

From Fear to Parody: Reinterpreting Tradition Chinese "Weddings and Funerals" Customs in Game Design through a Folkloresque Perspective

Yue Cao

RMIT, Melbourne

+61451271086

s3969941@student.rmit.edu.au

Keywords

Folkloresque, Parody, Chinese Culture, Game Design

INTRODUCTION

Traditional weddings and funerals have long held an important place in Chinese culture, functioning not only as rituals but also as reflections of deeply rooted beliefs about life, death, family, and societal structures (Hsi 2014). In contemporary Chinese horror games, these traditions continue to play a significant role. Their visual and cultural symbolism is often used to evoke fear and discomfort. However, beyond just evoking fear, these customs can also be a medium for critique through parody (Chatman 2001). This project developed a folk horror game titled *Karma*, which centers around traditional Chinese funeral customs and integrates them into the game narrative, environmental design, and mechanics. By applying the folkloresque concept (Foster and Tolbert, 2016), this study explores how these traditions are reinterpreted through a lens of parody, challenging the feudal and outdated aspects of these customs. Unlike many other games that use Chinese marriage and funeral elements purely to inspire fear, *Karma* shifts the focus, offering a reflective and critical perspective on these cultural practices.

To understand how *Karma* uses parody, it is essential to engage with the folkloresque concept, as outlined by Foster and Tolbert (2016). This framework categorizes the representation of folklore in popular culture into three modes: Integration, Portrayal, and Parody. Integration involves blending folkloric elements into new creative works, while Portrayal represents folklore through stereotypical or outdated imagery. Parody, the most relevant mode for this analysis, imitates and critiques folklore, often using satire to challenge outdated or problematic traditions. By analyzing three contemporary Chinese games—*Paper Bride* (Heartbeat Plus, 2021), *Ghost Feed* (Hulu World, 2023), and *Laughing to Die* (Good Luck Studio, 2024)—this research explores the common ways in which traditional marriage and funeral customs are presented and their roles in games. These games use wedding and funeral customs to

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

enhance the horror atmosphere and provide insight into how Integration and Portrayal are typically used to create horror. As Evans (2005) notes, folklore in horror helps build suspense, leading audiences to anticipate supernatural events. This application of such customs is undoubtedly effective, as folklore can create a compelling horror experience in popular culture through a subtle sense of familiarity (Tolbert 2016). However, their focus remains on creating fear rather than critiquing or reflecting on the customs themselves. Parody, as an effective method for incorporating folkloric elements into contemporary media, has not been fully explored or utilized in the context of Chinese marriage and funeral customs.

To address this gap, the study developed an experimental game titled *Karma*. In *Karma*, traditional Chinese "wedding and funeral" customs are not simply used to create a haunting atmosphere but are intentionally exaggerated and subverted through parody to critique their underlying feudal and superstitious elements. The game reinterprets these customs by integrating them into its narrative, environmental design, and gameplay mechanics. The story centers on a family tragedy driven by outdated superstitions, with the protagonist trapped in a ritualistic setting, forced to navigate exaggerated funeral rites that verge on the absurd. Parody is woven into *Karma*'s mechanics as well. Players must interact with these customs by solving puzzles that mimic the intricate and often nonsensical nature of traditional practices. For example, the player must collect funeral items representing the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), scattered across the game environment. The process is deliberately convoluted, requiring the player to engage in tasks that reflect the cumbersome and ritualistic nature of these customs. The game's critique extends through its environmental and visual design. Traditional mourning symbols—such as talismans, elaborate wreaths, and funeral attire—are depicted in exaggerated forms, cluttering the environment to emphasize the absurdity of blindly following superstition. This overuse of symbolism creates an immersive, surreal world where customs transform from cultural relics into tools of satire. By embedding parody in its narrative, mechanics, and visual design, *Karma* turns traditional customs from instruments of fear into vehicles for cultural critique, encouraging players to reconsider the relevance of these practices in contemporary society.

As part of China's millennia-old culture, marriage and funeral customs are traditionally used in horror games to evoke fear. However, this study demonstrates their potential as tools for critique. By adopting the folkloresque concept, *Karma* reinterprets these customs through parody to challenge their outdated, superstitious roots. Unlike other games focusing on fear, *Karma* uses narrative, environmental design, and gameplay mechanics to offer a critical perspective. It encourages players to reflect on the adaptability of these traditions in modern society. This approach not only expands the use of parody in game design but also highlights how games can critique cultural practices, pushing beyond simple horror to provoke deeper thought.

BIO

I am a student from China, currently pursuing a Master of Animation, Games, and Interactivity at RMIT University. I have always been fascinated by Asian folklore and am dedicated to researching and deconstructing it, aiming to integrate it into game

design. My experiments span various formats, including visual novels, platformers, and puzzle games. Through these projects, I strive to bring the rich cultural heritage of Chinese folklore into the interactive medium of gaming, offering players unique and immersive experiences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chatman, S. 2001. "Parody and Style." *Poetics Today* 22(1): 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-22-1-25>
- Evans, T. 2005. "A Last Defense Against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H.P. Lovecraft." *Journal of Folklore Research* 42(1): 99-135. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfr.2005.42.1.99>
- Foster, M. D. and Tolbert, J. A., eds. 2016. *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*. Colorado: University Press of Colorado.
- Franke, H. 1971. "A Note on Parody in Chinese Traditional Literature." *Oriens Extremus* 18(2): 237-251. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43382484>
- Good Luck Studio. 2024. *Laughing to Die*. Game. Gamera Games.
- HeartBeat Plus. 2021. *Paper Bride*. Game. HeartBeat Plus.
- Hulu World. 2023. *Ghost Feed*. Game. CE-Asia.
- Hsi, C. 2014. *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tolbert, J. A. 2016. "A Deadly Discipline." In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, edited by Foster, M. D. and Tolbert, J. A., Colorado: University Press of Colorado.