Behind the Form: Aesthetic Features and Cultural Attribution of Chaoshan Qiaopi

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Abstract. From the mid-19th century to the 1970s, many people in the Chaoshan region migrated to Southeast Asia out of economic necessity, sending their hard-earned money together with family letters back home. Chaoshan qiaopi thus emerged as a special type of document combining the functions of a family letter and a remittance certificate. Existing studies have focused primarily on the historical value, economic function, and social significance of qiaopi, while the literary character of qiaopi as a form of folk writing has not yet received systematic scholarly attention. Taking qiaopi texts as the core material, this paper examines the formal features of qiaopi and their cultural attribution from three dimensions: structural aesthetics, spatiotemporal aesthetics, and imagery. The ritualized structure of qiaopi is rooted in the Confucian family ethics of Chaoshan clan society and serves as a "writing ritual" through which the writer confirms his or her ethical position within the family. Its spatiotemporal aesthetics derive from the temporal delay and spatial blankness caused by its "cross-regional" nature, constituting a unique "third time-space" experience. Its imagery centers on the fusion of everyday details and classical imagery, reflecting the influence of traditional culture in folk writing. Together, these three dimensions demonstrate that the formal aesthetics of qiaopi is an embodiment of Chaoshan socio-cultural psychology at the textual level.

Keywords: Chaoshan qiaopi; formal aesthetics; cultural attribution.

1. Introduction

Qiaopi is a "silver-letter integrated" document through which overseas Chinese sent money and family letters back to China via private channels. It emerged in the mid-19th century, when many people in the Chaoshan region migrated to Southeast Asia out of economic necessity, and faded out by the 1970s. The great scholar Rao Zongyi praised it as the "Dunhuang of overseas Chinese history." In 1948, Rao Zongyi, in his Chaozhou Zhi, for the first time treated qiaopi as an independent academic object, systematically recording the state of the industry, marking the entry of qiaopi into academic vision [1]. Subsequent research has mostly proceeded from historical and economic perspectives, focusing on the documentary value and economic function of qiaopi. Some scholars have shown from the perspective of legal culture that qiaopi served to communicate family emotions, support the family economy, and maintain Confucian ethics, with family law as the foundation of its legal culture [2]. Other scholars have noticed that the physical form of qiaopi itself directly inherits traditional Chinese cultural etiquette [3]. In recent years, research perspectives have gradually expanded to linguistic features and literariness. Some scholars have noted that "the most moving sentences in qiaopi generally carry a profound Tang poetry quality," an expression shaped by classical poetry, Chaoshan folk ballad culture, and ghostwriter aesthetics [4].

From a theoretical perspective, "literariness" is not confined to pure literary texts. The Russian Formalist Roman Jakobson defined "literariness" as the object of literary science, namely "that which makes a given work a work of literature" [5]. Literariness thus depends not on genre or authorial intention but on whether language is organized into an expression with an aesthetic function. Viewed in this light, qiaopi has formed a stable and expressive writing tradition in terms of format, imagery, and rhetoric; its language pursues implicitness, elegance, and emotional tension, and it employs techniques such as bi-xing (analogical evocation), blank space, and classical imagery in emotional expression. Qiaopi is therefore not only historical material but also a sample of folk writing with literary qualities. An examination of the literariness of qiaopi helps to expand the boundaries of literary research and to bring previously neglected folk writing into the field of literary analysis.

However, existing research still lacks systematic exploration of the formal aesthetic features of qiaopi as a text in its own right. The above scholars' judgments on the "Tang poetry quality" of qiaopi language and their observations on the "etiquette inheritance" of qiaopi form provide important inspiration for the entry point of formal aesthetics, but they have not yet treated formal features as an independent object of systematic investigation. A large number of qiaopi texts possess ritualized structural aesthetics, spatiotemporal aesthetics of delay and blank space, and imagery combining everyday narrative and classical imagery. These formal features collectively point to the embodiment of Chaoshan socio-cultural psychology at the textual level, and their cultural attribution deserves further inquiry.

2. Structural Aesthetics: Ritualized Narrative and Family Ethics

The most intuitive aesthetic feature of qiaopi lies in its highly formulaic and ritualized writing structure. A typical Chaoshan qiaopi follows a fixed sequence of formats: an opening salutation, followed by the "respectfully reporting" formula, then reporting safety, describing hardships, asking about family matters, sending money, allocating it item by item, urging household duties, and finally concluding with blessings and a signature. This structure forms a strict ritual space, and its degree of standardization far exceeds that of ordinary private letters.

From the perspective of textual form, the structural aesthetics of qiaopi is first manifested in the stability and rigor of its format. In Letter No. 84, the sender Wandao opens with "Both parents, at your feet" and concludes with "kneeling to wish you blessings and peace," itemizing the remittance for nine relatives. Letter No. 83 follows the same pattern: Pan Zhaoxiang addresses "Grandmother, before your seat," explains the remittance, allocates it item by item, and closes with "Hereby respectfully, wishing you peace." Letter No. 202, from the mother Yang Xiulan to her son Chuhong, likewise opens with "Chuhong, my son, be informed" and closes with "Mother Yang Xiulan, May 25th," with the family's difficulties and remittance allocation in between. These three texts share a fixed format framework: opening and closing phrases are highly consistent, and the intervening narration follows roughly the same order. This shows that qiaopi writing unfolded within a widely recognized set of format conventions.

However, the stability of the format does not mean absolute uniformity. A close reading of the texts reveals subtle looseness within this stability. In Letter No. 202, Yang Xiulan writes as a mother to her son, omitting the usual "respectfully reporting" formula and entering directly into narration; in Letter No. 186, Zheng Yuchao writes to his mother, and the opening "Beloved Mother" already deviates from the standard "Mother, at your feet" format [4]. These deviations show that the format allowed a certain degree of flexible adjustment within its basic framework. The key point, however, is that such flexible adjustment was extremely limited and often appeared in specific relationships: a mother writing to her son was more direct than a son writing to his parents. This precisely confirms the correspondence between format and generational hierarchy. The "change" in format conversely confirms the regulatory power of the "unchanged."

The high stability of the qiaopi format can be further understood from the perspective of the act of writing. The format sequence underwent no fundamental change over decades, indicating that qiaopi writing was to a large extent a repetitive practice. Its function lay not only in transmitting information but also in conveying an ethical attitude through the format itself. By adopting a standardized format, the writer demonstrates recognition of and respect for family order; the format thus becomes a carrier of ethical consciousness, not merely a narrative tool.

The formation of this ritualized structure is rooted in the profound Confucian family ethics of Chaoshan society. Chaoshan family ethics center on filial piety and fraternal respect, adhering to the Confucian principles of honoring ancestors, loving kin, and cultivating oneself to regulate the family, and regarding supporting parents, nurturing wives and children, and assisting the clan as the ethical obligations of clan members. The long-term maintenance of this ethical system depended on the highly developed clan organizations in the Chaoshan region. The Chaoshan clan system was complete,

with clan heads and elders, ancestral halls and public property, and a clear generational order, forming a self-managed and mutually supportive local organizational system that provided a trust foundation and organizational carrier for the delivery of qiaopi. The institutional existence of the clan enabled Confucian ethics to be implemented from the conceptual level into concrete daily practice.

In qiaopi texts, the discipline exercised by Confucian ethics over writing form is also reflected in the system of appellations. The choice of salutations strictly follows generational hierarchy: for grandparents, "before your seat" or "at your feet"; for parents, "your excellency" or "at your feet"; for peers, "before your toilette" or "my wife, be informed"; for juniors, direct names. In Letter No. 160, Gao Yongmian writes to "Mother, at your feet," signing "Your son Yongmian respectfully reports"; similar formats also appear in Letter No. 195 (Zhengxian and Suili to "Mother-in-law, before your seat") and Letter No. 196 (Zheng Bikui to "Dear Mother, before your seat") [4]. This hierarchical system of appellations is precisely the expression of Confucian "filial piety and fraternal respect" ethics in letters. Fei Xiaotong's concept of the "differential mode of association" in From the Soil helps to understand this phenomenon: Chinese rural society is centered on the "self" and forms a differential network of interpersonal relationships according to closeness and distance [6]. The appellation system and remittance allocation logic of qiaopi are precisely the projection of this differential mode in the text. This differential mode is not only a description of social structure but also the cognitive framework of the writer, who naturally organizes his understanding of family relationships according to it when writing. The choice of appellation, the allocation of funds, and the order of greetings—each is an operation of positioning oneself and others within the differential mode. Therefore, the ritualized structure of qiaopi is a joint reflection of social ethics and the writer's cognition of family order.

Durkheim believed that ritual is a mechanism for the reproduction of social solidarity, strengthening collective consciousness and moral order through repeated and standardized behavior [7]. The ritualized writing of qiaopi is precisely such a "writing ritual": the sender, far from his homeland and in a foreign land, completes an emotional connection with the family through the repetition of a fixed format, confirming his ethical position within the family. In the previously cited Letter No. 84, Wandao's meticulous allocation to nine relatives, and in Letter No. 186, Zheng Yuchao's concise statement "Now sending seventy-five Hong Kong dollars on board, for household use, please receive" [4], share the common feature that the logic of allocation and the orderliness of the format are highly unified, reflecting the ethical division of labor and sense of responsibility within the family.

Placing qiaopi's ritualized writing in the longer tradition of writing, its uniqueness lies in the fact that its writers were mostly ordinary people or ghostwriters, and its channel was private qiaopi agencies. Its ritualization was therefore a spontaneous reproduction of etiquette norms in folk writing. Ordinary people might not explain the ethical connotation of "filial piety and fraternal respect," but through adherence to the format they performed Confucian ethics in daily practice. This "learning without knowing" shows that Confucian ethics had been internalized as a life common sense in Chaoshan society.

From a deeper cultural logic, this ritualized structure also reflects the clan-oriented collectivist tendency of Chaoshan clan society. The Chaoshan region has a significant "clanism" tendency and sense of responsibility; many elderly Chaoshan overseas Chinese exhibit fine qualities including filial piety, loyalty, trustworthiness, clanism, diligence and frugality, and intergenerational mutual assistance [8]. In the letters cited above, Pan Zhaoxiang's item-by-item allocation of remittances even amid war, Wandao's meticulous accounting to nine relatives, and Yang Xiulan's instructions to her "youngest aunt" and "Xiuxiang" one by one are all manifestations of family community consciousness at the writing level. The necessity of this confirmation and respect lies precisely in the fact that the writer is in a foreign country, far from the daily occasions of the family community. The format here assumes the function of "virtual presence," enabling overseas Chinese far from the family to reintegrate into the network of family ethics through standardized writing behavior.

3. Spatiotemporal Aesthetics: Delayed Time and Blank Space

The spatiotemporal aesthetics of qiaopi is rooted in its unique "cross-regional" attribute: from Southeast Asia to Chaoshan, spanning the distance of mountains and seas; from writing to reading, there is a delay of weeks or even months. This "rupture" and "bridging" of time and space constitutes the unique aesthetic tension of qiaopi.

In the temporal dimension, the "delay" attribute of qiaopi makes it a "dialogue across time and space." The sender writes "the present," but when the recipient reads the letter, it is already "the past." This time difference is particularly significant during wartime. In Letter No. 98, the sender Jihao writes after the victory of the War of Resistance: "Several years of salt and dust, enduring many dangers. Fortunately, the Allied forces have won, peace has arrived, and your son is healthy and safe." The phrase "for years the remittances have been interrupted" compresses four years of blankness into one sentence. When the recipient reads this letter, he or she feels both the joy of "surviving a disaster" and the desolation of "four years of blankness." Letter No. 99 similarly records this temporal rupture: "Since the outbreak of the East Asian War and the fall of Singapore, four years have already passed. After the Japanese invaders entered, all news was cut off… Now I have a son and a daughter. The girl is six years old; the boy is two" [4]. Four years of absence, the birth and growth of children—the family knew nothing until this moment. This "temporal fold" makes qiaopi a delayed container of emotion: the letter underwent the sedimentation of time on its way, emotion fermented and condensed in the delay, and when it finally arrived, it had already transcended mere information transmission and become a carrier of historical memory.

In the spatial dimension, the "blank space" aesthetics of qiaopi embody the implicit beauty of "endless meaning though limited words." The paper of qiaopi is limited, often only one page, yet it must carry multiple contents: remittance instructions, emotional expression, and family exhortations. This "short paper, long emotion" media limitation forces the writer to make information choices within a limited space. In Letter No. 37, Xiongcai comforts his mother by quoting the ancient saying "Flowers are never always good, the moon is never always full," without directly writing "Do not be sad," but letting his mother complete the consolation herself through the ancient saying—this is an "emotional blank space." In Letter No. 91, Pan Zhaoxiang, after itemizing the remittance, suddenly inserts "In these times, war is pressing daily; household expenses should be carefully managed. If there is war in the Pacific, letters will not get through," and the information density suddenly increases, creating spatial pressure; finally, he concludes with "Nothing more to say," leaving a blank space for the family to feel the unspoken worry. In Letter No. 58, Ding Bingnan's letter to his mother-in-law concludes with "Both inside and outside are fortunately peaceful, please do not worry," also leaving an emotional blank with the brief "More to be reported later" [4].

This "blank space" comes from the compression of emotion. Under the ethical constraint of "reporting good news but not bad," the writer of qiaopi hides pain and hardship, telling the family only of "peace" and "remittance," leaving the unspoken emotions for the recipient to complete. In In Letter No. 62, Wan Cheng explains to his wife why he sent so little: "I should have respectfully inquired after your well-being, but... after family remittances and personal expenses, there is no surplus at all; this is the reason" [4]. Through factual statements he indirectly expresses guilt and helplessness, transforming emotion into narration. Letter No. 67 similarly has Chen Wengao conclude with "You should be frugal in Tang" after noting the high price of rice, expressing concern in a restrained manner [4]. This restraint is a conscious formal choice of the writer. When overseas Chinese miss home, they do not express it directly but use the rivers, moon, and other natural scenes before them as carriers, pursuing implicit beauty and restrained emotional expression. This "writing without writing" is analogous to the classical poetic aesthetics of "meaning beyond words," and its deep psychological mechanism lies in the fact that the higher the emotional concentration, the more formal restraint is needed to make it appropriate. Within the framework of family ethics, excessive emotional venting is considered contrary to propriety, while implicit expression simultaneously satisfies the dual requirements of emotional transmission and ethical appropriateness.

From the perspective of maritime culture, the spatiotemporal aesthetics of qiaopi is also manifested as the construction of a "third time-space." Liu Zhongyu advocates breaking free from the historical context in which the Asian seas were "discovered" and re-understanding the "super-stability" of Asian culture from the perspective of internal traditional change [9]. Qiaopi is precisely the textual embodiment of this "maritime symbiosis" perspective. A commentary has pointed out that qiaopi, through words, "repairs and connects interrupted time and blocked space, folding the emigrant's residence and the original homeland onto one sheet of paper, traveling back and forth across the ocean, and constructs a 'third time-space'" [10]. This "third time-space" is essentially an aesthetic strategy for coping with diasporic existence: the body is not in the homeland, but emotion points to it, and this being both absent and present is itself tragic. Through writing, qiaopi transforms it into an aesthetic experience in which Southeast Asia and Chaoshan are simultaneously present, spatial barriers are bridged by imagination, and temporal delay is filled by emotion. Letter No. 83, in which Pan Zhaoxiang writes amid "great waves" that "travelers in a foreign land will surely have bad days; the young and old at home should know this," is a typical expression of this experience [4]. In Letter No. 99, Chen Guangchen's statement "Now I have a son and a daughter. The girl is six years old, the boy is two" turns a "local event" in Southeast Asia into part of the temporal sequence of the Chaoshan family [4]. The writer of qiaopi completes an aesthetic transcendence of diasporic existence precisely in this "third time-space."

4. Imagery Characteristics: Meaning-Weaving of Everyday Narrative and Classical Imagery

The most distinctive linguistic feature of qiaopi lies in its skillful fusion of everyday narrative and classical imagery, using "everyday details" to carry "deep emotions" and "plain language" to convey "elegant artistic conception," forming a unique imagery.

In qiaopi texts, high-frequency images present three categories.

The first category is survival-oriented images centered on "peace," "Heaven," and "money." The word "peace" and its synonymous expressions appear repeatedly in qiaopi, almost becoming a fixed vocabulary in every letter; "Heaven," "Heavenly Lord," "blue sky," and other appellations also frequently appear, often juxtaposed with "peace"; "money" appears in various currencies, from silver and national currency to Hong Kong dollars, throughout qiaopi. In Letter No. 83, "Fortunately, Heaven has protected us, the whole family is at peace"; in Letter No. 186, "May Heaven bless you, Mother, with many blessings and long life"—both attribute the realization of "peace" to the protection of Heaven [4]. In Letter No. 84, "Sending seventy yuan of national currency" and allocating it item by item; in Letter No. 187, "Enclosing one hundred Hong Kong dollars"—these silver records precise to the single digit give qiaopi the dual attributes of economic certificate and emotional carrier [4]. Notably, "peace" is rarely expressed as the writer's personal achievement but is attributed to "Heaven's protection"; the juxtaposition of "peace" and "money" reveals the core functional structure of qiaopi communication: economic delivery and emotional reassurance are two sides of the same act.

The second category is cross-regional images centered on "ship/steamer," "return," "waves/sea," and "mountains/clouds." Expressions of "ship/steamer" and "return" (including "return to Tang" and "back to Tang") carry the writer's orientation toward the homeland, while "waves," "sea," and "cloud mountains" outline the distance of cross-regional space. In Letter No. 62, "Now availing myself of the mail ship's convenience" shows the ship as the material prerequisite for qiaopi; in Letter No. 83, "On the voyage from Siam, the waves were great" turns maritime risk into spatial tension; in Letter No. 38, "distant cloud mountains" expresses helplessness under spatial obstruction, echoing the "return" image in Letter No. 3, "Naturally I will pack up and return home without fail" [4]. These image groups jointly construct a symbolic system of "cross-regional space": the ship is the tool for crossing space, the sea is the symbol of spatial obstruction, the cloud mountains are the concretization

of spatial distance, and returning home is the wish for spatial bridging. They together constitute the cognitive framework through which the writer of qiaopi understands his or her own diasporic situation.

The third category is everyday images centered on "illness/medicine," "clothing/shoes," "food," and "flowers/moon." "Illness/medicine" includes "headache powder" and "pills"; "clothing/shoes" includes "old clothes" and "rubber-soled slippers"; "food" includes "rice," "grain," and "salted pork"; "flowers/moon" is represented by "flowers are never always good, the moon is never always full." In Letter No. 202, the mother Yang Xiulan sends "two dozen headache powders" to her son, using an everyday medicine as a symbol of maternal concern; in Letter No. 203, "I entrust someone to bring thirty Hong Kong dollars and a pair of tree-bark shoes," using "shoes" as a materialized symbol of family affection; in Letter No. 37, "Flowers are never always good, the moon is never always full" integrates the philosophy of life's impermanence into everyday consolation through classical imagery [4]. These everyday objects are microcosms of hometown life; each connects the shared memories of sender and recipient, becoming a materialized symbol of emotion.

The internal connection among these three categories of images reveals the deep structure of the qiaopi imagery system. Survival-oriented images constitute the semantic base of qiaopi, answering the most basic question of "how survival is possible"; cross-regional images constitute the spatial framework of qiaopi, answering the question of "how diaspora is understood"; everyday images constitute the emotional texture of qiaopi, answering the question of "how emotion is conveyed." The three dimensions progress layer by layer, jointly weaving a complete imagery world, enabling qiaopi to carry the three dimensions of survival, space, and emotion within a limited space.

The formation of this imagery system is first closely related to the intermediary mechanism of the ghostwriter. As a folk practice of China's lower-middle-class intellectuals after the abolition of the imperial examinations, the qiaopi ghostwriter had the dual identity of literatus and laborer, deeply integrated into the social structure of the qiaoxiang, and was the shaper of the emotional and cultural connotations of qiaopi. On the one hand, the ghostwriter needed to accurately express what the overseas Chinese or their relatives wanted to say; on the other hand, he had to consciously adhere to the written language norms of traditional literati. Their dual identity determined the unique appearance of the qiaopi imagery system: it maintained the fresh texture of folk everyday language while permeating with the aesthetic accumulation of classical poetry and prose. This fusion of "folk" and "elegant" stems from the tradition of "seaside Zou-Lu" in Chaoshan culture and the "elegance in the bones" of the ghostwriters.

From the perspective of semiotics, Saussure divided linguistic signs into two elements: the "signifier" and the "signified" [11]. In qiaopi, everyday details are secondarily semioticized: their signifiers remain unchanged, but their signifieds are endowed with emotional meanings beyond everyday usage. The "headache powder," "old clothes," and "rice and grain" cited above are ordinary daily necessities in general contexts, but in qiaopi their signifieds shift to emotional meanings such as "health concern," "family affection," and "the taste of home." Qiaopi is addressed to specific recipients who share the same life-world, and its sign system is therefore a closed system dependent on shared experience. This limited sign system, through the repeated use of everyday objects, weaves a network of meaning sufficient to express deep emotions.

Moreover, the qiaopi writer's use of classical imagery is often not conscious literary creation but an expressive habit dormant in cultural unconsciousness. Lower-class laborers may not have read the Book of Songs, but the "try to eat more" they wrote originates from the Nineteen Ancient Poems; they may unconsciously use the bi-xing technique, such as "flowers are never always good, the moon is never always full." This is precisely traditional culture "used daily without awareness." This "dormant influence" is fundamentally rooted in the deep folk ballad culture of the Chaoshan region. Chaoshan ballad singing is based mainly on Chaozhou songbooks, covering historical stories, folk legends, and even Songs of Crossing the Seas and Cloth Poems about overseas Chinese experiences. These songbooks use seven-character lines with neat rhymes and catchy tunes, popular and deeply embedded in life. The long and short sentences of qiaopi likewise embody the language style of Chaozhou songbooks. Classical poetic tradition and folk ballad tradition thus form a dual nourishment

in qiaopi: the former provides imagery and rhetoric, while the latter provides the daily foundation of language rhythm and expressive habits, together constituting the cultural soil of qiaopi's imagery.

From the perspective of diaspora culture, the imagery system of qiaopi presents a deeper cultural function. The core dilemma of diasporic experience lies in the fact that the body is separated from the homeland, the sensory foundation of daily life is uprooted, and an irreparable rift opens between the remembered homeland and the place where one actually lives. The everyday images in qiaopi are precisely a symbolic response to this dilemma. These everyday images are ordinary daily necessities in general contexts, but in qiaopi they re-anchor the diasporic subject to the everyday experience of the homeland. By sending or mentioning these objects, the writer reconstructs a "sensory homeland" in the text: the mother is still sending headache powder, the wife still needs old clothes, and the price of rice at home is still rising and falling. These most concrete everyday details constitute the most resilient emotional bond between the diasporic subject and the homeland. It is in this sense that the imagery system of qiaopi is not only aesthetic but also existential: it enables the diasporic subject to regain continuity with the everyday life of the homeland in the text, reweaving the fractured experience of existence into a meaningful whole that can be borne.

5. Summary

The formal aesthetics of qiaopi is mutually supported across structure, time-space, and imagery, jointly constructing a writing form that is both ritually appropriate and emotionally moving. Together, they point to the same function: within the media limitation of silver-letter integration and the survival situation of cross-regional separation, to construct a writing form for the emotional expression of lower-class overseas Chinese that is both ritually appropriate and sufficiently moving. The generation of this formal aesthetics is rooted in the deep structure of Chaoshan socio-cultural psychology: Confucian clan ethics regulated the ritualized format of writing behavior, the maritime drifting experience shaped the delay and blank space of spatiotemporal perception, and classical poetic tradition, in a latent manner, settled into the language habits of folk writers. Under these three cultural forces, qiaopi developed a unique "everyday poetics," carrying deep ethical emotions in plain language, seeking freedom within format, and condensing emotion through delay and blank space. The core spirit of this "everyday poetics" lies in the tension balance between form and emotion: the stricter the format, the more implicit the emotion, and the contrast between the two makes the transmission of emotion more penetrating. Thus, the formal aesthetics of qiaopi contains a key clue to understanding the Chinese way of emotional expression: placing "emotion" within the framework of "propriety," and reaching the depth of emotion through formal restraint. The examination of the formal aesthetics of qiaopi helps to re-evaluate the literary value of this special text and also provides a concrete analytical case for exploring the relationship between folk writing and traditional culture, media limitation, and poetic generation.

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