

The Pursuit of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in Chinese Huai Opera

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Abstract: This paper explored the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty in Chinese Huai Opera. In the quest for truth, Huai Opera reflects the essence of life and seeks to portray authentic human experiences. The unity of truth and goodness is a central theme in Huai Opera, where moral values are intricately woven into the narratives. Through the exploration of human nature and societal critique, Huai Opera delves into the complexities of morality and ethics, offering profound insights into the human condition. Furthermore, the pursuit of beauty in Huai Opera is manifested through aesthetic emotions and artistic expressions, captivating audiences with its visual and auditory splendor. By examining the significance of truth, goodness, and beauty in Huai Opera, this paper shed light on the rich cultural heritage and artistic achievements of this traditional Chinese opera form.

1. Introduction

China is a society based on ethics, and the fundamental type of Chinese culture is ethical culture. By creating more local-colored operas based on real life, blending life into the realm of art, and bringing about stronger aesthetic feelings and education, local operas aim to serve society. Huai opera, born in the Lixiahe region and recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage, is a theatrical form of the working people, renowned for its echoes of ancient rituals and its unique position in the world of opera. The art and traditional ethics of Huai opera stem from a cultural matrix, constituting an important part of human civilization that is inseparable and complementary. Huai Opera, as a gem of Chinese opera, has been refined by the passage of time, carrying profound historical and cultural significance. Its unique pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty is not only evident in the inheritance of traditional culture but also shines through in its creation and performances.^[1]

Huai Opera reflects life through authentic stories and vivid characters, blending life with artistic truth to allow the audience to grasp the essence of life. Moreover, it seeks the unity of truth and goodness by incorporating qualities of kindness and integrity, conveying moral strength. Delving into human nature, Huai Opera reveals the brilliance and darkness of human nature, criticizing social injustices through art and calling for justice and goodness. In terms of aesthetics, Huai Opera presents exquisite artistic pictures to the audience with its unique singing style, skills, and stage artistry, pursuing the ultimate in aesthetics and expression, thus winning the love of the audience.

2. The Significance of Truth in Huai Opera

2.1. The Truth of Life and the Truth in Huai Opera

Huai opera's singing style primarily focuses on authentic vocal performances, with beautiful melodies and sincere emotions. This singing style not only carries rich local characteristics but also appears particularly delicate and genuine in expressing characters' emotions. When actors sing, they emphasize the delicate expression of emotions, using variations in pitch, speed, strength, and other vocal elements to showcase the characters' emotional fluctuations. "Opera refers to telling stories through singing and dancing." (Wang 2008) Huai opera precisely follows this form of "telling stories through singing and dancing," conveying story emotions through vocal performances, allowing the audience to feel the truth of life within the musical fluctuations. For example, in Huai opera *The Injustice to Dou E*, the protagonist Dou E's grievances and helplessness are vividly portrayed through the actors' passionate and stirring singing, allowing the audience to sense Dou E's inner pain and struggles, enhancing the artistic infectiousness of Huai opera.^[2]

The performances in Huai opera are also highly authentic. Actors on stage depict character personalities and life scenes through body movements, gestures, and expressions, incorporating subtle details from daily life into the opera, making the audience feel as if they are witnessing real-life events while enjoying the opera. As the Qing Dynasty opera theorist Li Yu stated in *Pleasant Diversion*: "The lyrics of a play should be straightforward and clear." (Li 1998) Huai opera's performance art aims for this straightforward and clear sense of authenticity, enabling the audience to intuitively perceive the vitality of life within the opera. For example, in Huai opera *The Story of the Golden Bracelet and Jade Ring*, the characters of scholar Wang Shipeng and courtesan Li Suping are vividly and touchingly portrayed. The twists and turns of their fates and emotional entanglements make the audience feel the reality and cruelty of life. This authentic character portrayal allows the audience to understand the characters' inner worlds more deeply, thereby experiencing the truth of life more profoundly.^[3]

Furthermore, Huai opera covers a wide range of subject matters, including history, reality, folk stories, and more. These subjects mostly stem from life, carrying profound real-world significance and social values. Huai opera artists delve deep into and refine real-life stories, creating a series of outstanding plays that reflect social realities and reveal the true nature of humanity. As the Ming Dynasty opera theorist Xu Wei mentioned in *Record of Nanxi*: "Life is like a play, play, as in life." (Li 2015) Huai opera precisely captures this deep exploration and refinement of real-life experiences, allowing the audience to sense the truth and beauty of life while enjoying the opera.

The truth of life is an objective existence perceived directly through the senses by people. The truth in Huai opera is the artistic representation and refinement of real-life experiences by artists through artistic means. As pointed out by the modern opera theorist Wu Mei in *Gu Qu Zhu Tan*: "Opera is about depicting emotions, situations, and objects, and using the past to explain the present." (Wu 2010) Huai opera artists deeply observe and understand life, using unique artistic techniques to infuse the truth of life into the opera, presenting an artistic truth that transcends reality. By delving into and experiencing life, they incorporate real-life stories, genuine emotions, and authentic characters into opera creation, allowing Huai opera to showcase the reality of life while also revealing its beauty and hope. This authentic artistic representation not only enhances the artistic infectiousness and appeal of Huai opera but also makes it an important carrier for inheriting and promoting the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.^[4]

2.2. The Unity of Truth and Goodness in Huai Opera

In Huai opera, the unity of truth and goodness is not only reflected in character personalities and

plot development but is also a profound artistic pursuit and cultural expression. This unity not only showcases the artistic charm of Huai opera but also demonstrates its unique value and significance in various dimensions such as philosophy, psychology, and art. In the *Analects of Confucius*, Confucius proposed the moral principle of “cultivating oneself and governing others without resentment or regret,” which not only embodies the core values of Confucianism but also provides a philosophical foundation for the unity of truth and goodness in Huai opera. In Huai opera, character images often embody the manifestation of this moral principle. Taking *The Peony Pavilion* as an example, the loyalty and integrity of the protagonist Li Jing serve as the epitome of “truth”; his adherence to righteousness and resistance to power represent the embodiment of “goodness.” Through the performances and storylines of Huai opera, the audience can feel the complexity of moral choices and human struggles, prompting them to reflect on their own moral beliefs and behavioral standards.^[5]

In the *Mencius*, Mencius proposed the viewpoint “by nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart,” emphasizing the importance of postnatal education in human development. This viewpoint finds vivid expression in Huai opera. Huai opera showcases the profound impact of education, environment, and other factors on human development by narrating the stories of different characters’ destinies. For example, in *The Butterfly Lovers*, the tragic love story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is not only due to their entrapment in feudal customs but also because of the lack of proper moral education and guidance. Through this example, Huai opera conveys the importance of education in shaping human nature and achieving the unity of truth and goodness.

Psychologist Sigmund Freud proposed the psychological structure theory of “id, ego, superego,” providing a new perspective for understanding the unity of truth and goodness in Huai opera. In Huai opera, character images often exhibit the complexity of this psychological structure. Taking *The Peony Pavilion* as an example, the love story between the protagonist Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei not only shows the entanglement and choices of true love and kindness in human nature but also reveals the conflicts and harmonization of instinctual impulses, practical considerations, and moral norms in human nature. Du Liniang bravely pursues freedom for love, embodying the impulse of the “id”; Liu Mengmei hesitates between love and family responsibilities, representing the balancing act of the “ego”; and their adherence to righteousness and mutual support in adversity reflects the moral norms of the “superego.” Through the performances and plot development of Huai opera, the audience can experience the diversity and contradictions of human nature, prompting them to contemplate their emotional and moral orientations.^[6]

Furthermore, psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory provides insights into understanding the unity of truth and goodness in Huai opera. In Huai opera, character images often pursue the satisfaction of needs at different levels, from physiological needs to self-actualization needs. However, among these needs, moral needs often hold a significant position. For example, in *The Legend of the White Snake*, Bai Niangzi fights against Fahai for love and justice, embodying the pursuit of moral needs. Through this example, Huai opera conveys the essential role of moral needs in human nature and the unity of truth and goodness in human nature.

Additionally, theories such as semiotics and narratology in art provide strong support for understanding the unity of truth and goodness in Huai opera. In Huai opera, various symbols and narrative techniques are cleverly used to convey the values of truth and goodness. For example, in *Wang Baochuan*, the portrayal of Wang Baochuan’s unwavering wait for her husband’s return after enduring eighteen years in a cold cave, using symbolism and metaphors, conveys the values of loyalty, kindness, and integrity. These techniques not only enhance the artistic expression of Huai opera but also deepen the audience’s understanding of the unity of truth and goodness. In conclusion, the unity of truth and goodness in Huai opera is a unique artistic charm that embodies the Chinese traditional culture’s pursuit of humanity, morality, and beauty.^[7]

3. The Value of Goodness in Huai Opera

3.1. Exploration of Human Nature

Huai opera pays special attention to revealing the complexity of human nature when depicting character images. Each character is not simply good or evil but possesses a rich inner world and intricate emotional entanglements. This complexity adds depth and authenticity to Huai opera works, providing the audience with an opportunity to deeply contemplate and explore human nature. Take *The Legend of the White Snake* as an example. Bai Suzhen, a white snake who has cultivated for a thousand years, is not merely a simple demon. She deeply loves Xu Xian and sacrifices everything for love, demonstrating her kindness and sincerity. However, her demonic nature brings her endless pain and turmoil, leading her to struggle between good and evil. This portrayal of complex human nature makes Bai Suzhen's character more vivid and multi-dimensional. Aristotle once pointed out in *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Man's nature lies in his reason." (Crisp 2014) Through the depiction of character complexity, Huai opera displays the rationality and irrationality, goodness and evil, sacrifice and selfishness within human nature.^[8]

Huai opera works often involve moral dilemmas. Characters face various moral challenges and must make difficult choices, reflecting the goodness, evil, truth, and falsehood within human nature. By unveiling characters' moral choices and inner struggles, Huai opera works prompt the audience to ponder what constitutes true goodness and true evil. For instance, in *Qin Xianglian*, the protagonist Qin Xianglian faces a significant moral choice after her husband Chen Shimei betrays her. She can choose to forgive her husband and maintain family harmony or expose her husband's crimes. Ultimately, she chooses to reveal the truth and ensure Chen Shimei faces the consequences. "The moral value of an action does not depend on the results it brings but on the motives and intentions of the actor." (Kant 1785) Qin Xianglian's choice is based on her steadfast pursuit of justice and truth, exhibiting nobility and greatness within human nature. By depicting characters' moral choices and inner struggles, Huai opera works guide the audience to contemplate what constitutes true goodness and evil, as well as genuine moral values.^[9]

Furthermore, characters in Huai opera works often face various human dilemmas and challenges. They must uphold their beliefs and pursuits in adversity, demonstrating resilience and bravery within human nature. Through the depiction of characters' dilemmas and transcendence, Huai opera works highlight the truth, goodness, and beauty within human nature. For example, in *The Romance of Hairpin*, the love story of Wang Shipeng and Qian Yulian is filled with twists and hardships. They face family pressures, threats of power, and societal prejudices but persist in their love and beliefs. Throughout this process, they exhibit resilience and bravery within human nature, as well as a pursuit and adherence to truth, goodness, and beauty. "The human psyche is filled with various desires and impulses, but only by transcending these desires and impulses can one achieve true self." (Freud 2005) The story of Wang Shipeng and Qian Yulian vividly illustrates this point. When faced with human dilemmas and challenges, they choose not to yield or give up but to uphold and transcend. This spirit not only embodies the truth, goodness, and beauty within human nature but also provides the audience with the courage and strength to face life's challenges and dilemmas.

3.2. Social Critique

Huai Opera, as one of the significant branches of traditional Chinese opera art, has not only won the hearts of a vast audience with its unique singing style, performance, and rich repertoire but has also become an important vehicle for studying traditional Chinese culture, social ethics, and human nature exploration through its profound spirit of social critique and humanistic care. In Huai Opera, the value of seeking goodness is not only reflected in the exploration of human nature and the

revelation of inner worlds but also finds a thorough expression in the critique and reflection on social realities. In Huai Opera works, often through the suffering and tragic destinies of characters from the lower social strata, the cruel reality of social injustice and wealth disparity is revealed.

Take *Li Huiniang* as an example. This Huai Opera work tells the tragic fate of the female protagonist Li Huiniang under the constraints of feudal ethics and family pressure. Li Huiniang, a poor girl, is noticed by the powerful due to her beauty and is forced to marry a man she does not love. In marriage, she suffers abuse from her husband and mistreatment from her in-laws, ultimately dying with resentment. This work deeply reveals the oppression and constraints of women under feudal ethics and the devastation of individual destinies by social injustice. Simultaneously, it triggers the audience's critique and reflection on feudal ethics and social injustice, promoting attention and contemplation on women's status and social equality. The *Analects of Confucius* mentions: "A noble person is concerned with righteousness; a petty person is concerned with personal gain." This statement finds vivid expression in Huai Opera works. Through the critique and reflection on social injustice, Huai Opera works call for attention to marginalized social groups, the pursuit of social fairness, and justice. This manifestation of seeking goodness in Huai Opera works is not only a profound revelation of social realities but also a pursuit and call for kindness and justice within human nature.^[10]

In Huai Opera works, the phenomenon of moral decay and distortion of human nature is prevalent. These works, through the critique and reflection on moral decay, reveal the ugliness and darkness within human nature. Take *Wang Kui Betrays Guiying* as an example. This Huai Opera work tells the story of Wang Kui betraying love for power and privilege. Wang Kui and Guiying share deep affection, yet Wang Kui, after achieving the top scholar position in the imperial examination, abandons Guiying for fame and fortune. This work, through the critique of Wang Kui's moral decay, reveals the greed and selfishness of human beings while displaying Guiying's steadfastness to love and morals. The manifestation of seeking goodness in Huai Opera works is not only a critique of moral decay but also a pursuit of kindness and morality within human nature.

The phenomenon of official corruption and power struggles is also often depicted in Huai Opera works. Take *Register of Honest Officials* as an example. This Huai Opera work reveals the dark side of official corruption through the struggles of honest officials against corrupt officials. The honest officials, in order to uphold justice and fairness, are willing to fight against the powerful, even sacrificing their own lives. This critique and reflection on power corruption not only reveal the cruel reality of official corruption but also prompt the audience to consider the importance of power and responsibility. As *Tao Te Ching* records: "When the Great Dao ceased to be observed, benevolence and righteousness came into vogue. Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy. When harmony no longer prevailed throughout the six kinships, filial sons found their manifestation; when the states and clans fell into disorder, loyal ministers appeared." Huai Opera works, through the critique and reflection on power corruption, call for people to pay attention to the fairness and transparency of power operation, and pursue a balance between power and responsibility.

4. The Expression of Beauty in Huai Opera

4.1. Aesthetic Emotions

Huai Opera, as a significant branch of traditional Chinese opera, has its roots deeply embedded in the fertile soil of Chinese culture. "Drama is a cultural phenomenon and an important component of human culture." (Shi 2010) The aesthetic emotions portrayed in Huai Opera works not only embody the essence of traditional Chinese culture but also reflect the universality of human emotional experiences. For example, in the Huai Opera work *Emperor's Lover*, a sense of tragic emotion runs through the narrative, telling the story of the protagonist Zhao Kuangyin's journey of escorting

Jingniang home. The display of familial love, friendship, and patriotism in this work not only embodies traditional Chinese ethical values but also resonates with the audience's inner feelings of loyalty and bravery.

In his book *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, Shi Yilong mentioned: "Drama, as a form of cultural expression, carries the richness and diversity of human emotional experiences." (Shi 2010) Huai Opera, as a unique form of cultural expression, also embodies this richness and diversity in aesthetic emotions. In Huai Opera works, there are not only depictions of emotions such as love and loyalty but also praises for justice, bravery, sacrifice, and more. These emotions are not only universal but also capable of transcending boundaries of time, culture, and language, touching the hearts of audiences from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, in the Huai Opera *My Wife is Princess*, by portraying the deep father-daughter bond between Tang Emperor Li Shimin and the princess, as well as the love twists between the princess and Guo Ai, the work delves into the entanglement of family affection and romantic love, allowing the audience to experience the bittersweet aspects of life amidst laughter and tears.

In addition to inheriting and expressing traditional culture, Huai Opera also demonstrates its unique innovation and development in contemporary society. With the changes in society and evolving aesthetic demands of the audience, Huai Opera, while preserving traditional elements, continuously absorbs new artistic forms and creative concepts to better align with modern audience aesthetics. This innovation and development not only inject new vitality into Huai Opera but also allow it to shine brightly in modern society. For example, in the modern Huai Opera *Xiang Lin Sao*, while maintaining traditional singing styles and performance techniques, modern elements such as contemporary dance and lighting are incorporated, making the work more vivid and lively. Moreover, the choice of themes in this production is more closely related to real-life, focusing on the emotions, thoughts, and values of contemporary people, evoking strong resonance among the audience.

Specifically, in modern adaptations of Huai Opera, one can observe the clever integration of many new elements and creative ideas. Take the Huai Opera *Painting Within a Painting* as an example, a pioneering work in Huai Opera. This production not only reworks the singing style by selecting suitable traditional Huai Opera tunes but also innovates moderately, preserving the authentic essence of Huai Opera while incorporating modern aesthetic elements. In terms of composition and music, *Painting Within a Painting* repackages traditional Huai Opera instruments and invites percussion experts for design, making the music more pleasing and visually appealing, aligning with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities. In stage presentation, the production pursues a simple and expressive style, fully leveraging the aesthetic feature of "one table, two chairs" in traditional opera, while integrating modern stage design elements, forming a unique stage design style. This innovation not only allows the audience to feel the rich traditional cultural atmosphere when appreciating Huai Opera but also experience a visual feast brought by modern technology.

Huai Opera, as a treasure of traditional Chinese opera, embodies a deep sense of aesthetic emotions in its pursuit of beauty. Through exquisite singing, vivid performances, and unique music, Huai Opera can resonate with the audience's inner feelings, touching upon hidden emotions. The artistic charm of Huai Opera lies not only in its external performance forms but also in the deep emotions and philosophies it conveys. When appreciating Huai Opera, the audience seems to immerse themselves in a world full of emotions and stories, sharing the joys and sorrows with the characters, experiencing the ups and downs of life. This transmission of aesthetic emotions makes Huai Opera a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, emotions and culture, showcasing its unique artistic charm and cultural value.

4.2. Artistic Presentation

Art scholar Ernst Grosse explicitly stated in his classic work *The Beginnings of Art*: “Art is a form of seeking beauty, conveying the pursuit and expression of beauty through the creation and presentation of artists.” (Grosse 1897) Huai Opera, as a form of opera art, displays its unique pursuit of beauty and artistic charm through the comprehensive use of various artistic elements such as music, dance, and performance. In Huai Opera works, the exquisite and detailed stage setting is a significant manifestation of its pursuit of beauty. The stage design in Huai Opera is meticulous, creating the ambiance and atmosphere that the work aims to convey through carefully arranged stage settings and decorations, presenting the ideals of beauty and aesthetic standards pursued by the work. For example, in the Huai Opera *The Legend of the White Snake*, the stage setting with green mountains and blue waters as the backdrop, adorned with lotus flowers, and water plants, creates a fresh and ethereal atmosphere, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the legendary love story of the White Snake and Xu Xian.

Costumes and props play a crucial role in the art of Huai Opera, serving as sources of visual beauty and direct reflections of the pursuit of beauty in Huai Opera art. The costume design in Huai Opera is extremely refined, with harmonious and rich color combinations, flowing lines full of rhythm, resembling moving artistic scrolls. Through these meticulously designed costumes, Huai Opera vividly portrays the character traits, social status, and complex emotional worlds of different characters in the work. Simultaneously, the prop styling in Huai Opera also exhibits high artistic value. Whether it is the simple and elegant tables, chairs, and stools or the sharp and delicate knives, spears, and halberds, each prop is meticulously crafted and polished, complementing the costumes to construct the overall aesthetic sense of the work. These props not only provide strong support for the actors’ performances but also offer the audience an immersive viewing experience. Taking the Huai Opera *Painted Skin* as an example, the costume and prop design in this work is exemplary. The costumes of the characters in the play are not only magnificent but also distinctive, accurately conveying the characters’ identities and personalities. Regarding props, whether it is the mysterious scroll or the eerie demon props, each is crafted with exquisite detail, leaving the audience in awe. Through the clever combination of costumes and props, the audience seems to be transported into a world full of fantastical colors, experiencing the mystery and horror conveyed by the work.

Makeup and styling in Huai Opera are also essential aspects of its pursuit of beauty. The makeup design in Huai Opera is ingenious, showcasing the character traits and emotional features that the work aims to express through precise makeup techniques and unique styling methods. In the Huai Opera *Wang Baochuan*, the makeup and styling design of Wang Baochuan is highly representative. Through meticulous makeup and unique styling, the actors vividly portray Wang Baochuan’s resilience, determination, and longing for love, allowing the audience to deeply feel the unwavering determination and sincere emotions conveyed by the work. Just as described in *General Introduction to Chinese Opera*: “The beauty of Huai Opera lies in its meticulous artistic expression, the gorgeousness of costumes and props, and the uniqueness of makeup and styling.” (Zhang and Guo 2014) These elements together constitute the unique charm of Huai Opera art, making it an indispensable part of traditional Chinese opera. Whether it is the exquisite and magnificent costumes, the meticulous props, or the unique makeup styling, they all demonstrate the artists’ persistent pursuit and profound understanding of beauty in Huai Opera.

5. Conclusions

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that Huai Opera, as a traditional art form in China, centers its pursuit on truth, goodness, and beauty, embodying care and exploration of morality, aesthetics, and human nature. In the performances of Huai Opera, real life intertwines with theatrical

expression, showcasing a concern and pursuit for the real world. Through the promotion of virtues such as kindness, integrity, and courage, it guides the audience to contemplate the value orientation of life. Huai Opera works explore human nature and critique social realities, revealing the complexity of human emotions, moral choices, and social issues, providing profound reflections and insights for the audience. Aesthetic emotions and artistic expressions intertwine in Huai Opera, displaying its unique artistic charm and aesthetic value, providing spiritual nourishment and enlightenment to the audience.

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Huai Opera inherits the cultural genes of the Chinese nation, offering valuable spiritual wealth and cultural heritage to contemporary society. In the future development, it is hoped that Huai Opera can continue to inherit and innovate, keeping pace with the times, bringing more artistic enjoyment and intellectual enlightenment to people. The pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty by Huai Opera is not only the inheritance and promotion of traditional culture but also a reflection and inspiration for contemporary society. It is believed that in the future, Huai Opera will continue to flourish and make greater contributions to the prosperity and inheritance of world culture.

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