



Analyzing the “Zhuhai Fisher Maiden” Legend through Greimas’ Semiotic Square: Narrative Structure and Cultural Implications

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Abstract. The “semiotic square” theory (A.J. Greimas) posits that any meaning structure contains a fundamental opposition between [X] and [anti-X]. The “Zhuhai Fisher Maiden” statue, though Zhuhai’s most renowned landmark, has long lacked systematic academic study as a “living myth.” This article examines three legend versions—“grateful,” “tragic,” and “guardian”—via Greimas’ semiotic square, revealing three relational sets in each: oppositional, contradictory, and implicational. Typical oppositions manifest as semantic conflicts between the Dragon Maiden ([X]) and antagonists such as Cangjiao, fox spirit, or clam spirit ([anti-X]), reflecting deeper value conflicts (e.g., true love vs. hatred, justice vs. evil). Despite surface differences, the three versions share a highly isomorphic deep narrative structure. The study further explores their intertextual links with traditional Chinese religious culture, including Daoist cosmology, folk beliefs, and Confucian ethics. The legend is thus not merely a local “living myth” but a composite cultural text that continues to shape worldviews and values in the Lingnan coastal region, holding significant academic and cultural heritage value.

Keywords: “Zhuhai Fisher Maiden”; folklore; Greimas’ “semiotic square”; narrative analysis; religious cultural heritage; living myth

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Zhuhai has been inhabited since antiquity, with events such as the Battle of Yamen (1279), the establishment of the Gongbei Customs Barrier (1553), and the Qi’ao villagers’ resistance against British opium vessels (1833) recorded in classical texts (Huang, X., 2011)^[10]. Alongside these documented histories, a rich body of myths and legends has been perpetuated through oral transmission. These “living myths,” though absent from official chronicles, form an essential part of local cultural memory, with the legend of the “Zhuhai Fisher Maiden” being the most emblematic.

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1.2 Theoretical Framework: Greimas’ “Semiotic Square”

Introduced by Algirdas Julien Greimas in *Structural Semantics* (1966) ^[7] and further developed in *On Meaning* (Greimas, 1987) ^[8], the “semiotic square” draws on Saussure and Jakobson’s binary oppositions. Within any meaning structure, a fundamental opposition is always present (Fischer, 2025) ^[3]. The square comprises four elements: [X] and [anti-X] form a relation of contrariety; [non-X] is the contradictory of [X]; [non-anti-X] is the contradictory of [anti-X]. Implication exists between [X] and [non-anti-X] (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1998) ^[14], and between [anti-X] and [non-X], while no direct opposition necessarily exists between [non-anti-X] and [non-X].

1.3 Literature Review

Greimas’ semiotic square has been applied mainly to novels and films (e.g., Gao & Li, 2016; Al-Hiloo et al., 2019), ^{[6][1]} with comparatively limited use in mythology and folklore (Pottier, 2006) ^[13]. In Chinese mythology research, scholars note an overemphasis on ancient texts at the expense of “living myths” (Schipper et al., 2011, pp. xv–xvi) ^[15]. Research on the “Zhuhai Fisher Maiden” focuses largely on sculpture (Huang, 1994; Lai, 2014) ^{[9][11]}, dance drama (Fu, 2020) ^[5], and urban tourism (Fu, 2016) ^[4], with only one recent thesis addressing the folklore text directly (Peng, 2024) ^[12]. Existing studies are methodologically conventional and scarce in core journals.

1.4 Research Gap and Positioning

Three limitations exist: neglect of the folklore text itself, constrained methodologies, and insufficient attention to the legend’s “living” character and deeper cultural implications. This study addresses these gaps by applying Greimas’ semiotic square to three representative versions.

1.5 Research Methodology

The three versions—“grateful,” “tragic,” and “guardian”—were collected through ethnographic interviews and local social networks following the 2012 release of *The Legend of the Fisher Maiden* in Zhuhai (Deng & Chen, 2012) ^[2]. Analysis proceeds in five steps: (1) outlining narrative structure; (2) assigning semiotic square positions ([X]: positively valenced protagonist; [anti-X]: direct antagonist; [non-anti-X]: supporting forces; [non-X]: contradictory yet non-oppositional forces); (3) analyzing interactions; (4) comparing deep structures across versions; (5) elucidating cultural implications.

2 Semiotic Square Analysis of Three Versions

2.1 The “Grateful Version”

Narrative Framework.

Near Xianglu Bay, the Dragon Maiden descends to the human realm and falls in love

with the fisherman Haipeng. Cangjiao, a dragon-like creature who loves her unrequitedly, sows discord. The Dragon Palace Steward had warned that removing any of her eight bracelets would endanger her life. Cangjiao tricks Haipeng into demanding one; the Maiden removes it in grief. Haipeng, remorseful, retrieves the “Resurrection Herb” from Jiuzhou Island with the Elder’s guidance, reviving her. They wed and later present a giant pearl to the Elder in gratitude.

Semiotic Square Analysis.

- [X]: Dragon Maiden—pursues genuine love and faithfulness; her self-sacrifice is narratively affirmed.
- [anti-X]: Cangjiao—employs deceit and dissension out of jealousy.
- [non-anti-X]: Haipeng and the Elder of Jiuzhou—auxiliary forces who cherish love and undertake salvific action.
- [non-X]: The eight Stewards—their regulatory constraints objectively impede free love and are exploited by [anti-X] as a trap.

Structural relations are illustrated in Figure 1.

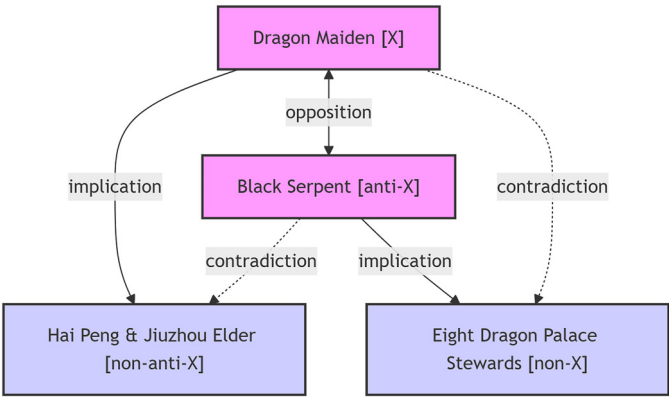


Fig. 1. Semiotic Square of the "Grateful Version".

Note: The following diagrammatic conventions apply to this and subsequent figures:

- Solid double-headed arrows: Oppositional relationships
- Dashed arrows (unidirectional): Contradictory relationships
- Solid arrows: Implicational relationships

2.2 The “Tragic Version”

Narrative Framework.

A fox spirit coveting a bay’s auspicious feng shui takes residence on Yehu Island, conjuring typhoons that bring calamity. A-Hai and A-Zhu, childhood sweethearts

betrothed to marry, lose both sets of parents in a hurricane. Seeking vengeance, they follow the Elder of Jiuzhou’s guidance to Gaolan Island, where a celestial scripture reveals that burning sandalwood from Xiangshan in a green jade incense burner will break the sorcery. They lead villagers to burn sandalwood, weakening the fox spirit. In retaliation, the fox spirit dispatches an otter spirit in human form to woo A-Zhu and sow discord. A-Hai falls prey to deception, growing suspicious of A-Zhu. Heartbroken, A-Zhu’s tears extinguish a luminous pearl, allowing the fox spirit to recover her powers. Remorseful, A-Zhu prays to the Dragon King; the pearl’s radiance is restored. A-Hai and the awakened otter spirit join forces against the fox spirit. All three perish in the final confrontation, vanquishing the fox spirit. A-Zhu, holding the luminous pearl, transforms into a stone statue to illuminate the path home for departed souls.

Semiotic Square Analysis.

- [X]: A-Zhu (and A-Hai)—core protagonists embodying justice, resilience, and sacrifice; their struggle escalates from personal vengeance to collective defense of their homeland.
- [anti-X]: The Fox Spirit—malevolent force whose pursuit of self-cultivation disregards living beings, unleashing disasters and threatening the human order.
- [non-anti-X]: The Elder of Jiuzhou, the Dragon King, and the awakened Otter Spirit—auxiliary forces providing guidance, divine intervention, and combat support.
- [non-X]: The Otter Spirit in his pre-awakening, humanoid form—briefly manipulated as an agent of dissension; his selfish actions generate emotional contradiction with [X] without direct opposition.

Structural relations are illustrated in Figure 2.

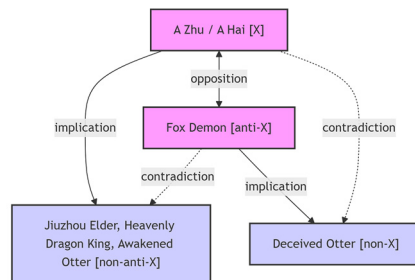


Fig. 2. Semiotic Square of the "Tragic Version"

2.3 The “Guardian Version”

Narrative Framework.

A clam spirit in the deep sea conjures waves and plunders islanders’ possessions. A-Hai, a young fisherwoman who loses her parents to a typhoon wrought by the spirit,

learns from an island elder that the “South Sea Pearl” can defeat it. After braving perils to retrieve the pearl, she rallies the community and vanquishes the clam spirit. Understanding the spirit still poses a threat, A-Hai grasps the pearl and transforms into a stone statue on the rocky shore, becoming an eternal guardian.

Semiotic Square Analysis.

- [X]: A-Hai—embodies guardianship, sacrifice, and collective wellbeing; her logic transforms from personal vengeance to preventative, eternal guardianship.
- [anti-X]: The Clam Spirit—represents destruction, plunder, and chaos; its persistent threat constitutes the fundamental conflict.
- [non-anti-X]: The Elder and the islanders—provide knowledge and collective support, forming an alliance with [X] against the antagonistic force.
- [non-X]: Latent, unnamed maritime threats or villagers who doubted A-Hai—create a latent contradiction with the permanent tranquility [X] seeks to establish.

Structural relations are illustrated in Figure 3.

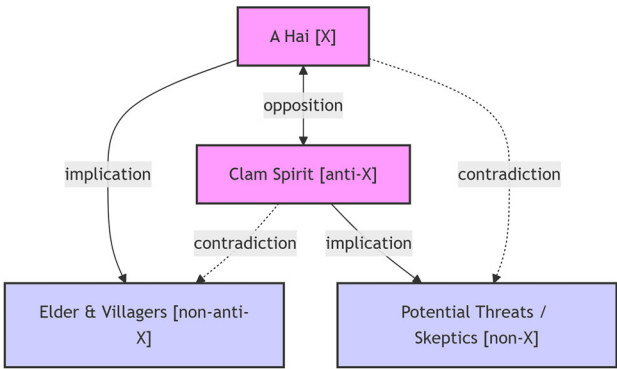


Fig. 3. Semiotic Square of the "Guardian Version"

3 Comparative Analysis of the Three Versions

The semiotic square analysis reveals high isomorphism in the deep structures of the three versions. Comparison proceeds from three dimensions: the core opposition axis, the auxiliary contradiction axis, and the deep implication axis.

3.1 The Core Opposition Axis: Value Conflicts between [X] and [anti-X]

As the fundamental narrative and moral driver across all three versions, the core axis of opposition between [X] and [anti-X] is systematically illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The Core Axis of Opposition

Version	Values Represented by [X]	Values Represented by [anti-X]	Nature of Conflict
Grateful	Genuine love, fidelity, pure love transcending boundaries	Jealousy, deception, destruction from frustrated desire	Creation vs. destruction of love
Tragic	Justice, resilience, collective action	Greed, malevolence, wanton destruction	Guardianship of justice vs. dissemination of evil
Guardian	Guardianship, sacrifice, collective wellbeing	Plunder, chaos, persistent threat	Eternal guardianship vs. Sustained destruction

In sum, the core opposition between [X] and [anti-X] constitutes the moral and narrative engine of all three versions, as summarised in Table 1.

3.2 The Auxiliary Contradiction Axis: [X] vs. [non-X] and [anti-X] vs. [non-anti-X]

In the auxiliary axis, the opposition between [X] and [non-X], and between [anti-X] and [non-anti-X], constitutes the secondary narrative driver, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The Auxiliary Axis of Contradiction

Version	[X] vs. [non-X]	[anti-X] vs. [non-anti-X]
Grateful	Dragon Maiden’s free love vs. Stewards’ regulatory constraints	Cangjiao’s deceit vs. Haipeng and Elder’s reparation
Tragic	A-Zhu’s justice vs. otter spirit’s emotional misunderstanding	Fox Spirit’s evil vs. Elder, Dragon King, and awakened otter
Guardian	A-Hai’s permanent tranquility vs. latent maritime threats	Clam Spirit’s destruction vs. Elder and islanders’ support

These relations ensure narrative conflict extends beyond simplistic good-evil binaries, introducing regulatory constraints, emotional misunderstandings, and latent threats.

3.3 The Deep Implication Axis

Collaboration between [X] and [non-anti-X].

As the positive counterpoint to the [anti-X] vs. [non-X] coupling, the collaboration between [X] and [non-anti-X] is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. The Collaborative Relationship between [X] and [non-anti-X]

Version	[X]	[non-anti-X]	Mode of Assistance
Grateful	Dragon Maiden	Haipeng, Elder of Jiuzhou	Remorse, sacrifice, guidance for “Resurrection Herb”
Tragic	A-Zhu (and A-Hai)	Elder, Dragon King, awakened otter	Guidance, divine empowerment, defection to alliance
Guardian	A-Hai	Elder, islanders	Revelation of pearl’s secret, collective resistance

Thus, [X] and [non-anti-X] form a “synergistic alliance” within the narrative structure.

Coupling between [anti-X] and [non-X].

As a secondary structural driver, the coupling between [anti-X] and [non-X] is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. The Coupling Relationship between [anti-X] and [non-X]

Version	[anti-X]	[non-X]	Mode of Utilisation
Grateful	Cangjiao	Eight Stewards	Exploitation of bracelet taboo as trap
Tragic	Fox Spirit	Otter spirit (deceived phase)	Exploitation of selfish desires to sow discord
Guardian	Clam Spirit	Latent maritime threats	[anti-X] as concentrated embodiment of [non-X]

[non-X] frequently serves as a springboard or amplifier for [anti-X]’s destructive agenda, though elements within [non-X] (e.g., the otter spirit) may undergo transformation.

3.4 Deep Structural Isomorphism

Despite surface differences—protagonists ranging from dragon maiden to mortal fisherwomen, conflicts from emotional entanglements to good-evil struggles, outcomes from harmonious unions to tragic transformations—the three versions share a pronounced isomorphism in deep structure. Each is organized around a core opposition between [X] (positive value) and [anti-X] (negative value), while [non-X] (regulatory/intermediate forces) and [non-anti-X] (wisdom/assistance forces) create a dynamically stable meaning-generating system. This framework foregrounds the Fisher Maiden’s moral radiance and sacrificial spirit, reflecting traditional values of good-evil opposition, cosmic retribution, and collective mutual aid.

4 Deep Intertextuality with Traditional Chinese Religious Culture

4.1 Daoist Cosmology and Self-Cultivation

All three versions are permeated by Daoist concepts: a tripartite “humans-immortals-demons” cosmos embodying the “Three Realms”; antagonistic motivations tied to “self-cultivation” (xiūliàn) and protagonists’ reliance on “sacred objects” (bǎowù) as narrative transformations of Daoist ritual implements (fǎqì); and plot devices such as immortal-to-human transformation or petrification embodying Daoist “transformation” (biànhuà) and “returning to authenticity” (fǎn pǔ guī zhēn).

4.2 Folk Beliefs and Local Ritual Practices

The legend intertwines with Lingnan maritime folk beliefs: the Dragon Maiden as a feminized sea deity; motifs of “odor-driven exorcism” and “blood-mediated spiritual communion” (e.g., burning sandalwood, irrigating with blood); petrification episodes connecting to apotropaic traditions (shígāndāng, wàngfūshí), transforming the fisher maiden into an eternal guardian.

4.3 Confucian Ethics and Religiously-Infused Secular Morality

The legends foreground Confucian ethics: vengeance and guardianship originate in “filial piety” (xiào) and evolve into collective “greater righteousness” (dà yì); the Grateful Version constructs a moral cycle of “fidelity-sincerity-reciprocity” (xìn-chéng-bào); the Fisher Maiden’s sacrifice embodies “sacrificing life to achieve benevolence” (shā shēn chéng rén) and religious “self-immolation in devotion” (shě shēn fèngxiàn).

4.4 Conclusion: Local Legend as Vehicle for Religious Culture

The multiple variants collectively form a vibrant system of local religious-cultural transmission, preserving traditional symbols and concepts, providing etiological explanations for local beliefs and landscapes, and translating Confucian precepts into emotionally resonant sacred narratives. Transmitted across generations, they continue to shape worldviews and ethical orientations in the Lingnan coastal region.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Research Findings

Three findings emerge. First, despite surface divergences, the three versions share isomorphic deep structures, constituted by core opposition ([X] vs. [anti-X]), auxiliary contradiction ([X] vs. [non-X], [anti-X] vs. [non-anti-X]), and deep implication ([X] vs. [non-anti-X], [anti-X] vs. [non-X]) axes. Second, functional character relationships remain stable regardless of identity variations. Third, the legend is a composite cultural vehicle bearing Daoist thought, folk beliefs, and Confucian ethics, continuing to shape worldviews and ethical norms through intergenerational transmission.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study offers contributions in four respects: originality in research object (first systematic examination of the folklore text); originality in theoretical perspective (first application of Greimas’ semiotic square to this legend); originality in methodological approach (integration of structuralist analysis with religious-cultural interpretation); and originality in research materials (fieldwork and local network data).

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations include focus on three versions, under-elaboration of certain elements (e.g., [non-X] in the Guardian Version), and the need for more documentary support for religious-cultural interpretation. Future research may expand version collection, integrate with other narrative theories, undertake cross-regional comparative studies, and examine contemporary transformations.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

As a precious “living myth” of the Lingnan coast, the “Zhuhai Fisher Maiden” legend—with its stable deep structure and profound religious-cultural significance—reflects local communities’ cognitive frameworks and value orientations toward maritime perils and social conflicts. Beyond entertainment, these legends constitute a cultural encoding system bearing worldviews, values, and beliefs. Preserving such living cultural heritage deserves sustained attention from academia and the broader community.

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