

Article

Stage Image, Presence, and Meaning in Mo Yan's *Crocodile*

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Abstract

Mo Yan's stage play *Crocodile* (*Eyu*) marks a shift away from novel-centered scholarship in Mo Yan studies. Centered on a continually fed, ever-growing crocodile, the play moves the animal from a textual symbol to a stage image. Existing studies emphasize theme, symbolism, or genre but say less about how stage procedures establish the crocodile's presence as a publicly perceptible fact and generate meanings around power, desire, and judgment. This article addresses that gap through a script-based, stage-oriented semiotic analysis. Drawing on Barthes's denotation and connotation together with Hjelmslev's expression and content planes, it analyzes how stage images organize perception and meaning. It argues that presence in *Crocodile* is produced through linked sensory, spatial, and verbal cues: at moments of concealment and disclosure, expansion, threshold, and loss of control, the play turns the crocodile into a collectively witnessable event rather than a mere symbol, while repeated cues consolidate associations around power, desire, and judgment, reorienting spectatorship toward the conditions of witnessing. By treating the stage image as an operative mechanism rather than a symbol to be decoded, the article shows how the play, through stage procedures, establishes the crocodile as a perceptible and witnessable stage presence that generates meaning.

Keywords: Mo Yan; stage image; presence; theater semiotics; spectatorship

1. Introduction

As the 2012 Nobel laureate in Literature, Mo Yan has been studied predominantly as a novelist, with scholarship long centered on root-seeking literature, magical realism, folk narration, and historical allegory, leaving his dramatic writing comparatively under-examined. Yet *Crocodile* (*Eyu*), premiered by Yanghua Drama in Suzhou in 2023 and later staged in multiple cities (Mo 2023; Q. Xiao 2024), foregrounds Mo Yan's theatrical practice. Its importance lies not simply in adding another dramatic text to Mo Yan's oeuvre, but in the way it moves animal imagery from narrative metaphor into stage space. Centered on a crocodile that is continually fed and keeps growing, the play makes power, desire, and judgment perceptible through a stage image rather than through symbolic statement alone. This article therefore shifts attention from what the crocodile symbolizes to how the play makes it into a visible, audible, and collectively perceptible stage presence.

Mo Yan's dramatic work is not limited to this play alone. Earlier works and stage-related projects, including the coauthored *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bie ji*) with Wang Shuzeng, *Our Jing Ke* (*Women de Jingke*), and the staged reading of *The Boiler Worker's Wife* (*Guolu gong de qizi*), indicate a sustained engagement with drama, which Mo Yan himself has described as a long-held aspiration in discussing these earlier plays (Mo and Zhang 2018). Still, *Crocodile* stands out because it places a nonhuman figure at the center of theatrical organization rather than treating animal imagery only as a narrative motif or symbolic



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material. Mo Yan has traced the play's origins to a 2008 visit to the Maison de Victor Hugo in Paris (Mo 2023, p. 195). Mo Yan has also drawn an analogy between the container that limits the crocodile's growth and the institutional limits placed on official power: just as the size of its enclosure determines how large the crocodile can grow, the constraints on power determine how far desire can expand (Z. Zhang 2024). In the play, however, this relation is not left as an abstract metaphor. It is mediated by stage procedures, through which the crocodile becomes an object that organizes attention and meaning.

The play's basic dramatic situation can be summarized briefly. Shan Wudan, a corrupt official who has fled overseas, keeps a crocodile whose growth increasingly exceeds its enclosures. Beginning as a small creature in a covered glass case, it is relocated to progressively larger containers and eventually placed in the large central fish tank. Along this route, the crocodile is staged through covering and unveiling, naming, feeding, relocation, and collective reaction: it swallows a voice recorder, becomes associated with a coffin-shaped case and a crocodile-shaped cangue, and in the final act enters a sequence of sound, speech, and judgment. This minimal context is necessary because the crocodile's meaning develops through a sequence of stage procedures.

Magical realism in theatrical contexts differs markedly from its literary counterpart. In literary narrative, it juxtaposes the extraordinary and the everyday through narration and description (Faris 2004, pp. 1–2); in the theater, the extraordinary must instead be made credible under conditions of co-presence, appearing through the material, spatial, acoustic, and bodily arrangements of a shared theatrical situation (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 38). For this reason, the question *Crocodile* raises is not only whether it continues Mo Yan's magical-realist imagination, but, more precisely, how a nonhuman and seemingly excessive figure is made perceptible once it enters the stage—how a literary animal image becomes a stage image through apparatus, sound, light, space, and speech.

In English-language scholarship, *Crocodile* has so far drawn only brief reviews (M. Zhang 2023), critical attention remaining with Mo Yan's fiction (Ning 2019). The more developed Chinese-language commentary divides along two lines, both of which take the crocodile's significance as their point of departure. One line classifies the play generically, reading it against Cao Yu's dramatic tradition and Strindberg's expressionism to define it as a Chinese-style expressionist drama (Z. Zhang 2024). The other reads the crocodile as a bearer of meaning—through metaphor and symbol (Q. Xiao 2024) and through a “crocodilism narrative” of social life and the darker aspects of human nature (Wang 2024, p. 145); and even the studies that turn most directly to the stage take it as a source of symbolic and spatial meaning rather than as the process that makes the crocodile present (Yang 2025; Huang 2025). These approaches, for all their differences, begin from a crocodile whose meaning is already given, to be classified or decoded, and so they take for granted what the production must in fact accomplish: the establishment of the crocodile as a stage presence.

This article addresses that question by treating the crocodile not as a ready-made symbol but as a stage image produced through procedures specified in the written play. It asks how the crocodile is first established as a stage presence and how that presence then generates meanings around power, desire, and judgment. In doing so, it shifts the discussion from what the crocodile means to how theatrical meaning is made, showing how a literary animal image can become a sustained process of presence and signification on stage.

2. Research Questions and Method

Centering on the crocodile image, this article addresses two related questions. First, how does the play construct the crocodile on stage as a visible, audible, and legible presence under conditions of theatrical co-presence (shared theatrical time and space)? In semiotic terms, this first question concerns referentialization: the process by which the script's

stage directions, dialogue, and sensory cues stabilize the crocodile as a perceptible stage presence. Second, once that presence has been established, how does it generate and accumulate meanings around power, desire, and judgment? This second question concerns signification and leads to the article's later discussion of spectatorship as a stage-structured problem of viewing position.

This article is based primarily on the published script of *Crocodile*; its dialogue and stage directions describe the props, lighting, sound, spatial arrangement, and bodily action through which the crocodile is made theatrically perceptible. Where relevant, it also refers to published interviews, reviews, and existing scholarship on the play as contextual support for understanding its stage-oriented design. Within this evidence base, references to spectatorship, witnessing, and collective viewing describe the viewing positions and conditions of perceptibility organized by the script. The focus is therefore the structure of theatrical presentation and the way it makes the crocodile perceptible as a shared stage object.

The analysis uses Barthes's distinction between denotation and connotation to separate two analytical moments: first, how the crocodile is made perceptible as a stage presence (referentialization); second, how that presence generates and accumulates meanings around power, desire, and judgment (signification) (Barthes 1968, pp. 89–92). Hjelmslev's distinction between expression and content is used in a limited sense: the analysis distinguishes between the stage means of presentation—containers, light, sound, bodily action, and spatial placement—and the meanings made possible through those means (Hjelmslev 1961, pp. 47–114).

On this basis, the article proceeds through close analysis of selected scenes, segments, and key moments across the four acts. It pays particular attention to how changes in sound and light, bodily action, and spatial occupation unfold in relation to one another, while reading these stage cues alongside dialogue and stage directions. In practical terms, the analysis gives particular weight to a stage moment when several cues named in the script—such as light, sound, spatial placement, bodily reaction, or dialogue—converge around the crocodile and recur in recognizable form elsewhere in the play. Stage presence, on this account, is established through the co-presence of material, spatial, acoustic, and bodily arrangements within the same theatrical situation (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 38); the convergence of such cues is weighed accordingly.

The analysis then follows how the same objects and actions are re-encoded across the play: the glass case becomes a coffin-shaped verdict apparatus; feeding becomes a staged sequence of escalating consumption; the swallowed voice recorder links appetite to the loss of recordable testimony; and the crocodile-shaped cangue transfers the animal's form onto Shan Wudan's body. References to spectatorship throughout the article describe the viewing positions organized by these stage procedures, not psychological outcomes for actual audiences.

3. The Crocodile Onstage: From Concealment to Loss of Control

In *Crocodile*, the crocodile image is built gradually through latent cues summoned by characters' speech, acts of concealment, disclosure, naming, display, spatial relocation, and enlargement of scale, and finally the crocodile's voice, loss of control, and judgment. Across this sequence, the crocodile ceases to be merely an animal metaphor in the written play and is organized as a visible and audible stage image made available for collective attention. What is at issue here is not the stage reproduction of a physical animal, but a mediated stage object composed in the written play through containers, changes in scale, lighting, sound, dialogue, bodily reaction, and spatial placement. The crocodile appears through covered and uncovered containers, verbal naming, visible enclosure, reported

growth, sound cues, bodily responses around the tank, and finally a voice attributed to the crocodile. The analysis therefore turns from what the crocodile stands for at any single moment to the ways these stage procedures change how the crocodile is seen, heard, and attended to.

3.1. Concealment and Pre-Positioning

Act One, Scene One is time-stamped 5 May 2005. The central large fish tank is covered with red cloth (Mo 2023, p. 9), thereby directing attention toward this as-yet-unrevealed core object and producing an absence-in-presence (Lehmann 2006, pp. 89–90). Subsequently, the character Shou Ma vaults over the tank, clearing the red cord strung along the railing (Mo 2023, p. 17), charging what had seemed a merely decorative scenic installation with a threshold sense of danger and desire.

At the start of the unveiling ceremony in Act One, Scene Two, the cloth is lifted and a hard light floods the tank; a school of brightly colored tropical fish comes into view (Mo 2023, p. 40). At this point, what is disclosed is still only tropical fish, not a crocodile. Nevertheless, the entire sequence of concealment–transgression–revelation first redirects attention through the tropical-fish reveal and thereby plants the foreshadowing of the crocodile’s appearance. The misdirection is structurally productive: the display apparatus—cloth, railing, illumination—has already established the tank as a site of organized disclosure. The tropical fish reveal confirms that this apparatus is operational and that its direction of attention has already been established, so that the crocodile’s entry into the same framing inherits an already-activated viewing position. Next, workers carry in a one-meter-long glass case draped in red and place it on a half-meter-high stand; once unveiled, a juvenile crocodile of roughly thirty centimeters appears inside (Mo 2023, p. 45). In the ensuing dialogue, a joking misnaming of the crocodile as a mermaid gives way to its proper identification as an Orinoco crocodile, followed by debate over potential length and spatial capacity, for example: “If we put it into this big tank ... in three years it could grow into a giant crocodile” (Mo 2023, p. 47). Proper naming here is not merely taxonomic. It converts the visible creature into a legible and discussable object: one with a species identity, a projected growth trajectory, and a spatial demand that can be negotiated. The animal has become a presence that can be referred to, argued about, and planned around.

Accordingly, through the sequence of concealment–transgression–revelation–proper naming, Act One marks a transition from summons-by-absence to first presence. The crocodile enters Act Two as a named, visible, and spatially situated object—one whose future scale has already been imagined and whose stage position has been established as a matter of directed attention and organized display.

3.2. Verification and Display

Act Two, Scene One is time-stamped 5 May 2008. The foreground layout remains largely unchanged, but a transparent glass case roughly two meters long is added in front of the large fish tank, indicating that the crocodile has grown to more than one meter (Mo 2023, p. 53). A worker cleans the crocodile case; meanwhile, Mrs. Tang reacts to its smell with the remark “it really stinks,” and, together with the ensuing exchange, draws the crocodile into everyday frameworks of regulation, care, and social interaction. Lao Hei immediately claims to have registered the crocodile with the Animal Protection Committee as an emotional support animal (Mo 2023, p. 54). The smell reaction and the registration together confirm the crocodile’s presence through social verification: it is real enough to smell, real enough to require administrative handling. Thereafter, Shan Wudan takes a voice recorder from Niu Bu, plays it briefly, and then tosses it into the case; the crocodile leaps halfway up and swallows it whole. The crowd gathered around exclaims: “It swal-

lowed my voice recorder!" "It swallowed half a stage play!" — and the crocodile's thrashing elicits the surrounding characters' reactions and their judgment that it "can understand human speech" (Mo 2023, p. 61).

Act Two, Scene Two. Two days later, four workers carry in a coffin-shaped, lidless transparent case; under the direction of Lao Hei, they transfer the crocodile from the small transparent glass case into the larger one. The crocodile remains motionless, like a piece of rotten wood (Mo 2023, pp. 73–74). After observing at close range, Shan Wudan delivers three consecutive lines: "It still lacks a lid"; "Without a lid, how can the coffin be sealed and a verdict rendered?"; "Inscribe the crime; it deserves death ten thousand times" (Mo 2023, pp. 76–77). The same scene also records Shan Wudan's self-identification: "When the crocodile is comfortable, I am comfortable. The crocodile is me; I am the crocodile" (Mo 2023, p. 76). Interleaved are proposals to replace the large fish tank with a backyard swimming pool and a series of growth estimates (progressing from over one meter to over two, three, and five meters), together with a feeding list specifying live chickens, live ducks, live rabbits, and live pigs (Mo 2023, pp. 79–80). The scene also briefly previews the performance action involving the "cangue" (*jia*, a neck restraint) (Mo 2023, pp. 86–98). By the end of Act Two, the crocodile's stage status has solidified: the voice recorder episode transforms a moment of display into a collectively witnessed event, confirmed by the surrounding characters' reactions. The coffin-shaped case and the cangue preview extend this presence into the register of judgment and punishment, where the crocodile begins to acquire meanings beyond perceptible presence.

3.3. Relocation and Expansion

At the opening of Act Three, other characters recount Shan Wudan's abnormal behavior: ever since the letter was slipped through the door crack, he "talks to himself all day" and "in the middle of the night converses with the crocodile ... holding that gun and gesturing at his own head" (Mo 2023, pp. 101–2). At this stage the crocodile functions as the object of midnight confidences rather than as an explicitly manifested onstage presence.

After Huang Dashi arrives, Shan Wudan sits before the crocodile case and tosses an apple inside; the water splashes and churns, and Huang Dashi recoils. The two then exchange lines: "Does the crocodile even eat fruit?" — "It prefers to eat people" (Mo 2023, pp. 104–12). This is the first moment in Act Three when principal characters explicitly link the crocodile to eating people. Huang Dashi then slowly surveys the space, alternating between looking indoors and out, before returning to the crocodile case and fixing his gaze on it. He claims to hear the crocodile's private words — "I'm suffocating; move me into that big tank and let my pent-up energy be released" (Mo 2023, pp. 130–31). Here the crocodile's request is conveyed entirely through another's voice; the stage still grants it no direct movement or sound.

At the end of the scene, Shan Wudan orders: "Move it (the crocodile in the case) into that big tank (the large fish tank)." As for the tropical fish already in the tank, the matter is dispatched in passing with a single line — "Let fate decide what becomes of them" — thereby finalizing the relocation (Mo 2023, p. 131). The relocation is not merely a change of enclosure. The large fish tank occupies the center of the stage foreground; moving the crocodile into it displaces the tank's previous occupants and repositions the crocodile as the primary object around which the frame, light, and spatial arrangement now operate. The single line dismissing the tropical fish confirms that the crocodile has not simply been given more space: it has displaced what previously occupied the center of the display. By the end of Act Three, the crocodile has moved from a displayed object at the periphery of the stage to the spatial center around which attention is organized. It has not yet spoken, but its position within the staging apparatus has been established as primary.

3.4. Threshold and Loss of Control

Act Four opens on 5 May 2015. The stage foreground is dim, the large fish tank is lit, and the stage direction notes that the audience “can clearly see the crocodile inside, now four meters long” (Mo 2023, p. 135). Shan Wudan, holding the Bible, reads in a low voice a passage from the Book of Job on Leviathan, and then exchanges lines with Shou Ma about how “this crocodile seems to have crawled out of the Bible” (Mo 2023, pp. 135–38). The crocodile is thereby established as a mythic and monstrous focus of presence, and the visual as well as narrative focus shifts to the large fish tank. The Leviathan passage does not simply describe the crocodile; it reframes it. A creature that had been growing, feeding, and being displayed within a domestic enclosure is now read against a biblical figure of primordial, unconquerable force. The superimposition of scriptural voice on the lit tank moves the crocodile from a manageable exotic animal into a figure associated with biblical and primordial force—a shift accomplished not through the crocodile’s own action but through the stage’s coordination of text, light, and space.

The second scene shifts to a birthday setup with guests coming and going. Lao Hei and others first carry onstage a coffin-shaped transparent tank with a lid, discussing inscriptions such as “deserves death ten thousand times” and a sliding-rail design that would allow the coffin to “self-seal.” At this point, Director Wei arrives (Mo 2023, pp. 143–48). Next, Niu Bu and Deng Zhao unbox and present a “crocodile-shaped cangue,” proposing variants—“beauty cangue,” “coin cangue,” and “power cangue”—together with a plan for a global tour (Mo 2023, pp. 160–62). Only then does Niu Bu report the collapse of Qingyun Bridge, prompting a dispute with Shan Wudan over whether to return home—effectively to his death—or to pursue a “three-cangue tour” (Mo 2023, pp. 162–63). Amid public pressure and a shift in his self-presentation, Shan Wudan declares in public: “Put the crocodile cangue on me.” He then recasts himself as a performance artist, adopts the stage name E Meng (鳄梦)—literally crocodile dream and a homophone of *e meng* (噩梦, “nightmare”)—and announces that he is celebrating the death of Shan Wudan and the birth of E Meng (Mo 2023, pp. 164–65), entering center stage wearing the crocodile cangue as actors in ring-shaped cangues advance downstage in formation. The cangue transfers the crocodile’s presence from tank to body. What had been confined to a glass enclosure is now worn, carried, and paraded: the crocodile’s form migrates into the space of human action and public display, extending its stage reach beyond the apparatus of the tank.

In the third scene a blue wash bathes the newly sobered Shan Wudan; inside the large fish tank, the giant crocodile is clearly visible, and “that crocodile-shaped cangue is tossed haphazardly on the ground” (Mo 2023, p. 166). What follows is an extended monologue and letter (Shou Ma’s farewell) and a father–son confrontation when Xiao Tao enters; factual accusations, familial rupture, and Shan Wudan’s collapse are pushed to an extreme. At the scene’s end, a deep-throated rumble approaches from afar; water splashes erupt as if a massive body were leaping out of the tank, and the stage withholds judgment between reality and hallucination. Finally, the position of speech reverses: the crocodile speaks—“You are me; I am you ... hear my solemn judgment ... buried at last in the crocodile’s belly” (Mo 2023, pp. 178–80); Shan Wudan answers, “I am in the crocodile’s belly,” then suddenly falls prone before the tank, culminating in an extreme staging of Shan Wudan’s identification with the crocodile (Mo 2023, pp. 183–84). The act closes in a suspended mode that neither ratifies the transgression as established fact nor reduces it to mere illusion. By the end of Act Four, the crocodile has crossed the threshold that Section 3 traces in its entirety: from a concealed, anticipated object to a named presence; from a collectively verified event to the spatial center of the stage; and finally from a displayed figure to a speaking and judging subject. This transformation occurs through apparatus, scale, sound, light, text,

and bodily action, constituting the referentialization of the crocodile as a perceptible stage presence.

4. Constructing Presence: Referentialization

Referentialization does not begin by conjuring a crocodile out of nothing; rather, it first organizes visibility through a staged framework of display. In Act One's tropical-fish unveiling (Mo 2023, p. 40), the sequence of uncovering—intense illumination—public display lets stage apparatus and the lighting field operate prior to narration, granting the juvenile crocodile its first visibility and a minimal confirmation of its presence onstage. Visibility thereby shifts from a chance narrative occurrence to a viewing framework continuously maintained by apparatus and light.

The opening of Act Two further establishes a sound-before-form sensory sequence: olfactory cues and line prompts function as parallel triggers, with visual perception arriving in confirmation. The foreground is then augmented by a transparent glass case, and dialogue marks the crocodile's scale, effecting a turn from a discussed object to a visible entity. Moments of astonishment follow—for example, the tossed voice recorder being swallowed (Mo 2023, p. 61)—which signal a leap from momentary disclosure to a collectively witnessable event, initiating a transition from brief appearance to stabilized display.

Act Three, building on this framework of display and verification, advances the crocodile's presence toward spatial occupation. Shan Wudan proposes an operational sequence—growth, followed by container replacement and then visibility enhancement—and, through imperative lines such as “Contact Lao Hei ... move it into the big tank” (Mo 2023, p. 131), specifies the path of execution; the disposition of the tropical fish is marginalized, indicating the crocodile's elevated priority as an object of display. Here spatial occupation refers only to the geometric-centering effect on visibility produced by changes in container and placement; it does not entail any elevation of narrative status.

Act Four brings these procedures to a threshold: visibility, sound, bodily action, and speech converge as the crocodile moves from displayed object to speaking and judging figure. First, in Scene One the downstage area is dim while the tank is bright, and the four-meter form is clearly visible (Mo 2023, p. 135); Shan Wudan, holding the Bible, reads in a low voice the Leviathan passage from the Book of Job, superimposing the sound field on the central field of visibility (Mo 2023, pp. 135–36). Entering Scene Three, a sensory chain is triggered by a gunshot: the crocodile smells blood and then thrashes violently inside the tank (Mo 2023, p. 175). Shan Wudan then lifts the lid, carries his son's body in, and covers it with a blanket; a boy's clear singing rises, and, to the song, a white strip of paper is torn off and the lid is pushed shut (Mo 2023, p. 176). At the same time, the olfactory cue receives a second confirmation: Shan Wudan infers that the crocodile “smelled the blood seeping from the bullet hole” and leaped (Mo 2023, p. 177). The subsequent buildup of sound and light pushes the threshold further: lighting changes inside the tank combine with a low crocodile call; in the darkness, water splashes erupt, as if a massive body were leaping out (Mo 2023, p. 178). Finally, a giant crocodile slowly crawls from the direction of the tank toward Shan Wudan, crying out as it crawls (Mo 2023, pp. 178–79). After stopping several meters away, a human voice first says “Hello,” then shifts into dialogue and ultimately reaches a solemn judgment (Mo 2023, pp. 179–83). A blaze of light, loud declamation, and a sudden collapse to the floor close the act with a terminal cadence (Mo 2023, p. 184).

This is the sense in which referentialization operates here: it organizes multisensory processes into an order of presence that is collectively witnessable. Its core lies in the anticipatory allocation and directional arrangement embodied by sound-before-form. Specifically, before the target has appeared, sonic and verbal cues prepare spatial orientation and temporal rhythm; existing research in cognitive neuroscience shows that when auditory

cues foreshadow a spatial target, the spatial-attention network shared by vision and audition is activated in advance (Smith et al. 2010; Popov et al. 2023). In theatrical terms, such cueing helps explain how sound and verbal prompts can prepare a field of attention before the object is fully visible. On this perceptual-acoustic account, stage apparatus and spatial occupation, lighting, sound, and the performing body with its rhythmic organization are not isolated design elements but synergistic links in a continuous chain of attention-alignment-witnessing (Collins 2018).

5. From Presence to Signification

Once the crocodile's presence has been progressively secured through both visible and audible channels, its signifying dimension is activated on the basis of that referential force. Signification here is not a simple overlay of pre-given symbols; rather, it is a continuous process of stage re-encoding, whereby procedures of growth, display, and judgment are staged as mechanisms for the expansion of desire and the reconfiguration of power relations.

5.1. Power, Desire, and Judgment: The Re-Encoding of Stage Objects

The crocodile's signification emerges from the same objects and procedures that first make it perceptible: coverings, containers, naming, display, spatial relocation, and bodily response. These elements do not merely support the crocodile's presence; they are re-encoded into meanings organized around power, desire, and judgment. Four recurring stage procedures carry this re-encoding: the container, feeding, the swallowed recorder, and the crocodile-shaped cangue.

The first and clearest re-encoding concerns the container. In Act Two, Scene Two, four workers carry onstage a coffin-shaped, lidless transparent case (Mo 2023, pp. 73–74). Lao Hei immediately glosses its form: “coffin—official-wealth—becoming an official and getting rich” (棺材, *guancai*, and 官财, *guancai*) (Mo 2023, pp. 73–74). The container's shape does not simply reference death; in Lao Hei's reading, it makes the crocodile's housing carry three meanings at once: official power, wealth accumulation, and fatal closure. Shan Wudan responds not with discomfort but with elaboration: “Without a lid, how can the coffin be sealed and a verdict rendered?” and “deserves death ten thousand times” (Mo 2023, pp. 76–77). When the coffin reappears in Act Four with its lid and self-sealing mechanism, Shan Wudan tests it and observes that one can now seal one's own coffin (Mo 2023, pp. 143–48). The display case that once served as a container for growth has become an apparatus for self-verdict. The crocodile inside it is no longer simply a visible object; it is a presence that has been emplaced within a structure of crime, punishment, and irreversibility.

Feeding provides another channel of re-encoding. Lao Hei specifies the provisioning requirement: live chickens, live ducks, live rabbits, and live pigs (Mo 2023, pp. 79–80). The progression is not incidental: each item marks a larger and more vital offering, so that feeding no longer appears as the practical care of a rare animal but as a staged sequence of escalating consumption. The crocodile's growth is therefore registered not only through changing containers but also through the increasingly costly forms of life required to sustain it. In this sense, feeding links desire to sacrifice: the more the crocodile grows, the more the people around Shan Wudan must organize themselves around supplying, justifying, and normalizing that appetite.

The swallowing of the voice recorder adds a different layer. In Act Two, Shan Wudan plays a voice recorder briefly, then tosses it into the tank; the crocodile leaps halfway up and swallows it whole (Mo 2023, p. 61). The surrounding characters' exclamations—“It swallowed my voice recorder!” “It swallowed half a stage play!”—register this as a collectively witnessed event. But the object swallowed is not arbitrary: a voice recorder is a

device for recording, archiving, and producing testimony. Its ingestion converts an act of display into the destruction of a possible record. What disappears is not only an object but the possibility of preserving testimony in a stable form. The crocodile's appetite thus begins to touch the conditions of judgment itself, because judgment depends on what can be heard, recorded, and retained.

The cangue then shifts the re-encoding from enclosure to body. The crocodile-shaped cangue first appears in Act Four as a gift (Mo 2023, pp. 160–62). Unlike the earlier glass cangue worn by Deng Zhao as a performance-art gesture, the crocodile-shaped cangue transfers the crocodile's form from tank to body: the animal growing in its glass enclosure is now worn around a human neck as a punishment instrument. In this movement, the crocodile is no longer only looked at from outside; its form is attached to Shan Wudan's body and becomes part of his public self-presentation. Shan Wudan does not refuse the cangue; he requests it—"Put the crocodile cangue on me" (Mo 2023, pp. 164–65)—and renames himself E Meng, a name that is simultaneously "crocodile-dream" and, by homophony, "nightmare." The cangue re-encodes the crocodile as a sign of punishment while also becoming the vehicle through which Shan Wudan assumes judgment upon himself: Shan Wudan does not merely accept a verdict; he incorporates it, wearing the form of what will judge him.

Read together, the coffin-form, feeding sequence, swallowed recorder, and crocodile-shaped cangue show how the crocodile is drawn into a power–desire–judgment configuration. It does not symbolize power and punishment from the outset. Rather, these meanings are built through repeated re-encodings of stage objects already made perceptible earlier. The container becomes a verdict apparatus; feeding becomes a sequence of escalating consumption; the swallowed recorder links appetite to the loss of recordable testimony; and the cangue transfers the crocodile's form onto Shan Wudan's body. Signification therefore works less as a fixed code than as an accumulating theatrical process.

5.2. Mediated Distance and Subjective Thresholds: "Hello" as a Turning Point

Crocodile constructs the crocodile's presence through the framed visibility of the fish tank, changes in lighting, and a spatialized sound field, rather than through mimetic embodiment by performers or full-scale props. The crocodile is therefore perceived less as an autonomous entity than as an image organized by apparatus, frame, sound, and delayed disclosure. The conditions of perception are thus structured by mediated distance and sound–image tension (Wilkins 2013; Bowers 2024). Through this mediated distance, the stage sustains the co-presence of the real and the extraordinary, avoids literalist naturalization, and keeps the relation between the real and the staged open rather than fixing it into a single literal reading (Lehmann 2006, p. 103). By maintaining co-presence via mediation, the play resists reducing the crocodile to a single, literalized political allegory.

At the end of the play, the instant of "Hello" constitutes a decisive threshold in the work's process of signification: when an animal cry shifts into a clear human voice, the crocodile moves from a visible, audible object to a dialogic subject. By this point, all other characters have exited—Shan Wudan's son has even taken his own life—compressing the stage relation to a one-to-one confrontation between Shan Wudan and the crocodile. No longer merely an external object of viewing, the crocodile seems to speak as Shan Wudan's other self, the personified representative of his inner desire and self-destructive impulse. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the scene externalizes an inner dialogue. As Lacan argues, speech involves a structure in which the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form, while the subject seeks in speech "the response of the other" (Lacan 2001, pp. 63–64). The moment the crocodile acquires a human voice, Shan Wudan's subjectivity splits: his repressed desire is articulated through an other's voice,

generating a dialogue of the self with itself. He must, through the voice of this externalized Other (the crocodile), confront and answer his own internalized desire and judgment. Semiotically, the conversion marked by “Hello” amounts to a reconfiguration of the signifying mechanism. The crocodile shifts from a humanly assigned symbol to a producer of meaning; formerly a signified object, it becomes a signifying subject. This shift reorganizes the play’s symbolic relations at the moment of address (Peirce 1998, pp. 409–11). Thus the moment of “Hello” is not only the dramatic climax but also a turning point in the play’s signifying structure: the crocodile enters as a speaking figure, and earlier signs of desire, enclosure, and judgment are reorganized around its voice.

5.3. *Spatial Expansion and the Logic of Return: From Private Display to Public Threat*

Each enlargement of the crocodile’s living space is accompanied by a redrawing of the boundaries of power—a further pathway of signification in the play. Initially confined in a sealed glass case, the crocodile inhabits a private, collectible enclosure that implies absolute control and possession, along with a self-confirming sense of power. As the plot advances and the animal is relocated to the large fish tank, the increasing openness and scale signal a loosening of formerly secure control: the crocodile gains greater mobility, and its radius of threat extends into the public sphere. Through this spatial conversion, the stage renders the crocodile’s growing force as a visible erosion of human control. Accordingly, the shift from the small glass case to the larger glass case and then to the large fish tank is presented as an integrated process—from private possession to public threat, from the maintenance of order to loss of control and backlash. The spatial layout organizes a relation among containment, visibility, and control; once those boundaries are breached, their failure and the transfer of control become legible.

From the protagonist’s private treasure to the final, unmanageable breakdown, the trajectory of the crocodile image recalls Freud’s account of repression: substitute formations and symptoms indicate a return of the repressed, and repression that first appears successful may later fail, allowing the repressed to return in transformed form (Freud 1957, pp. 154–57). The ostensible hobby of possessing and feeding the crocodile is in fact a displaced expression of an inner need for control. What appears as careful tending and protection of a rare animal in fact asserts absolute power over another life. As a dangerous yet ostensibly tamed being, the crocodile accords with Shan Wudan’s contradictory desires for stimulation and mastery. Yet the pursuit of power to its limit plants the seeds of self-destruction: the crocodile’s final counterattack is not accidental but a consequence built into this trajectory—the more meticulously it is cultivated, the more fully the conditions for ruin are produced. By tightening the threat step by step, crossing the threshold into human voice, and culminating in the adjudicatory moment, the staging progressively concretizes this inner contradiction; the repressed desire returns with force and overtakes the subject.

The crocodile also gathers the protagonist’s losses into a single material site. In the final scene, his surviving son Xiao Tao shoots himself, and his body is laid inside the coffin-shaped tank beside the crocodile, covered with the three paper strips that had hung above the tank—strips marking the “netherworld birthdays” of Shan Wudan’s three sons who died young (Mo 2023, pp. 175–76). Moments later Shan Wudan confesses that he “ate the child’s placenta” and calls himself “a man-eating devil,” then immediately turns to address the crocodile as desire itself, “the devil that destroys all things” (Mo 2023, p. 177). The animal fed and enlarged throughout the play thus comes to share its enclosure with the dead, and the protagonist’s swelling appetite is explicitly tied to the children it has consumed. In this sense the crocodile is not only a figure of expanding desire but also a material carrier of traumatic memory.

Taken together, the play's production of meaning depends on the joint action of threshold-driven presence and the effects of mediated distance. The crocodile functions both as a mirror of power structures and as the speaking body of a fissured subject. Its central transformation lies in the shift from object-sign to producer of signification. The passage from reference to signification is not achieved by a static assignment of meaning to a single symbol; it is the outcome of ongoing stage re-encoding. Within this process, the image of the crocodile bears multiple symbolic functions: it is a challenger to power relations, a material carrier of traumatic memory, and a mechanism for the return of repressed desire. For this reason, the crocodile exceeds the category of a mere theatrical prop and becomes a stage apparatus that supports a layered structure of meaning. In theatrical terms, it marks a passage from visible object to signifying stage figure, showing how meaning is generated through repeated staging rather than assigned to a fixed symbol.

6. Witnessing and the Ethics of Spectatorship

With the crocodile's presence already secured, its function is not simply to advance the plot but to reorganize the position from which viewing takes place. The stage procedures already traced—concealment, naming, spatial centralization, re-encoding, and the "Hello" threshold—do not only build the crocodile's presence; they also progressively reposition viewing in relation to what is being witnessed. At the close of the play, this repositioning makes several viewing positions available: witnessing, address, and proximity to judgment.

Crocodile does not compress allegory into a monocausal, institution-driven political satire. Instead, it locates its narrative fulcrum in the tension between external constraint and internalized desire. Two father–son lines run in parallel—Shan Wudan cultivates a crocodile tied to bureaucratic power, capital, and sex, while his son feeds an inner crocodile with drugs—and together they suggest that external constraint alone cannot explain the play's central problem. The parallel redirects attention toward how desire is internalized, recognized, and misrecognized by the subject.

As a stage figure, the crocodile image allows the play to move beyond individual moral indictment. Rather than relying on a ready-made symbolic code, the play constructs the crocodile's allegorical force through its own stage procedures, leaving the figure open to contemporary reconfiguration. A neighboring textual comparison is instructive: Foley's discussion of *Frog* shows that modern animal images can complicate the boundary between human and animal identity (Foley 2024). In this light, the crocodile is doubly inflected: at once a prehistoric remnant and a modern kept animal; at once endowed with a primordial predatory drive and dependent on artificial feeding. It thereby refracts a form of desire that appears archaic in its predatory force but modern in the artificial conditions that sustain it.

Mo Yan's animal allegory does not rely only on the traditional anthropomorphic mode in which an animal stands for a human vice. Rather, the play repeatedly links Shan Wudan's self-understanding to the crocodile he keeps and feeds (J. Xiao 2022). Shan Wudan is not merely compared to the crocodile; through his own declarations and actions, the play makes the animal a figure through which he recognizes himself. Keeping and feeding the crocodile therefore becomes a form of self-confirmation. The focus of allegorical reading shifts from condemning an external object to tracing how the subject identifies with the very appetite he appears to control.

This allegorical dimension does not stop at the level of character; it also extends into the conditions of spectatorship that the play organizes. Three specific stage arrangements are relevant. First, the letters read aloud (Mo 2023, pp. 101–2), together with utterances delivered in direct address, repeatedly expose structures of mutual benefit and collusion, making it difficult to treat wrongdoing as a fully external object of observation. Second,

the terminal utterance of “Hello” reorganizes the viewing relation: the formerly watched becomes the speaking figure; viewing is repositioned from one-way observation toward a confrontation with address (Chan 2020). Third, the accumulated stage objects—the crocodile-shaped cangue, the coffin-shaped case and its self-sealing lid, the swallowed voice recorder, the Leviathan recitation—do not stay contained within the crocodile’s enclosure; by the close of the play, they have organized a viewing position in which the structure of appetite and judgment is recognizable as part of the same staged structure rather than as a separate object contained in the tank.

Accordingly, the ethical dimension of spectatorship in this play should be understood in stage-structural rather than psychological terms. The play does not show whether spectators acknowledge or constrain an “inner crocodile.” What it does show is a viewing structure in which inner desire, judgment, and self-recognition are brought into proximity. The crocodile ceases to be a purely visual image and becomes the stage figure through which these viewing positions—witnessing, address, and proximity to judgment—are organized and made available.

7. Conclusions

Centering on the stage image of the crocodile in *Crocodile*, this article has examined two related processes: how presence is constructed on stage and how meaning is generated from that presence. The analysis shows that the play does not simply present the crocodile as a symbolic object. Rather, through the coordination of staging, lighting, sound, and bodily action described in the script, it gradually establishes the crocodile as a visible and audible stage presence made available for collective attention. At key moments of concealment, revelation, expansion, threshold, and loss of control, the crocodile becomes not only something represented but something made witnessable through stage procedures.

On that basis, the play’s meanings do not arise from a fixed symbol alone. They emerge through repetition, intensification, and recontextualization across scenes, gradually forming a network organized around power, desire, and judgment. In this process, the crocodile shifts from a stage image to a more active signifying presence. It also changes the terms of spectatorship: rather than inviting interpretation alone, the play organizes viewing around the unfolding relation between desire, judgment, and self-recognition.

The article’s main contribution lies in showing how a stage image can be understood not merely as visual ornament or symbolic shorthand, but as a mechanism of theatrical meaning-making. By focusing on the crocodile as an image organized through stage procedures, this study brings discussions of Mo Yan’s dramatic aesthetics closer to questions of staging, perception, and signification. More broadly, it offers a way to analyze non-human figures in contemporary theater not by asking first what they symbolize, but by examining how stage procedures make them perceptible, witnessable, and capable of generating meaning.

This study remains a single-case analysis based primarily on the script of *Crocodile*, with published interviews, reviews, and existing scholarship on the play used where relevant as contextual support. Its account of spectatorship is therefore centered on the stage conditions that make collective witnessing possible. Further research may extend this perspective by comparing similar plays, examining documented stagings, or analyzing how different theatrical media reshape the crocodile image. Even so, *Crocodile* shows with particular clarity how a written animal image can be organized as a sustained theatrical process of presence and meaning.

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