

Title: Advancing Pragmatic Inference in Chinese through Theatrical Texts: A Practitioner Inquiry on "*The Thunderstorm*"

Abstract

For learners of Chinese, understanding what is implied but not directly said is a major challenge. Chinese is a high-context language, where meaning often depends on shared cultural knowledge, subtle cues, and situational factors rather than clear statements. This study explores how classic theater can be a powerful classroom tool to develop this crucial skill, known as pragmatic inference. Focusing on Cao Yu's renowned 1934 play *The Thunderstorm*, the research asks: How can this dramatically rich text help learners decode hidden meanings, and what teaching strategies make this process effective?

Using the lens of Relevance Theory, which explains how we interpret communication by balancing the effort required with the meaning gained, the paper analyzes the play's dense, indirect dialogue. Scenes are charged with unspoken history, strategic silence, metaphorical language, and strict social rules about family, class, and face. These features mirror the real-world inferential challenges learners face, making the play an ideal training ground.

The core of the study presents a practical teaching framework built on three stages of support, or "scaffolding." Before reading, tools like film viewings and character maps provide students with the necessary background about the plot, relationships, and historical setting. During close reading of key scenes, guided activities help students unpack subtext—for example, by comparing characters' literal words with their likely intentions using simple charts. After reading, synthesis tasks encourage learners to connect these details to the play's larger themes, such as oppressive traditions or inevitable fate.

Most importantly, this process is driven by metapragmatic discussion: carefully designed classroom conversations where the teacher prompts students to first notice, then analyze, and finally critique the hidden social rules shaping the characters' communication. Why do they speak in circles? What are they afraid to say aloud? Who benefits from this indirectness? Through such questions, students move from passive reading to active critical thinking.

Findings suggest that this structured, yet dialogic approach does more than promote comprehension of a single play. It cultivates a transferable form of literacy, empowering learners to question how language operates in other high-context situations, from historical texts to modern media and interpersonal interactions. While requiring thoughtful preparation from teachers, the model demonstrates that literary texts like *The Thunderstorm* are not just cultural artifacts, but vital tools for fostering deeper interpretive agility and social awareness in the language classroom.