

# CREATIVE COGNITION OF DREAM IMAGERY AMONG PRACTITIONERS OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE DRAMA

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(Received 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2025; revised 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2025; accepted 29<sup>th</sup> September 2025)

**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the creative cognition and practical application of dream imagery in contemporary Chinese drama. Based on semi-structured interviews, it deeply explores how directors, playwrights, and stage designers understand and employ dream imagery. The study begins by delineating the concept of dream imagery and its multidimensional roles in dramatic narrative, aesthetic function, and expressive techniques, highlighting that current research tends to emphasize text analysis and audience reception while neglecting creators' subjective perspectives. Adopting a qualitative research paradigm informed by symbolic interactionism and cognitive psychology, this study systematically analyzes how creators construct dream imagery in script conception and stage presentation, and addresses challenges such as cultural gaps, technical constraints, and audience comprehension difficulties. The findings reveal that dream imagery serves not only as a carrier of psychological and social symbols but also reflects contemporary drama's break from traditional structures and aesthetic innovation. This paper emphasizes a three-dimensional interaction model among creators, texts, and audiences, enriching theoretical perspectives on dream imagery and offering experiential references for theatrical creation and cross-media dissemination. Finally, the study proposes theoretical and practical pathways for developing a distinctive Chinese paradigm of dream imagery creation, promoting the sustained development of dream narrative in contemporary Chinese drama.

**Keywords:** *contemporary Chinese drama, creative cognition, nonlinear narrative, audience reception*

## Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous evolution of the cultural and artistic ecosystem, contemporary Chinese drama has exhibited notable diversity and experimental tendencies in content, form, and media techniques (Jing, 2024; Wu, 2023). Particularly in exploring deep themes such as individual psychology, social structure, and collective unconscious, dream imagery, as a surreal narrative device, has gradually been widely adopted in contemporary performance art. Dream imagery in contemporary Chinese performing arts has been a significant area of exploration, as artists and performers utilize classical imageries grounded in Chinese traditions to forge evocative signification across established cultural boundaries. Unlike traditional drama's emphasis on realism and linear narrative, dream imagery often manifests through symbolism, metaphor, and nonlinear structures, posing cognitive and emotional challenges to the audience while offering rich interpretive possibilities and artistic tension (Martin et al., 2020). Since the late 20th century, Chinese drama creators have increasingly integrated dream imagery into stage narratives (Li, 2010; Zhao, 2006). Directors such as Meng Jinghui and Lai Shengchuan exemplify works featuring fluid transitions and interpenetrations between dream and reality (Bloch and Lemish, 2003). This aesthetic orientation not only reveals profound explorations of the human inner world but also signals a rupture and reconstruction of traditional dramatic structures. Concurrently, the

frequent use of dream imagery has exposed creative and dissemination issues such as ambiguous expression, cultural contextual disjunction, and uneven audience reception (Glaskin, 2015). Moreover, amid China's profound social transformation and increasingly complex individual psychology, the artistic expression of dream imagery has gradually evolved into a critical medium reflecting social anxieties, generational conflicts, and identity crises (Saari, 2020). With the rising aesthetic demands of younger audiences, theatrical creation increasingly emphasizes subjective experience and symbolic language, making dream imagery an ever more popular element in creation.

The rise of dream imagery in stage art is the outcome of interaction between artistic autonomy and social change. On one hand, innovations in technology, such as lighting, projection, and multimedia, have enabled the visual realization of dreams; on the other, playwrights and directors rely increasingly on dream lexicons, abstract yet expressive, to convey complex psychological states and social conflicts. However, scholarly research on dream imagery largely concentrates on narrative structure, aesthetic style, and audience reception, with limited attention to how creators understand and apply dream imagery in practice. Most studies approach the topic via textual analysis or audience surveys, examining the function of dream sequences in dramatic structure, the construction of symbolic meaning, and audience acceptance of nonlinear narration. While these studies provide valuable insights, they overlook creators as the primary agents constructing the imagery, their subjective cognition, creative logic, and contextual judgment. This gap makes it difficult to understand how and why dream imagery is generated and expressed as it is, and how it is influenced by creative contexts and media conditions. Furthermore, methodological limitations persist: research often relies heavily on textual dissection, lacking on-site observation and experiential interviews of the creative process; theoretically, existing frameworks mainly borrow from Western semiotics and psychology, insufficiently reflecting the cultural connotations and indigenous aesthetic logic of dream imagery in the Chinese context. Hence, there is an urgent need to approach dream imagery from the creator's perspective, exploring cognitive processes and realization paths to fill the gap in subjectivity and practical engagement. This study aims to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with contemporary Chinese drama practitioners to explore their cognition and practical experience regarding dream imagery during creation. The specific research objectives are to: (1) clarify practitioners' conceptual definitions and understandings of dream imagery; (2) analyze strategies for employing dream imagery in scriptwriting, directorial conception, and stage presentation; (3) investigate challenges encountered in practice, including audience comprehension difficulties, technical constraints, and cultural contextual gaps; (4) assess how external factors such as technological innovation and media convergence influence the presentation of dream imagery and audience perception mechanisms.

The contributions of this study are as follows. First, it broadens the scholarly focus on dream imagery in drama studies by extending attention from audience reception to creative cognition, emphasizing the cognitive frameworks and contextual sensitivity of creators. Through systematic interviews capturing creators' individual experiences, this paper reveals the generative logic and aesthetic functions of dream imagery within the contemporary theatrical milieu, laying a foundation for more comprehensive theoretical models. Second, the study attempts to construct an analytical perspective that accounts for the tension between creative intention and audience perception, moving beyond linear "text-audience" reception models to introduce a three-dimensional "creator-text-

audience” interactive framework, thereby offering a fuller understanding of the multifaceted role of dream imagery in the dramatic system. Third, the paper provides practical references for drama creators, playwrights, and directors regarding the design and presentation of dream imagery, enhancing narrative effectiveness and artistic quality. The findings also offer suggestions for drama education and audience guidance, improving the perceptibility and communicative power of dream narratives. Fourth, the research approach holds potential for cross-media expansion, as dream imagery, an inherently composite narrative resource, has long transcended traditional drama, appearing widely in film, dance, and digital art. Future studies might compare dream expressions across media to explore how dream narratives cross boundaries and impact audience aesthetic structures. In summary, as a narrative element integrating artistic expression and psychological reference, dream imagery’s role in contemporary Chinese drama is increasingly prominent. This paper endeavors to ground the investigation at the source of creation, examining the cognitive logic and operational practices behind this imagery system, thereby providing theoretical and experiential support for constructing a distinctive Chinese theatrical aesthetic and creative paradigm.

### ***Literature review***

#### ***Conceptual definition of dream imagery***

“Dream imagery” refers to a symbolic expression originating from the individual subconscious, often characterized in artistic representation by a disruption of temporal and spatial logic, non-linearity, fragmentation, and ambiguous boundaries (Aldridge, 1996). In psychology, Freud viewed dreams as indirect expressions of repressed desires, while Jung emphasized their connection to the collective unconscious, two perspectives that have profoundly influenced how dream imagery is constructed in artistic works (Boag, 2017). Freud’s theory positions dream as wish-fulfillment, revealing the unacknowledged contents of the unconscious. Artists, therefore, often employ dream imagery to express deep-seated psychological conflicts. Jung, in contrast, sees dreams as part of a shared symbolic system, imbued with universality and cultural memory. In the context of theatre, dream imagery refers to how playwrights or directors translate internal conflict, collective emotion, or surreal experiences into symbolic, abstract, visual, auditory, or narrative language, thus creating a non-realistic theatrical space. In contemporary Chinese theatre, dream imagery functions not only as a narrative strategy but also as an artistic approach to explore the boundaries between reality and fantasy (Yifang et al., 2025). Techniques include the insertion of dream sequences, spatial dislocations, and visualizations of psychological projection. These characteristics enhance symbolic potential and expressive power, while also increasing the complexity of creation and the difficulty of audience interpretation. In recent years, the advancement of new media technologies has further diversified the ways dream imagery is expressed on stage, incorporating digital video and virtual reality to create immersive and interactive experiences, thereby expanding both its aesthetic scope and representational form.

#### ***Aesthetic functions of dream imagery***

International scholars have generally approached the aesthetic functions of dream imagery from the perspectives of surrealism and performance theory. Antonin Artaud, in his theory of the “Theatre of Cruelty,” advocated for awakening the audience’s

subconscious through irrational and sensory-driven means (Walsh, 2012). He regarded dreams, representing non-logical perception, as central to his theatrical practice. Artaud emphasized surpassing the limitations of language by using intense visual and auditory stimuli to produce a dream-like alienation effect and trigger instinctual audience responses (Malik, 2007). Jerzy Grotowski, through his “poor theatre” concept, reduced dream imagery to bodily language and symbolic movement to awaken primal perception (Misopolinou, 2004). He encouraged actors to explore the subconscious through their physicality, using minimalistic staging and bodily symbols to express profound dreamlike images. Experimental theatre artists such as Robert Wilson have further emphasized the visual and musical qualities of dream-based stage language, transforming the stage into a manifestation of inner psychic illusions (Roeder, 2014). Wilson’s work, with its elaborate visual design and rhythmic pacing, evokes surreal dream spaces and deep audience immersion. In the Chinese academic context, scholars often analyze the aesthetic attributes of dream imagery from the standpoint of integrating traditional culture with modern artistic expression. Bislev (2015) argues that the drifting and unpredictable qualities of dream imagery enhance the defamiliarization effect of theatre, helping audiences break away from habitual modes of viewing. Sun (2019) points out that dream imagery frequently presents a sense of weightlessness in time and space through stage design and non-logical dramatic actions, thus constructing a unique aesthetic path for character psychology. Dream imagery in Chinese theatre also often incorporates traditional symbols, such as water, mirrors, and light, infusing it with cultural depth and Eastern philosophical meaning. Broadly speaking, dream imagery on the aesthetic level serves multiple functions: transcending realist logic, evoking emotional resonance, and representing psychological illusions. It has thus become a key expressive device in post-realist theatre.

### *Narrative structure and techniques of dream imagery*

In terms of narrative structure, scholars often regard dream imagery as a structural element that disrupts linear logic and chronological order. Previous research argues that dream narratives deconstruct traditional Aristotelian unity through techniques such as flashbacks, insertions, and juxtaposition, thus creating a “multi-reality” perspective (Gibbs, 2022). She notes that spatial-temporal dislocations and stream-of-consciousness methods in dream narratives produce multi-layered and multifaceted experiences, challenging monolithic interpretations of dramatic plots. Fredric Jameson sees dream imagery as a narrative symbol of fragmented identities and hybrid realities in postmodern culture, typifying the “stream-of-consciousness narrative” in the context of late capitalism, and reflecting fluid and ambiguous identities within complex social structures (Jameson, 2009). As for specific techniques, foreign productions often use multimedia, lighting, and physical language to construct dream scenes. For instance, German director Katie Mitchell employs projection, mirrors, and live editing to sharply contrast dream segments with reality. Belgian director Jan Fabre uses repetitive actions and alienated body language to convey the anxiety and evasiveness of dreams. These combinations of visual and physical language help audiences access the irrational and subconscious dimensions of dream imagery. In Chinese scholarship, more attention is paid to how dream imagery challenges plot-centered dramaturgy and constructs non-linear, non-causal theatrical logic. Phung (2012) observes that in Stan Lai’s *A Dream Like a Dream*, the dream does not merely function as an embedded narrative structure but also serves as a supplementary logic to character emotion, marked by multiplicity of

perspective and layered temporality. Clift and Clift (2020) emphasizes that dream imagery often disrupts character unity through object metaphors and multiple role transformations, reflecting a deeper reflection on the relationship between ego, reality, and the Other. In sum, the incorporation of dream imagery into narrative structure allows drama to escape linear constraints and align more closely with the natural flow of consciousness and the spontaneity of the subconscious, thus fostering formal and thematic innovation.

### ***Reception and dissemination of dream imagery***

Studies on the reception of dream imagery primarily examine how audiences interpret dream segments and respond emotionally. Scholarship in reception psychology emphasizes how dream imagery evokes “psychological projection” and “empathic resonance.” In performance theory, Richard Schechner’s concept of “restored behavior” suggests that dream sequences can trigger latent psychological structures in audiences, stimulating irrational empathy and enabling them to experience the subconscious world of the characters (Sidebottom, 2018). Others see dreams as “emotional constructs” that enhance immersion in participatory theatre, allowing audiences to actively engage with dream narratives and form personalized emotional responses (Bott et al., 2003; Fisher, 1990). In dissemination studies, the polysemy and symbolism of dream sequences are central concerns. Roland Barthes’s theory of the “open text” holds that dream narratives allow for multiple interpretations, enhancing textual openness and audience agency—an idea that has significantly influenced analyses of dream segments in contemporary “deconstructive theatre.” Researchers have focused on the influence of dream imagery on different audience groups. Woods et al. (2013), using eye-tracking experiments, found that while dream sequences capture attention, their semantic ambiguity significantly increases interpretive difficulty. Cultural background and viewing experience greatly affect how dream imagery is received (Hollan, 2009); many audience members misinterpret symbolic content due to a lack of psychological or semiotic knowledge, resulting in a “reception gap.” Additionally, scholars have identified the problem of “contextual absence” in cross-cultural dissemination. For instance, dream segments in Chinese theatre often rely on localized myths or psychological frameworks, which may be misunderstood or overlooked in international contexts, thereby weakening communicative efficacy. Overall, while dream imagery enhances theatrical expressiveness, its ambiguity and openness also present challenges in audience reception and cultural transmission. Future research may draw on cognitive psychology and intercultural communication theory to further explore the comprehensibility of dream imagery and audience response mechanisms, offering theoretical support for its effective global dissemination.

### ***Literature gaps***

Despite the growing body of literature on dream imagery, several significant gaps remain. First, existing studies have largely focused on textual analysis or audience reception, with insufficient attention paid to the perspectives of creative practitioners such as directors, playwrights, and stage designers. This limits our understanding of the generative mechanisms and creative logic behind dream imagery. Second, empirical studies remain weak, particularly those involving qualitative interviews and detailed documentation of the creative process, leading to a lack of insight into the practical

operations of dream imagery. Third, many studies rely heavily on Western theoretical frameworks, with limited exploration of how dream imagery is adapted within Chinese cultural contexts, making it difficult to establish a localized theoretical system. Moreover, current research tends to center on mainstream theatre in major cities and well-known directors, neglecting the diverse practices of smaller troupes, emerging artists, and marginalized creators, thus narrowing the scope of inquiry. In response, this study adopts a creator-centered perspective, employing semi-structured interviews to systematically examine the creative experiences of multiple playwrights and directors. It aims to explore the practical pathways and aesthetic choices involved in the generation of dream imagery, taking into account cultural backgrounds and regional variations. The goal is to build a more practice-oriented and culturally grounded theoretical framework to address the above-mentioned gaps.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Research paradigm***

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, emphasizing in-depth understanding and interpretation of the mechanisms through which dream imagery is generated in theatrical creation. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex socio-cultural phenomena and subjective experiences, and it facilitates the revelation of the creators' multi-layered cognition and meaning construction related to dream imagery. The theoretical framework is grounded in a social constructivist perspective, which posits that dream imagery is not merely a projection of individual inner experiences but also a product of collective cognition and symbolic interaction shaped by sociocultural contexts. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, this study investigates how creators reconstruct the symbolic meanings of dream imagery within theatrical space through various systems of signs. At the same time, insights from cognitive psychology, especially regarding dreams and the mechanisms of the subconscious, are incorporated to provide psychological support for the interpretation of dream imagery. Theories from drama studies on the production and reception of dream imagery further offer analytical tools to examine the transformation of symbols and symbolic expression in creative processes. By integrating interdisciplinary theories from psychology, cultural studies, and the performing arts, this research seeks to construct a comprehensive analytical framework. This framework aims to illuminate both the generative pathways and the cultural implications of dream imagery in contemporary Chinese theatre.

### ***Sample selection***

The study focuses on the field of contemporary Chinese theatre, selecting directors, playwrights, and stage designers as the primary research subjects, given their central roles in the conception and realization of dream imagery. Sample selection follows the principle of typical cases, covering medium- to large-scale theatre companies and independent theatre studios in three major cultural hubs: Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Forty experienced and representative creators were selected, including those known for experimental aesthetics and adaptations of traditional drama, in order to reflect a diversity of artistic styles and creative philosophies. This diversified sampling strategy allows for an in-depth exploration of the generation and expression

strategies of dream imagery from multiple backgrounds and perspectives. Moreover, by analyzing differences across regions and artistic schools, the study examines how local cultural environments shape the creation of dream imagery, thereby laying the groundwork for the broader applicability and theoretical generalization of the research findings. Sample selection is not only based on artistic experience and the influence of works but also considers the creators' depth of understanding and the diversity of expressive approaches toward dream imagery. This ensures the richness and representativeness of the collected data.

### ***Data collection***

Data collection is primarily conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews and on-site observation. The interview design centers around topics such as the creative motivations, sources of inspiration, expressive techniques, technical implementation, and challenges and solutions encountered during the creation of dream imagery. Each interview lasts approximately 60 to 90 minutes, ensuring the opportunity for detailed exploration of the participants' viewpoints. Interviews are audio-and video-recorded to preserve the completeness of the information and accurately capture nuanced details. On-site observation supplements interview data by facilitating a better understanding of team collaboration and technical implementation in the creative process, particularly in relation to stage design, lighting, and multimedia technologies used to represent dream imagery. The researcher also participates in portions of script rehearsals and production processes to collect first-hand data that complements the interviews. By triangulating multiple data sources, the study forms a systematic understanding of the generative process of dream imagery, allowing for cross-validation and deep analysis. Additionally, careful attention is paid to creating a comfortable and open interview environment to foster trust, enabling participants to candidly share their authentic creative experiences and reflections.

### ***Data analysis***

The study employs grounded theory coding to systematically analyze the interview and observation data (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012). The analysis process is divided into three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding phase, interview transcripts are analyzed line-by-line to identify key elements and concepts related to the generation of dream imagery, such as sources of inspiration, expressive methods, and cultural symbols. In the axial coding phase, related concepts are integrated to construct thematic categories, thereby revealing the internal connections and logical structures within the creative process. The selective coding phase centers on the core category of "mechanisms of dream imagery generation," through which a theoretical model is developed to explain how creators construct dream imagery within both cultural contexts and artistic practices. In addition, textual analysis and comparative case studies of specific creative works are incorporated to enhance analytical rigor and interpretative validity. Qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo is used to assist in data organization and coding, thereby improving efficiency and systematic processing. The study also emphasizes the interaction between theory and practice: the interview guide is continuously adjusted in light of coding results to ensure the focus and depth of ongoing data collection. Through a meticulous analytical process, this research aims to construct a scientifically grounded and empirically

supported theoretical framework for the generation of dream imagery, providing a solid foundation for future theoretical development and practical application.

## Results and Discussion

### *Analysis of the motivations and current practices in dream imagery creation*

According to the data collected, the creation of dream imagery in contemporary Chinese theatre is primarily driven by the artistic need to express real-life predicaments and the desire to evoke emotional resonance among audiences (*Table 1*). The survey results indicate that 85% of the interviewed creators believe dream imagery helps transcend the constraints of linear narrative and allows for the portrayal of characters' complex inner worlds. Approximately 72% noted that their creation of dream imagery often combines personal experience with social realities, reflecting a high degree of both individualization and sociocultural embeddedness. However, the application of dream imagery in practice varies significantly. Professional theatre companies in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou tend to favor technologically intensive methods, such as multimedia projections and dynamic lighting design, while smaller or regional companies rely more on symbolic props and traditional visual metaphors. This divergence reflects not only the influence of resource availability on the modes of realization but also reveals differing artistic interpretations and aesthetic preferences. Although most creators recognize the expressive potential of dream imagery as a non-linear and non-logical form, they also acknowledge the practical challenges of vague articulation and limited audience comprehension. Many respondents emphasized that dream imagery serves not only as an artistic breakthrough but also as a medium of emotional dialogue with the audience, requiring a delicate balance between creative intention and interpretive accessibility. In other words, while dream imagery enables directors to externalize their inner vision, it also tests the cognitive engagement of the audience, making its application both complex and inherently tension-filled.

**Table 1.** Audience awareness and understanding of dream imagery (N=40).

Cognitivve dimension	Numbers	Percentage
Expressing internal conflicts of characters	34	85.0
Reflecting social realities and collective memory	29	72.0
Breaking traditional narrative logic	31	77.5
Exploring irrationality and the unconscious	26	65.0
Enhancing emotional resonance with the audience	33	82.5

### *Techniques and technological applications in dream imagery*

Survey data reveal that the techniques used to construct dream imagery primarily center on visual symbolism, non-linear narrative structures, spatial design, and the integration of multimedia technologies. Lighting and color design are considered by 90% of respondents as core components of dream construction. Additionally, 70% employ projection technologies, and 60% incorporate sound effects and music to reinforce the dream-like atmosphere. These findings illustrate the increasing dependence on, and creative use of, technological tools in modern theatre, demonstrating the expressive richness and diversity of dream imagery. Non-linear storytelling has also emerged as a prominent structural trend. About 68% of creators use techniques such as flashbacks, parallel narratives, and fragmentation to disrupt

traditional chronological progression and emphasize the fluidity of dream logic. Spatial dynamics, such as rotating stages and suspended installations, are employed by over 55% of respondents to simulate spatial dislocation and further accentuate the surreal quality of dream sequences. Nonetheless, the growing reliance on technology has introduced new challenges in terms of coordination and integration. Some creators reported that technical limitations frequently hinder their creative freedom, particularly in smaller companies constrained by limited budgets and outdated equipment. Overall, while technological innovation continues to expand the expressive range of dream imagery, it also necessitates careful planning and interdisciplinary collaboration. As emerging technologies evolve, the theatrical language of dream imagery is poised for deeper and more imaginative innovations.

### ***Challenges in dream imagery creation and strategies for resolution***

Interviews with creators reveal that the production of dream imagery faces several challenges, including vague expression, audience comprehension barriers, and technical execution difficulties. Approximately 78% of respondents indicated that the inherent ambiguity of dream imagery often leads to misinterpretation or disconnection among audiences, resulting in what has been described as an “aesthetic gap”: a phenomenon echoed in previous theoretical literature. Director F remarked: “Dream sequences frequently require the audience to have some background in cultural or psychological concepts; without this, misreading is almost inevitable.” To address these issues, creators have adopted a range of strategies. Some production teams collect feedback from preview audiences and post-performance discussions, then adjust the narrative rhythm and symbolic density of dream sequences to enhance clarity. Others increase the explicit representation of characters' psychological states to create stronger narrative cohesion between dream and reality. On the technical front, repeated rehearsals and close coordination across departments are emphasized to minimize operational disruptions. Budget constraints and spatial limitations remain persistent obstacles. Companies in major cities are generally better equipped with funding and facilities, whereas smaller troupes rely more on creative substitutions and symbolic language. A number of interviewees pointed out that maintaining artistic integrity under economic pressure, while still achieving a compelling dream aesthetic—is a pressing issue that demands ongoing negotiation. In essence, the creation of dream imagery requires artists to navigate between conceptual ambition and practical feasibility, balancing aesthetic autonomy with operational constraints.

### ***Cultural context and audience reception of dream imagery***

The survey findings indicate that cultural context plays a significant role in shaping the interpretation and reception of dream imagery. Most respondents agreed that dream imagery in Chinese theatre is rooted in the fusion of traditional cultural symbols and modern sociopolitical themes, giving it a uniquely local character. Mythology, folklore, and collective memory frequently serve as source materials for symbolic construction. However, differences in cultural literacy and psychological awareness among audiences often result in stratified aesthetic experiences. In particular, cross-cultural performances pose greater challenges. Some creators observed that dream imagery may be misinterpreted or diluted in international contexts due to the absence of shared cultural frameworks. Several respondents called for stronger mechanisms of audience education

and cultural mediation to enhance interpretive efficacy and communicative depth. Beyond the intentions of the creators, the meanings embedded in dream imagery are shaped by contemporary values and collective consciousness. Interpretations may differ drastically across regions and demographic groups, underlining the complexity and pluralism of this artistic device. Moving forward, a key challenge for creators lies in preserving the originality and cultural specificity of dream imagery while achieving broader resonance across diverse audiences. Striking this balance will be essential to the continued development and international dissemination of dream-infused theatre in China.

## Conclusion

Through a systematic investigation and analysis of the use of dream imagery in contemporary Chinese theatre, this study yields the following key findings: (1) As a means of transcending traditional narrative frameworks, dream imagery has emerged as a significant artistic strategy for expressing inner conflict and reflecting social realities in contemporary theatre. Most creators believe that dream imagery not only enriches the theatrical language but also enhances the emotional complexity and depth of performance. By disrupting the linearity of time and space, dream sequences allow for the articulation of irrational and subconscious psychological states, rendering dramatic texts more open-ended and symbolically charged. (2) The methods of expressing dream imagery are diverse, encompassing visual symbolism, nonlinear narrative structures, spatial design, and the integration of multimedia technologies. In particular, lighting, color, projection, and sound effects are regarded as core elements in the construction of dream sequences, significantly enhancing stage expressiveness. However, disparities in technical resources result in pronounced differences in the realization of dream imagery among theatre groups. While professional troupes in major cities benefit from advanced technical support, small and medium-sized companies often rely more on traditional symbols and creative improvisation. (3) The creation of dream imagery involves a series of challenges, including ambiguous expression, audience comprehension difficulties, and technological limitations. Due to its inherent polysemy, dream imagery often elicits layered interpretations, and in some cases, confusion or alienation among audiences. In response, creators have adopted various strategies, such as incorporating audience feedback, making characters' psychological states more explicit, and strengthening cross-departmental technical collaboration, in order to improve narrative clarity and artistic impact. Furthermore, budget constraints and venue limitations remain major obstacles to the scale and technical sophistication of dream imagery, representing a common concern across the industry. (4) The cultural context exerts a profound influence on both the creation and reception of dream imagery. Rooted in the fusion of traditional Chinese culture and contemporary social narratives, dream symbols are marked by their indigenous characteristics. However, variations in audience cultural literacy and psychological knowledge lead to divergent levels of understanding and appreciation, with cross-cultural communication posing particular challenges. Creators emphasize the importance of audience education and cultural interpretation to foster more inclusive and nuanced understandings of dream imagery and to facilitate its broader dissemination. In sum, dream imagery, as a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates artistic innovation, technological application, and cultural transmission, holds considerable potential for development. Nonetheless, it also presents numerous

challenges that require continuous exploration in terms of creative philosophy, technical execution, and communicative strategies.

Based on the above findings, this study offers the following recommendations: First, creators should deepen their understanding of the artistic connotations and expressive principles of dream imagery, aiming to enhance both its expressive power and structural coherence. Academic forums, interdisciplinary collaboration, and creative experimentation should be encouraged to expand the repertoire of techniques available for dream imagery and to develop multi-sensory, multi-dimensional modes of expression that support its systematic integration into theatrical language. Second, technical support and innovation should be strengthened. Government agencies and cultural institutions are advised to increase investment in theatrical infrastructure, particularly in equipping small and medium-sized troupes with advanced multimedia tools and providing technical training. This would contribute to the broader dissemination and enhancement of technological methods for realizing dream imagery. In parallel, creative teams should reinforce interdepartmental collaboration to ensure effective integration of artistic and technical elements, thereby improving the visual and auditory effects of dream scenes. Third, audience education and communication strategies should be enhanced to increase the acceptability of dream imagery. Activities such as workshops, curated performances, and public lectures could be used to familiarize audiences with the cultural references and symbolic meanings embedded in dream imagery, thereby reducing interpretive barriers. Interactive dissemination through new media platforms may also enhance audience engagement and experiential depth, supporting the popularization and deeper understanding of dream-related aesthetics. Finally, the cultural specificity and cross-cultural dissemination of dream imagery should be carefully addressed. In international contexts, creators must adapt and reframe culturally specific symbols in ways that are accessible to diverse audiences, while preserving artistic authenticity. This entails adjusting expressive strategies to align with varying cultural backgrounds. Policymakers should also support initiatives that promote cultural diversity and exchange, thereby facilitating the global circulation of Chinese theatrical works that feature dream imagery. While this study has provided a relatively comprehensive examination of the creation and reception of dream imagery in contemporary Chinese theatre, several limitations remain. First, the research relied primarily on interviews, with limited inclusion of field observations or experimental design. Future studies could incorporate live performance observation, audience psychological assessments, and experimental methods to generate more comprehensive and multi-faceted data and to deepen our understanding of audience reception mechanisms. Second, although the study touches upon the technical aspects of dream imagery, it does not thoroughly examine the mechanisms by which specific technologies affect artistic outcomes. Future research could explore the integration of emerging stage technologies and their capacity to enhance expressive power and audience experience in dream-based performances. Lastly, the analysis of cultural context remains at a general level. Future research might investigate cognitive differences across cultural groups in greater detail, with particular attention to issues of translation and creative adaptation in cross-cultural settings. This could further promote the international development of dream imagery as a distinctive theatrical aesthetic.

## Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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