

# Research on the Symbolic Meaning of White Cranes — A Case Study of *Fly with the Crane*

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## Abstract

*Fly with the Crane* is a feature film directed by Chinese filmmaker Li Ruijun in 2012, adapted from the short story of the same name by Su Tong. Set against a family backdrop, the film explores the emotional conflicts and collisions of life philosophies between the elderly and their family members when facing life and death decisions. Cranes play a significant symbolic role in the film, reflecting the characters' inner emotions and their different understandings of life, death, and destiny. From the crane pattern on the coffin to the real white cranes in the film, and to the crane in the heart of the protagonist, five types of white cranes present different layers of symbolic meanings, enriching the depth and connotation of the film. At the same time, the film also reflects the current reality of scarce land resources, conflicts in resource allocation, and changes in people's consciousness, indicating that the "crane culture" may gradually disappear.

**Keywords:** white crane, *Fly with the Crane*, symbolic meaning, semiotics

## 1. Introduction

In Chinese culture, the white crane is endowed with rich symbolic meanings and is often regarded as a symbol of auspiciousness, longevity, and spirituality. This symbolism is not only reflected in literature, painting, and traditional culture but also plays an important role in the art of cinema. This study aims to explore the symbolic meaning of white cranes in Chinese films, using the film *Fly with the Crane* directed by Li Ruijun as an example. Through the multiple representations of white cranes in the film, it deeply explores the meaning of life, the destiny of life and death, and the relationship between humans and nature. By analyzing the white cranes in the film, we can better understand the Chinese cultural

understanding of life and death, as well as people's reflections on the natural and humanistic spirit. This study not only helps deepen our understanding of the symbolic meaning of white cranes but also provides an important perspective for further exploring the continuity and evolution of Chinese traditional culture in contemporary art.

The film *Fly with the Crane*, directed by Chinese filmmaker Li Ruijun in 2012, adapted from the short story of the same name by Su Tong, tells the story set in a mountain village in Gansu, where the carpenter Old Ma is approaching the end of his life. He refuses to be cremated and instead wishes to be buried in the earth and ride a white crane to the afterlife. His grandson and granddaughter help him fulfill his wish. The

film, set against a family backdrop, explores the emotional conflicts and collisions of life philosophies between the elderly and their family members when facing life and death decisions. Through the multiple representations of the white crane, a symbolic animal, the film deeply explores the meaning of life, the destiny of life and death, and the relationship between humans and nature.

In ancient China, both the tortoise and the crane symbolized longevity. For example, there is the idiom “龟年鹤寿” (guī nián hè shòu), used to wish someone a long life. When an elderly person passes away, the expression “驾鹤西去” (jià hè xī qù) is often used to express respect and blessings for the deceased. This concept originated from Taoism, which views the immortal crane as having a long lifespan and gentle temperament, in line with the Taoist philosophy of “无为不争” (wú wéi bù zhēng), meaning “non-action” or “effortless action.” In Taoism, the crane is seen as a symbol of spirituality, and legend has it that immortals are often accompanied by cranes. There are many tales in Taoist scriptures about cranes ascending to immortality, hence people often use expressions like “跨鹤仙去” (kuà hè xiān qù) and “驾鹤仙游” (jià hè xiān yóu) to euphemistically refer to the deceased. The Chinese title of the film *Fly with the Crane* precisely integrates this symbolism, more fittingly expressing the theme. The following will elucidate the five different white crane images appearing in the film.

## 2. The White Crane on the Coffin

The depiction of a white crane on the coffin not only hints at the passing of the individual but also symbolizes a gentle transition between life and death. This coffin was specifically made for Old Li’s companion, Old Cao, and it features a white crane symbolizing the completion of life ascending to the heavens. The background presents a blood-red hue with several clouds painted in the classical Chinese style, suggesting that the departure of the deceased is not simply peaceful but may involve more complex narratives. This artistic approach not only adds to the dramatic tension of the film but also reflects the filmmaker’s profound contemplation on the fate of life and death. Regarding Old Cao’s demise, the film does not elaborate on his specific cause of death, merely indicating that he passed away due to illness. To keep it discreet, his family secretly buried him in their own

cornfield. After the announcement of cremation becoming mandatory in the locality, there were many elderly people like Old Li who preferred traditional burial, and there were certainly many coffin makers like Old Cao. In real life, some elderly individuals opt for self-termination to avoid cremation before the implementation of cremation dates. Hence, whether Old Cao’s death was due to natural causes or self-choice is worth pondering. Furthermore, the white crane depicted on the coffin symbolizes “driving the crane westward,” representing blessings for the deceased. However, against the backdrop of a blood-red background, it seems to hint at a sense of unease and turmoil. Deliberately expressed by the author, this foreshadows that Old Cao’s passing is not straightforward. As we later see in the narrative, Old Cao’s grave is dug up and transferred to the crematorium due to a report.

## 3. The White Crane on the Chair

In the director’s cut at 18 minutes and 52 seconds, a chair appears during dinner time with the evening sun casting its glow upon it. It’s an ordinary wooden chair with seat and back cushions. The back cushion is embroidered with a pattern depicting two white cranes, one pecking down at something while the other gazes into the distance from a higher vantage point. Despite some wear and tear on the pattern, the chair on the right is noticeably more worn, indicating it’s been used more frequently. A small table is placed between the two chairs, laden with food. Old Ma slowly sits on the chair to the right, while his daughter hands him a pack of quit-smoking candies before taking her seat on the other chair. She invites Old Ma to spend Mid-Autumn Festival at her house. In the subsequent two scenes, appearing at 54 minutes and 43 seconds and 86 minutes and 8 seconds respectively, are both dinner scenes. In the first two instances, it’s dusk, and Old Ma still occupies the worn chair on the right, evidently his designated seat. The third scene takes place at night, with the family having dinner, but Old Ma lies in bed due to illness, and his son sits on the chair on the right. This chronological arrangement, coupled with the symbol of the white crane and the changes in characters, seems to be a hint. The sunset signifies the end of the day, much like Old Ma’s current state of illness. As the time transitions from dusk to night, the worn chair adorned with the white crane symbol changes its occupant, indicating Old Ma

is nearing the “end point,” and the head of the family will transition from Old Ma to his son.

#### 4. The Real White Cranes

In real life, the white cranes refer to those found in the wetlands near Old Li’s daughter’s house. When his daughter, Cunhua, comes to visit Old Li, she also takes him to her house to spend the Mid-Autumn Festival. On the way to her house, Old Li notices some new graves. Upon arriving at his daughter’s house, Old Li asks his granddaughter whether the deceased here are taken to the crematorium or secretly buried. His granddaughter tells him that indeed some people are secretly buried. Subsequently, his granddaughter takes Old Li to see these graves. After viewing them, Old Li feels secretly delighted because he also hopes to have an earth burial after death, and if he were to pass away here, there would be a chance to fulfill this wish. Later, Old Li asks his granddaughter if she knows about immortal cranes. He tells her that immortal cranes are auspicious birds, and when they fly to a place, it signifies someone is about to ascend to heaven. His granddaughter recalls a place and takes Old Li to a wetland where many cranes reside. The two walk towards the direction of the cranes, but the nearest ones have already flown away.

For Old Li’s granddaughter, these cranes are simply a natural phenomenon in real life. However, for Old Li, as he mentioned earlier, the appearance of immortal cranes signifies that someone is about to “ride the crane to the west.” Although this interpretation may evoke sadness in the audience, for Old Li, it is a pleasant surprise.

This segment in the film uses a fixed long shot, with the two walking away from the camera towards the direction of the cranes. This serves as strong evidence of Old Li’s desire for an earth burial. Riding the crane to the west signifies death, but it also signifies the soul finding rest. The sight of real cranes gives Old Li great hope, hence his strong desire to pass away at his daughter’s house. This is Old Li’s wish, but for his daughter, it’s definitely not a good thing, nor is it auspicious. Typically, an elderly person passing away at their own home is the best outcome. After learning about Old Li’s wish from her daughter, Cunhua makes an excuse to help her brother’s family and sends Old Li away, thwarting his plan.

#### 5. The White Crane in the Animation

In the daughter’s house, granddaughter Miaomiao snuggles up to Old Ma while watching the animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. Old Ma, holding a cigarette, appears frail and coughs intermittently. In the animation, after Taiyi Zhenren bids farewell to Nezha, he summons his mount – the immortal crane, and rides the white crane into the sky. The camera then shifts to Old Ma. His daughter walks over, observing him coughing from a cold and smoking, and admonishes him, telling him she will take him home. Before this, there’s a scene where the daughter talks to her brother. Learning that Old Ma wants to secretly die at their house, she finds it inappropriate. Thus, under the pretext of helping her brother pick melons, she sends Old Ma back home. The scene in the animation where Taiyi Zhenren rides the immortal crane reinforces a particular emotion, echoing Old Ma’s wish. In his mind, after death, one is buried in the earth, and then the immortal crane takes them away. We cannot imagine how this scene would be, but the animation suggests it might be like Taiyi Zhenren riding the crane westward.

In semiotic theory, the white crane symbolizes profound significance as a symbolic object. It represents spiritual transcendence and liberation, often regarded as a symbol of spirituality. In this animation, the appearance of the white crane symbolizes Old Ma’s desire for death and yearning for transcendence. The scene of Taiyi Zhenren riding the immortal crane strengthens this emotional expression, implying that Old Ma’s wish can be fulfilled. For Old Ma, being buried in the earth after death and then taken away by the immortal crane signifies spiritual liberation and transcendence. Thus, the presentation of this plot highlights the symbolic significance of the white crane in the text through semiotic theory, expressing humanity’s inherent pursuit of death and transcendence.

#### 6. The White Crane in Old Li’s Heart

After seeing the white crane near his daughter’s house, Old Li eagerly hoped to see them by the lakeside of his own reservoir. However, the grass by the lake is about to be cut, and these grasses are crucial for attracting cranes, wild ducks, and other birds. Old Li deeply understands that only these cranes can fulfill his wish to “ride the crane westward.” Although he hopes to stop the villagers from mowing the grass, the only person he can stop is his son; he is powerless against others. Even if the grass by

the lake is cut down, Old Li still waits under the tree every day, anticipating the crane in his heart. He observes carefully, even sending his grandson to look for traces of the crane, but all in vain.

For Old Li, the white crane symbolizes transcendence after death. He knows his time is short and hopes to see the crane in his heart before passing away, which would bring him peace of mind. Therefore, what he waits for is not the crane in reality but the crane in his heart that can lead him to ride westward. Despite the arrival of the crane meaning one's departure from this world, Old Li still anticipates this moment. Only in this way can he avoid cremation, and ultimately, Old Li is buried by his grandson. The ending of the film leaves the audience in suspense. After Old Li and his grandchildren leave, a white feather falls from the sky. Perhaps, this is a touch of tenderness in the harsh reality. Although Old Li did not wait for the real crane, the feather falling from the sky after his burial seems to imply the arrival of the crane in his heart, carrying him westward.

## 7. Conclusion

In Chinese culture, the crane is regarded as an auspicious symbol, representing longevity and respect for the departed. In the film, the five types of white cranes play significant symbolic roles, revealing the characters' inner emotions and diverse interpretations of life, death, and destiny, enriching the film with depth and profundity. This also explains why these rare cranes are repeatedly emphasized throughout the film. However, today, with the scarcity of land resources, conflicts in resource allocation, and changes in people's consciousness, this "crane culture" is gradually declining, even facing the threat of extinction, much like the story depicted in the film. The disappearance of this culture not only signifies a shift in values but also reflects the impact of societal changes on cultural heritage.

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