, with the diversification of dramatic forms and the deepening of technological intervention, the “Mental Image Theory” is expected to continuously empower actors’ artistic exploration through theoretical iteration and practical innovation.

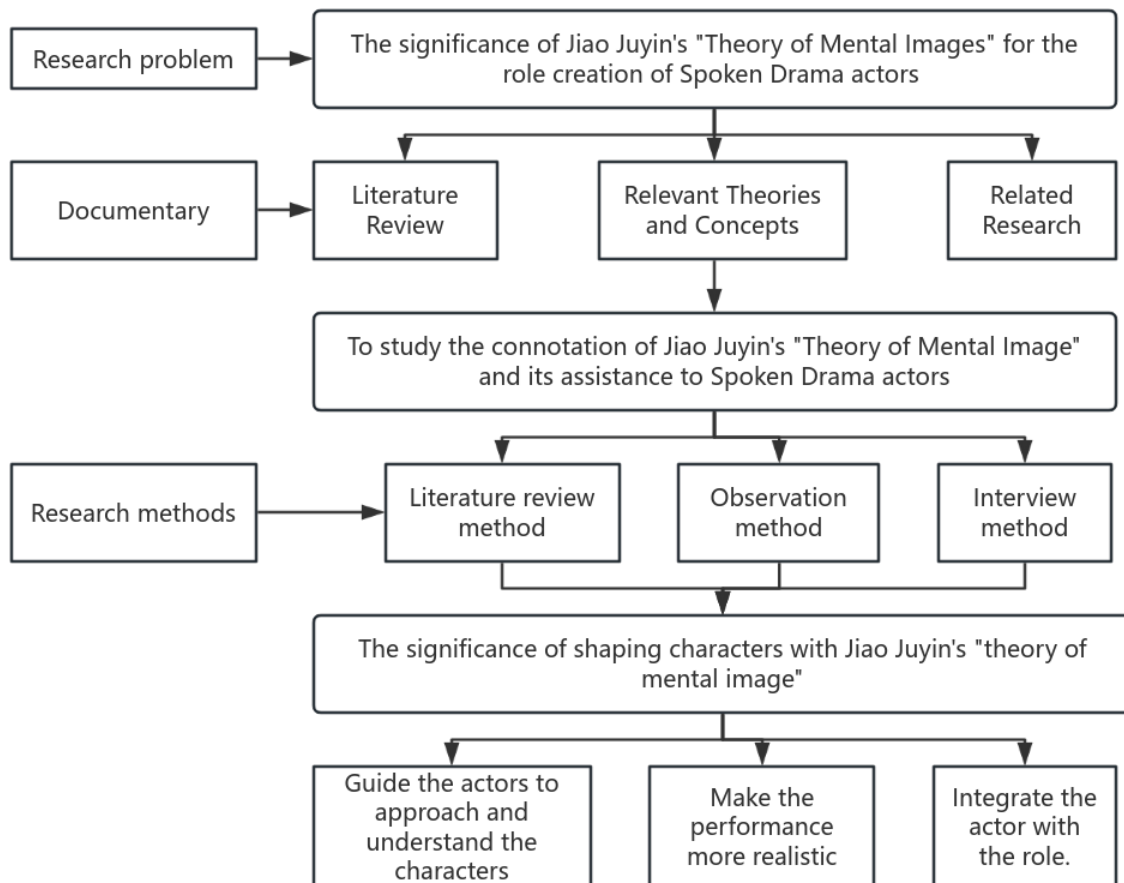
International research:

Academic interest in the "Mental Image Theory" has been relatively limited overseas. In scholarly research, some scholars at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich have examined the "Mental Image Theory" as a variant of the Stanislavski system. Overall, international studies on the "Mental Image Theory" remain in an early stage, with most research confined to theoretical introductions and conceptual explanations. There is a lack of in-depth exploration into its application within Chinese theatrical performance practices, and the deeper dialogues between the "Mental Image Theory" and Western performance theories have not been adequately revealed.

#### 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework*



#### 5. METHODOLOGY

##### 1. Population and Sample

The overall subject is Chinese stage actors. The sample consists of 20 actors who used Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" to shape their characters in the production of "And Then There Were None".

Among them, there are three actresses who played the role of “Vera”, and their names are Zhao Shi Yi, Jiang Ming Jun, and Yang Yuxin.

## 2. Research Scope

Content scope: The significance of Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory” for the role creation of Spoken Drama actors.

Subject scope: Teachers who apply Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory” in teaching, actors who perform using Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory”.

Geographical scope: Rehearsals and performances at Shanghai XiaFei Theatre, performance venues at Shanghai Normal University, the university itself, the publicity department, and related online performances.

Time scope: From January 2024 to December 2024.

## 3. Research Tools

Researchers designed two interview questionnaires using a semi-structured interview format. One questionnaire was used to interview professors from the “And Then There Were None” production team who applied Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory” theory as guidance, while the other was used to interview actors from the same production who employed Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory” theory in character development. A total of 10 questions were prepared for the interviews.

## 4. Data Collection

4.1 This research is a qualitative study. Data is collected from existing research outcomes, that is, by comprehensively analyzing the published relevant academic papers and books, extracting the research data and information related to Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory”.

4.2 The interview period was from January 2024 to December 2024. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and informed consent was obtained from the participants, with a commitment to use the interview content solely for the research of the thesis. The information collected through the interviews explored the significance of Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory” for actors in character portrayal, providing reliable theoretical support for subsequent discussions and conclusions.

4.3 By delving into the production team of “And Then There Were None”, shaping the character “Vera”, and based on the research objectives and plans, the information and data required for this study were obtained. Through this, the significance of Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory” for actors in character portrayal was summarized.

## 6. RESULTS

1. Establishing a “Mental Image(Xin Xiang)” can guide actors to approach and understand their characters.

Mr. Chen Mingzheng once said, “Drama is the study of human beings; it is about writing about people. An actor's performing art is to create the actions of living characters, which is the core of drama.” (Mingzheng, 2015)<sup>[2]</sup> When actors first receive a script, they may feel unfamiliar with the characters in it because the

characters in the script have their own era background, growth environment, and personality traits, which may be different from the actors themselves. Sometimes, even after repeatedly reading the script and pondering the character, they still cannot understand the character, cannot well experience the character's inner world, and the distance between them and the character is very far, resulting in inaccurate actions and emotionless dialogues on stage.

Professor Meng Jiaxu believes that the “Mental Image Theory” allows actors to first obtain some external features of the character, and then through imitating these features, feel and experience the inner basis and internal motivation of these physical actions of the character, achieving a unity of form and spirit, and an integration of the inside and outside. Then, in the rehearsal process, further enrich and develop the external actions, truly “living as the character” (Jiaxu, 2024)<sup>[1]</sup> It can be seen that after initially reading and analyzing the script and finding that the actor's own background is too different from the character to enter the character's inner world, one can start from the external features of the character. For example: wearing the clothes belonging to the character, applying makeup and styling the hair that match the character.

Vera Claythorne in the play *\*And Then There Were None\** is a governess born in a British rural village around the 1930s. As the last character to die in the entire drama, her inner emotions and psychological development are highly complex and ever-changing. In an interview, the actress mentioned that her personal experiences differed greatly from those of the character. Since she could not find direct parallels in her own life, she relied on Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" to shape the role focusing on the character's external traits and transforming herself accordingly. This transformation included: 1) curling her naturally straight hair to appear more mature; 2) changing her makeup style from light to bold; and 3) altering her wardrobe replacing her usual cute overalls and bubble skirts with more sophisticated clothing, swapping her casual backpack for a velvet handbag, and exchanging comfortable sneakers for shiny high heels. With these changes in appearance, especially after putting on the high heels, the actress gradually began to believe she truly was Vera. She started to explore Vera's presence through posture, body movements, and facial expressions. As a result, she felt her connection with Vera growing stronger, eventually establishing a remarkable bond between herself and the character.

2. Establishing a “Mental Image(Xin Xiang)” can guide actors to experience the inner world of their characters, enhancing the authenticity of their performances.

Art originates from life but transcends it. The more information one observes in daily life, the richer the accumulated materials will be, and the more vivid and lifelike the characters created will be. When we encounter a stranger in life, the first thing we notice is their external features, such as their clothing, appearance, voice, behavior, and posture. Only then do we gradually understand their inner emotions and personality traits through these external features. Different people have different external features and, correspondingly, different personalities and inner emotions.

Figure 2

*A performance still of the stage play "And Then There Were None"*



Source: Mingjun Jiang (2024)

At first, actors had to imagine the setting based solely on textual descriptions in the script. But when the beautiful and luxurious two-story villa appeared before their eyes, a richer mental image of the character emerged. Zhao Shiyi, who plays "Vera," mentioned in an interview that Vera is a person living in the 1930s a time far removed from our own. Simply changing costumes would not be enough; she also needed to adopt physical movements appropriate to the character, use different stage patterns and emotional expressions depending on her scene partners, and make clear distinctions between interactions. According to observers, Zhao Shiyi would stand within the "villa" as Vera, carefully observing every ornament, piece of furniture, and scene behind each door. At the same time, images of Vera hosting distinguished guests and enjoying her vacation filled her mind. With the real setting, combined with her understanding of the prescribed circumstances and her grasp of Vera's external traits, Zhao gradually stepped into Vera's inner world. It was precisely because she understood Vera's thoughts and motivations that Zhao felt more confident and natural in portraying the character's outward appearance.

In summary, the "Mental Image(Xin Xiang)" grows richer and deeper as actors deepen their understanding of the given circumstances and master their roles. The character's physical actions and external features help bridge the gap between actor and role, allowing the performer to feel the character more fully. The fuller the mental image, the better the actor can sense and understand the character's inner life. The greater the insight into the character's inner world, the more profound the overall interpretation becomes. When physical portrayals are grounded in psychological depth, the resulting character comes alive and becomes three-dimensional. In theater performance, audiences pay to enter the theater and watch characters with distinct personalities come to life on stage only authentic performances can truly captivate them. The ultimate goal of Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" is to help actors create vivid, lifelike characters.

3. Establishing a “mental image(Xin Xiang)” enables actors to blend with their roles and create vivid character images.

If an actor doesn't understand the character in his heart, his performance must be wrong. Therefore, he should build a “mental image (Xin Xiang)” of the character in his mind. This “mental image” of the character should be a concrete and vivid person in his mind, including his external appearance, external physical actions, personality, habits, emotions, way of thinking, and so on. The richer it is, the better. Live in the prescribed situation with this “mental image” truly. By establishing the “mental image(Xin Xiang)”, the actor will enhance the connection between the “inner self” and the “outer appearance”. In this process, he will gradually approach the character and believe that he is the character until he completely becomes the character in the play.

Initially, the actor approaches the character by capturing and exploring the external image, thereby entering the character's inner world and finding an inner basis. Subsequently, through the character's inner emotions, they return to external actions, allowing the actor to have a more natural grasp of external actions. Throughout this process, the actor becomes increasingly in tune with the character, and the performance becomes more authentic. The benefits are numerous: first, it enables actors to eliminate the awareness of false performance and live authentically within the prescribed circumstances; second, it helps actors find ways to express the character through their own bodies, creating characters with unique personality traits; third, it can stimulate the actor's valuable “subconscious”, making the performance more life-like and detailed.

During the creation and rehearsal of *\*And Then There Were None\**, actress Zhao Shiyi accurately captured Vera's external appearance, physical characteristics, inner emotions, and personality by establishing a vivid “Mental Image(Xin Xiang)” of the character. As this mental image gradually refined, the alignment between the role and the actor deepened, allowing for increasingly natural and fluid performance. In an interview, Zhao Shiyi, who portrayed Vera, mentioned that after three guests died under mysterious circumstances around her, and upon learning that the butler Rogers had been chopped to death with an axe, she spontaneously delivered the line, “Split in two life ends; seven now become six,” followed by a hysterical burst of laughter and uncontrollable trembling. These physical gestures and emotional responses were not premeditated; rather, they emerged naturally from the real-time interaction during rehearsals, flowing authentically once the mental image of Vera was firmly established in her mind. From an initial, superficial understanding of Vera, to gradually building her into a fully realized, three-dimensional figure, and ultimately merging completely with the character, the “Mental Image (Xin Xiang)” became the bridge connecting the actress and her role.

## 7. DISCUSSION

This study, through an in-depth exploration of Jiao Juyin's “Mental Image Theory”, clarifies its core role and profound significance in the process of actors shaping characters. The research results show that the “Mental Image Theory” not only provides actors with a method to understand and integrate into

characters comprehensively from the inner to the outer, but also greatly enhances the authenticity and appeal of performances, thereby helping actors present more three-dimensional and vivid character images on the stage. Through interviews and observations of the actress playing Vera in \*And Then There Were None\*, this study obtained first-hand empirical materials on how the "Mental Image Theory" guides character shaping, and its research results further confirm the methodological value and practical effectiveness of this theory.

Looking at the existing research on Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory", most of them focus on theoretical origins while this study places more emphasis on the help of the "Mental Image Theory" for drama actors. These differentiated research perspectives reflect the rich connotation of the "Mental Image Theory". It is hoped that this article can provide help for actors who have troubles in shaping characters.

## 8. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Implication of the Study

1. The core value of Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" lies in providing actors with a systematic approach from observing life to presenting on stage. Through the path of "observing life - nurturing mental images - internal and external transformation", actors can break through the limitations of their own experiences and transform abstract texts into concrete stage images. This theory can help actors create vivid character images and truly "live" in the prescribed stage situations, which is of great significance for enhancing the quality of performance.

2. Jiao Juyin's "Mental Image Theory" is a significant symbol of the localization of Chinese drama theory. Its core lies in the combination of the Stanislavsky system with Chinese opera aesthetics and realistic literary and artistic thought. In-depth research on the philosophical basis of the "Theory of Mental Image" can fill the gap in the modern Chinese performance theory system and establish its uniqueness in the global drama theory.

### 2. Recommendations for Future Research

This article analyzes the significance and role of Jiao Juyin's "mental image(Xin Xiang)" theory in the process of actors shaping their roles. It is hoped that when actors feel lost in the process of shaping their roles, "mental image(Xin Xiang)" can point out a bright path for them. There are still many deficiencies in this article. In the future, it is hoped that more scholars will explore this theory, and also hope that some scholars can systematically sort out Jiao Juyin's unpublished manuscripts, rehearsal notes and letters (such as the materials in the Beijing People's Art Theatre Archives) to restore the original theoretical framework and development context of the "mental image(Xin Xiang)" theory. Through original documents, more empirical bases can be provided for the theoretical origin.

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