

The Formation and Significance of Ethical Thought in Chinese Huai Opera

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the background and profound significance of ethical thought in Chinese Huai Opera. Its formation is based on the unique regional culture and profound historical traditions, while also deeply influenced by social changes and the needs of the people. Drawing on the essence of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and other diverse ideologies, the ethical thought in Huai Opera serves multiple social functions such as entertainment, cognition, and aesthetics. This study aimed to reveal the cultural and social value of ethical thought in Huai Opera and provide theoretical support for the inheritance and development of Huai Opera.

KEYWORDS

Huai Opera; Ethical Thought; Culture; Social Functions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Huai Opera, also known as “Jianghuai Opera”, is an ancient Han Chinese opera genre. Originating during the reigns of the Qing Emperors Qianlong and Jiaqing, it emerged in the regions of Yancheng and Funing in northern Jiangsu, as well as Qingjiang, Huaian, and Baoying. Its prosperity can be traced back to modern times in Shanghai and is currently popular in Jiangsu Province, Shanghai, and certain areas of Anhui Province. In June 2008, Huai Opera, jointly applied by the Shanghai Huai Opera Troupe and Yancheng City in Jiangsu Province, was approved by the State Council and included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. Among the various local opera genres in Jiangsu, Huai Opera has been considered one of the most representative local opera genres due to its wide performance area and large audience base. As a regional cultural product, Huai Opera is not only a form of entertainment and artistic expression but also integrates the history, geography, and customs of northern Jiangsu, carrying the emotional memories of the specific ethnic group in northern Jiangsu and embodying the values and choices of the people living in this region.

2. THE SOIL FOR THE EMERGENCE OF ETHICAL THOUGHT IN HUAI OPERA

2.1. Regional Culture and Historical Tradition

The origins of Huai opera have deep roots in the long-standing “incense opera,” “Huixi,” and “mentan ci” popular in the salt and Huai regions. The “incense opera,” also known as “child opera,” had close ties with superstitious activities involving child mediums before liberation. The “incense opera” ceremonies, like other ritualistic activities, aimed to ward off epidemics, expel evil, ward off disasters,

pray for good harvests, seek blessings, and bring good fortune through offerings and entertainment for the gods. It emphasized rituals and preserved many ancient ritualistic customs. In ceremonies such as inviting and bidding farewell to gods, opening and closing altars, chanting prayers, drumming and dancing, wielding spears and shields, and even driving away epidemics and expelling evil spirits, the incense opera followed the ritualistic customs of ancient rituals. These mysterious and ritualistic ceremonies contained elements of storytelling and performance, such as child mediums chanting prayers, performing “stepping through the door in eight steps,” drumming and singing while seated, and intense performances like the thrilling exorcism with a “chopping knife.” The ethical significance contained in Huai opera, originating from ancient ritualistic ceremonies, is thought-provoking. The rural folk ritual ceremonies stem from the essential needs of life: “Folk beliefs have prominent utilitarianism. All activities of folk beliefs stem from the practical needs of the people’s real life, with corresponding utilitarian purposes...The essence of folk beliefs is to seek auspiciousness and ward off disasters. Whether it is divination, ritual activities, or various forms of witchcraft, they all revolve around self-interest for survival.” (Zhong 1998).

The operas derived from shamanistic practices and ritual activities have always served the practical function of meeting the survival needs of the people. It was the necessity of survival that led to the dissemination of operas, which also contained rich traditional ethical thoughts. For example, performing operas during various festivals throughout China is still a common folk tradition in both northern and southern regions. Regardless of the festival, opera performances are indispensable, demonstrating that psychological or spiritual needs often play a more irreplaceable role than material needs. This aesthetic art signifies the importance of spirituality and morality in the folk aesthetic system or the entire cultural system of China. Huai opera actors emerged from the people, driven by survival needs, providing educational functions through entertainment. The mobile opera troupes satisfied people’s desires for cultural life and spiritual pursuits, leading to the rapid spread of ethical thoughts in Huai opera. Furthermore, the artistic aspects of Huai opera continuously evolved from needs and dissemination, gradually developing into a well-structured and distinctive art form, as seen in the “chanting of prayers” in “child opera” and the “melancholic tunes” in “mentan ci.” Therefore, in the process of Huai opera performances, the audience’s appreciation is not only a transmission of ethical thoughts but also a process of artistic creation. The audience is both the recipient and creator of Huai opera art, actively participating in the performance process, showcasing the vitality of Huai opera art.

2.2. Social Changes and Public Needs

Throughout the long history of China, social structures, values, and moral standards have undergone continuous changes and developments. These changes have not only influenced the overall appearance of society but also profoundly impacted the creation and expression of theatrical genres. Huai opera, as one of them, has its ethical thoughts closely intertwined with the social changes of the time. At different stages of Chinese history, societal moral concepts and ethical values have transitioned from closed to open, from singular to diverse (Zhang 2010). This transformation is reflected not only in the political, economic, and cultural aspects of society but also significantly influences the creation and expression of theatrical genres. As a local opera, Huai opera’s ethical thoughts gradually formed within this historical context.

As an ancient cultural form, theatrical genres have always been essential carriers of entertainment and cultural exchange for the people. Huai opera, as one of them, had its ethical thoughts shaped and evolved under the profound influence of the contemporary popular demands. Throughout the development of Huai opera, the demands of the people played a vital role in the formation and evolution of its ethical thoughts. On one hand, the people’s attention and pursuit of morality and ethics provided essential intellectual resources for the formation of ethical thoughts in Huai opera. For instance, in Huai opera works from the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as *My Wife is Princess* and *Marriage of the Number One Scholar*, there were frequent praises and portrayals of traditional

virtues like loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, and benevolence, directly responding to the moral demands of the people. On the other hand, the people's concerns and reflections on social issues also provided significant intellectual impetus for the development of ethical thoughts in Huai opera. These works reflected the contradictions and conflicts in society at that time, such as wealth gaps and official corruption, serving as a direct reflection of the social demands of the people.

3. THE CONCEPTUAL ORIGINS OF ETHICAL THOUGHT IN HUAI OPERA

3.1. Confucianism

As early as around the 6th century BC, concepts such as “Dao,” “De,” “Lun,” and “Li” appeared in works like the *Book of Changes* and the *Book of Documents* in China. The *Book of Changes* not only introduced moral categories like “loyalty,” “filial piety,” “integrity,” “righteousness,” and “benevolence,” but also for the first time combined the word “morality.” “Lun” carries meanings of seniority, order, and morality, while “Li” embodies order and morality. “All modulations of sound take their rise from the mind of man; and music is the intercommunication of them in their relations and differences.” (Li Ji Warring States 475 BC-221 BC) This means that music and human ethics are interconnected.

Confucius' *Analects* can be considered, in a sense, the first systematic work in China to expound on ethical morals. The book covers various dimensions of moral viewpoints, such as moral principles, moral cultivation, and moral tendencies. The most famous aspect is using “rituals and music” as the primary means to regulate human behavior and moral thinking. Starting from Confucius, ancient Chinese moral and ethical issues were profoundly summarized and contemplated, leaving a profound impact on future generations. From ancient times to the present, under the leadership of “rituals,” “loyalty, filial piety, integrity, righteousness” are the greatest cohesion of China's ethical system and ethical thoughts, and Huai opera's expression intention is no exception. “Rituals” play a dominant role in traditional Chinese thought and even in local operas, while loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness can better reflect certain specific relationships of ethics and human emotions in Huai opera works.

For example, in the Huai opera *Wang Laohu's Marriage Proposal*, we can clearly see the profound influence of Confucian thought on the script. The play tells the story of Wang Laohu mistakenly kidnapping a bride, and eventually, misunderstandings are resolved, leading to the union of the lovers. Throughout this process, the Confucian values of “benevolence” and “righteousness” are fully embodied. Despite Wang Laohu's rough character, upon learning the truth, he bravely admits his mistake, showcasing the Confucian spirit of “benevolence”; while Zhou Wenbin remains steadfast in his love and principles, refusing to yield to power, demonstrating the Confucian value of upholding “righteousness.” This integration of Confucian thought allows Huai opera to not only entertain the audience but also convey profound ethical and moral concepts.

3.2. Taoism

As one of China's traditional theatrical genres, Huai opera has not only won the audience's love with its unique artistic form and exquisite performance skills but also carries rich cultural connotations and ethical thoughts. Among many philosophical thoughts, Daoist thought, with its unique perspective and profound philosophy, has had a profound impact on the formation and development of ethical thoughts in Huai opera. Daoist thought, as an important school of ancient Chinese philosophy, emphasizes individual self-cultivation and the pursuit of inner peace and freedom. This philosophy finds ample expression in the character portrayals in Huai opera works. On the stage of Huai opera, we often encounter characters who are introverted, profound, and seek inner peace. They

are not swayed by external influences, maintaining inner tranquility, a vivid depiction of the Daoist idea of “the highest goodness is like water. Water benefits all things and does not compete”. (Laozi Tao Te Ching) For instance, in the Huai opera *Pearl Tower*, the protagonist Fang Qing, despite facing family upheavals and mysteries about his origins, manages to maintain a peaceful mindset, using softness to overcome rigidity, ultimately averting danger. This character portrayal embodies Daoist thought in Huai opera art.

The Daoist concept of “following nature and governing by non-action” (Laozi Tao Te Ching) has also significantly influenced the emotional expression in Huai opera works. Emotional expressions in Huai opera are often subtle and restrained rather than direct and flamboyant. Through delicate performances, actors vividly portray the inner emotional changes of characters, a manifestation of the Daoist idea of “knowing when to stop to avoid danger.” (Laozi Tao Te Ching) In the Huai opera *The Mark of Teeth*, after enduring various hardships, the protagonists reunite with their loved ones. However, instead of celebrating extravagantly, they express their inner joy and gratitude in a calm and restrained manner, embodying the Daoist philosophy in Huai opera works.

Daoist thought has had a profound impact on the life attitudes and values in Huai opera works. In Huai opera, characters often pursue inner peace, transcendence from the mundane, and seek spiritual liberation and wisdom. This value orientation is a reflection of the Daoist idea of “in the pursuit of learning, knowledge is increased daily. In the pursuit of Dao, actions are reduced daily”. (Laozi Tao Te Ching) In the Huai opera *My Wife is Princess*, when faced with the temptations of power and wealth, the protagonist remains steadfast in inner peace and freedom, unaffected by external influences. This value orientation vividly embodies Daoist thought in Huai opera art. By delving into the essence of Daoist thought, Huai opera artists integrate it into their artistic creations, showcasing the unique artistic charm and profound ethical thoughts of Huai opera while inheriting and promoting traditional Chinese culture.

3.3. Buddhism

Originating from ancient India, Buddhist thought, after blending with Chinese indigenous culture, formed a Buddhist culture with Chinese characteristics. Values such as compassion, selflessness, and transcendence from the mundane became the core ideas of Buddhist culture. These ideas are widely reflected and inherited in Huai opera works, infusing Huai opera with profound ethical connotations. In Huai opera, we often encounter characters embodying compassion, wisdom, and selflessness. These characters, when faced with adversity, always treat others with compassion, resolve conflicts with wisdom, and selflessly sacrifice themselves. For example, in the Huai opera *Qin Xianglian*, despite enduring hardships, Qin Xianglian maintains her kind and compassionate nature, selflessly dedicating herself to family and friends, embodying the values of compassion and selflessness emphasized in Buddhist thought.

The Buddhist concept of “form is emptiness, emptiness also is form” (Heart Sutra) finds vivid expression in the characters of Huai opera. This realm of “form is emptiness” signifies transcending the superficial appearances of the material world to perceive the inner essence of things. In Huai opera, some characters can transcend worldly disturbances, maintain compassion, and exhibit the Buddhist idea of “selflessness for others” and wisdom. For instance, in the Huai opera *Wang Baochuan*, when faced with the temptations of power and wealth, Wang Baochuan upholds her moral principles, choosing to transcend the mundane and return to a life of authenticity, embodying the realm of “form is emptiness” in Buddhist thought.

Furthermore, Buddhist thought emphasizes compassion, selflessness, and transcendence from the mundane, focusing on emotional transcendence and elevation. This philosophy has had a significant impact on the ways and depths of emotional expression in Huai opera works. In Huai opera, emotional expressions are often transcendent and profound, emphasizing the transcendence of the mundane and emotions. For example, in the Huai opera *The Butterfly Lovers*, although the love story of Liang

Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is tragic, their emotional expressions transcend worldly constraints, reaching a realm beyond life and death. This mode of emotional expression aligns with the Buddhist emphasis on transcending the mundane and emotions, making Huai opera works more profound and moving in emotional expression.

The Buddhist concept of “all conditioned phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows” (Diamond Sutra) is also reflected in Huai opera works. This value orientation signifies transcending the superficial and transient aspects of life and things, seeking the inner truth and eternity. In Huai opera, characters often transcend worldly gains and losses and emotional entanglements, embodying the wisdom and realm of transcendence from the mundane and emotions emphasized in Buddhist thought. For example, in the Huai opera *My Wife is Princess*, when the emperor and princess face choices between power and familial ties, they transcend personal gains and losses, choosing to uphold the interests of the nation and its people, embodying the value orientation of “like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows” emphasized in Buddhist thought. In conclusion, Buddhist thought has had a profound influence on the conceptual origins of ethical thought in Huai opera. This influence is not only evident in character development but also in emotional expression and value orientations.

4. THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF ETHICAL THOUGHT IN HUAI OPERA

4.1. Entertainment Function

The birth of any theatrical genre as a branch of art can be traced back to ancient rituals, a viewpoint stemming from in-depth explorations in anthropology, cultural studies, and art history. These rituals often began with offerings to the heavens and spirits, seeking blessings for bountiful harvests and the well-being of the people through sacrificial activities and performances. As stated in *The Book of Rites - The Law of Sacrifices*, “Sacrifice is not something that comes from outside, but something that arises from within.” This reverence and supplication born from within became the primal driving force behind the birth of drama. Both cultivation and harvest required reporting to the heavens, not just as agricultural activities but as beliefs and customs deeply rooted in agrarian culture. In agrarian societies, every aspect of life was connected to the heavens, spirits, and the belief that they could influence crop growth and people’s destinies. Thus, in leisure times, people entertained themselves through song and dance performances, simultaneously reenacting scenes from labor and daily life. This form of entertainment not only praised labor but also expressed a love for life.

As a folk art form rich in local flavor, Huai opera’s birth and development are deeply rooted in this cultural background. Huai opera’s entertainment value is not only reflected in its performance forms and content but also in the spirit of entertainment it embodies. The entertainment value of Huai opera is first seen in its performance forms. Huai opera’s performances are diverse and flexible, incorporating basic opera techniques like singing, recitation, acting, and martial arts, along with unique body movements, steps, and gestures. These performance forms not only make Huai opera visually appealing but also provide auditory enjoyment. When audiences watch Huai opera performances, they can appreciate the actors’ exquisite skills and profound artistic cultivation, experiencing spiritual joy and satisfaction.

Furthermore, Huai opera’s entertainment value is also evident in its performance content. Huai opera draws inspiration from folk tales, historical legends, and real-life events, portraying the beauty and ugliness of human nature, the brightness and darkness of society through vivid storylines and vivid character portrayals. These plays contain tragic elements as well as comedic elements, allowing audiences to resonate emotionally deeply while also enjoying a light and pleasant aesthetic experience. More importantly, the entertainment value of Huai opera corresponds to the inclusive spirit of entertainment it embodies. This spirit of entertainment is a vital component of Huai opera culture, reflecting the care for humanity and love for life in Huai opera art. Whether tragic or comedic, Huai opera is filled with love for life and care for humanity. Through their superb skills and genuine

emotions, actors immerse the audience in vivid story worlds, allowing them to experience the beauty of life and the essence of human existence during the performance.

For example, in the Huai opera *Golden Hairpin*, the love story between the protagonist Wang Shipeng and his wife Qian Yulian is filled with joys and sorrows. Through exquisite performances, actors vividly portray the deep affection and turbulent fate of this couple. Audiences not only feel the sincere emotions between them but also experience the unpredictability of life and the helplessness of human existence. However, amidst this helplessness, actors use humor and wit to show the beauty and hope in life, allowing the audience to appreciate life's beauty and possibilities. This spirit of entertainment ensures that Huai opera maintains its vitality and unique artistic charm in its inheritance and development.

4.2. Cognitive Function

The cognitive function of Huai opera is first seen in its inheritance of history. By interpreting historical events and figures, Huai opera vividly presents the appearance, humanistic spirit, and moral concepts of ancient society to the audience. For example, the Huai opera *Wang Baochuan*, set in the Tang Dynasty, tells the love story between Wang Baochuan and Xue Pinggui. The play not only showcases the court life and ceremonial systems of the Tang Dynasty but also conveys the ancient society's pursuit of love, loyalty, and bravery through Wang Baochuan's unwavering determination and Xue Pinggui's valor in battle. While enjoying the plot, the audience gains a preliminary understanding of the historical culture of the Tang Dynasty.

In addition to historical inheritance, Huai opera reflects social realities, allowing the audience to see a microcosm of society within the drama. Huai opera works often use social realities as a backdrop, portraying various characters and conflicts to highlight societal issues and contradictions. For instance, in the Huai opera *The Strange Case*, a bizarre case is used as a clue to reveal judicial corruption and moral decay in society through the fair judgment of judges and the cunning arguments of criminals. While enjoying the plot, the audience is encouraged to think deeply about these issues, enhancing their awareness of social realities.

Furthermore, Huai opera conveys moral concepts and life philosophies through the portrayal of various character images. These character images serve as both positive role models and cautionary tales. Through their fates and stories, they convey moral norms and life wisdom to the audience. For example, Qin Xianglian in the Huai opera *Qin Xianglian* is a typical positive character. She fights against the powerful to uphold her dignity and justice. Her resilience and courage deeply touch the audience's hearts, inspiring them to pursue justice and fairness. On the other hand, the Huai opera *Fifteen Taels* warns the audience to discern right from wrong, not easily believe rumors, and also conveys the complexity and diversity of human nature.

The relationship between Huai opera and the experiential world of reality is one of representation. It is through this representation that people unconsciously gain a certain level of cognition and enlightenment while watching Huai opera. After all, in ancient times, many common people did not have the opportunity to receive education, so the opera stage became an important means for them to understand history, society, and even find role models. "The beauty of drama lies in authenticity. Authenticity means being down-to-earth, touching the heart and soul. As customs decline day by day, the reason for this decline lies in people's love for novelty and change. The function of drama lies in regulating customs." (Wu 2010) Wu Mei believes that local operas like Huai opera regulate customs, which is also a manifestation of its cognitive function.

4.3. Aesthetic Function

Huai opera, as a traditional theatrical art form with deep historical roots and distinct local characteristics, goes far beyond mere entertainment or pastime in its aesthetic function. It is not just

art born from life but an art actively engaged with the world, catering to the spiritual needs of people. In the performance activities of Huai opera, both the audience and actors undergo a unique aesthetic experience, a fusion of imagination and experience, selflessness and self, imitation and creation, body and spirit. During Huai opera performances, audiences and actors together create a unique aesthetic space. Through imagination, audiences transform the stage performances into images in their minds, resonating with the emotions of the characters and experiencing the ups and downs of the plot. Actors, through their superb skills, bring the script to life with vivid performances, immersing themselves in their roles, using their bodies and spirits to interpret and create art. This interaction and fusion between the audience and actors are essential manifestations of Huai opera's aesthetic function.

"Drama is a comprehensive art form that requires actors, audience, script, director, music, and art elements to coordinate and integrate with each other to achieve the best aesthetic effect." (Zhang 1980) As a form of theatrical art, Huai opera's aesthetic function also requires the participation and coordination of these elements. Taking the classic Huai opera *The Lute* as an example, the play tells the story of Zhao Wuniang and Cai Bojie's tragic love story, showcasing the beauty and ugliness of human nature, the nobility and baseness of morality. While enjoying the play, the audience can not only feel the emotional changes of the characters but also contemplate life and society. Through their superb acting skills, actors vividly express the emotions of the characters, allowing the audience to feel as if they are immersed in the world of the play. This emotional resonance and experience are essential manifestations of Huai opera's aesthetic function.

Huai opera performances are not merely about preaching, political propaganda, or moral education; they represent a unity of secular care and spiritual transcendence. On the stage of Huai opera, various social phenomena and human destinies are all closely related to real lives. While enjoying Huai opera, audiences not only feel the emotional changes of the characters but also gain a profound understanding and reflection on society. For example, in the Huai opera *Wang Baochuan*, Wang Baochuan, in her unwavering pursuit of love and loyalty, faces hardships and stands up against tyranny. Her character embodies qualities of resilience and perseverance, inspiring the audience to contemplate issues of love, marriage, and loyalty in society while enjoying the plot. This unity of secular care and spiritual transcendence is the unique aspect of Huai opera's aesthetic function.

Huai opera also plays a dual role in cognition and influence through its aesthetic function. By appreciating Huai opera works, audiences can learn about history, understand society, and experience life, thereby gaining a cognitive aesthetic understanding. Furthermore, through its profound moral connotations and moving artistic expressions, Huai opera exerts a strong moral influence on the audience. On the stage of Huai opera, audiences see stories and images of karma, loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness. These stories and images contain profound moral connotations and life philosophies. While enjoying these works, audiences are unconsciously influenced and inspired by these moral values, generating a sense of goodness and pursuit within their hearts. This dual function of aesthetic cognition and moral influence allows Huai opera to play a significant social role through subtle and gradual influence.

5. CONCLUSION

Huai Opera, as an important component of traditional Chinese culture, demonstrates profound influence in various aspects through the formation and significance of its ethical thought. Firstly, the fertile ground for the emergence of ethical thought in Huai Opera lies in the nourishment of regional culture, historical traditions, social changes, and the demands of the people, providing rich soil for its unique cultural connotations. Secondly, the conceptual origins of ethical thought in Huai Opera mainly stem from the influences of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which provide abundant spiritual nourishment for Huai Opera. Lastly, the ethical thought in Huai Opera plays an important role in society, including functions of entertainment, cognition, and aesthetics.

Through these functions, Huai Opera not only satisfies the spiritual and cultural needs of the people but also promotes social harmony, stability, cultural inheritance, and development. Therefore, in-depth research on the formation and significance of ethical thought in Huai Opera contributes to a better understanding and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture, promotes innovative development in cultural arts, and advances social civilization. The study of ethical thought in Huai Opera holds significant theoretical and practical implications, deserving further exploration and excavation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study is supported by the Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Jiangsu Province, China (Grant No. 2022SJYB2024), partly supported by High-level Talent Research Initiation Project at Yancheng Institute of Technology, China (Grant No. xjr2022033).

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