

# Research on the Incorruptness-themed Henan Opera from the Perspective of Art Aesthetics

Taking the Incorruptness Trilogy of Henan Opera Theatre as an Example

Qie Chu

College of Arts Henan Xinxiang, Henan Normal University, 453007, China  
Xinyang College of Arts, Xinyang, 450100, China

**Abstract:** In recent years, the “incorruptness trilogy” including Zhang Boxing (an incorruptible official of Qing Dynasty), A Family Photo and Bao Shizhao (an honest and upright inspector of Qing Dynasty) created by Henan Opera Theatre has been well received by the masses and has aroused profound social repercussions. Based on the reality, three new works of Henan Opera clarify the political orientation of literature and art, and reflect the noble traditions of Chinese culture; Realizing the harmony between the form and content, and expressing the profound connotations. Besides, the three works show the aesthetic characteristics of art and profound aesthetic value through a logical narrative. Based on the relevant theories of art aesthetics including narrative aesthetics and acceptance aesthetics, this thesis will analyze the script, stage forms and audience is acceptable of the incorruptness trilogy, aim to explore the artistic characteristics and aesthetic value of the incorruptness trilogy and provide a new aesthetic paradigm for the creation of contemporary Henan Opera.

**Keywords:** Art Aesthetics, Henan Opera, Incorruptness, Connotations

## 1. Introduction

With the contemporary art aesthetic becoming more diversified, the unique aesthetic of traditional Chinese arts such as Henan Opera is becoming more and more prominent, which attracts the attention of experts and scholars. Henan Opera stands out among various traditional Chinese operas or its vividly narrative style and profound connotations. In recent years, the “incorruptness trilogy” including Zhang Boxing, A Family Photo and Bao Shizhao created by Henan Opera Theatre embodies the literary and artistic thought of President Xi in the new era, responds to the call of the CPC to combat corruption, builds a clean government, and also takes into account the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture. What’s more, the “incorruptness trilogy” realizes the harmony between the beauty of form and the richness of connotations of operas, and give audiences a unique aesthetic experience through a logical narrative.

## 2. The Unity of the Mainstream of Era and the Inheritance of Culture

In *Philosophie de l'Art*, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine puts forward that race, era and environment are three elements that influence art [1]. And good literary and artistic works are inevitably bred in the soil of the three elements, and deeply reflect the style of the three elements. Thus, the

“incorruptness trilogy” is the response of the Chinese nation to the backgrounds of era, which realizes the unity of the mainstream of era and the inheritance of culture. In 2014, President Xi said at the seminar in literature and art: “The literary and artistic achievements of an era will ultimately depend on the works. To promote the prosperity and development of literature and art, what we should do is to create excellent works that correspond to our great nation and era.” Facing the call of President Xi, Henan Opera Theatre creates the “incorruptness trilogy” under the backgrounds of anti-corruption and clean governance, including Zhang Boxing, A Family Photo and Bao Shizhao, which has been well received by the masses and has aroused profound social repercussions. The work Zhang Boxing simplifies the case of imperial competitive examination of Qing Dynasty, which tells the story of an incorruptible official called Zhang Boxing, and praises his lofty quality and ideological level. The work A Family Photo focuses on the three generations of the Han family, which tells the great harm that the corrupted official Han Yingjie has brought to the family and himself, and discusses the damage of the kinship caused by the corruption. The work Bao Shizhao tells the story of Bao Shizhao—an honest and upright inspector of Qing Dynasty, who cared about people’s livelihood and enjoyed the respect of people, and lost his position after offending bigwigs. The three works link the past to the

present. For one thing, they set an example for the officials and truly benefit the people. For another, they show the great damage caused by corruption to the family and ring the bell of “warning”. What’s more, the three works embody the distinctive orientation of the era, and reflect the political vane of strictly administering the party and rejecting corruption. It is worth mentioning that taking Zhang Boxing as a typical figure is derived from the idea of President Xi. In 2014, President Xi delivered a speech during his visit to County Lankao of Henan: “Zhang Boxing, a well-known honest and upright official of Qing Dynasty born in Lankao, he has served successively as the Governor of Fujian and Governor of Jiangsu and Minister of Rituals, and he has wrote a proclamation in order to decline gifts of others. Thus, I think that the honest and upright official Zhang Boxing sets a good example for our contemporary officials.”

In addition to the distinctive orientation of the era, the “incorruptness trilogy” also embodies a kind of spiritual temperament, that is Dana's "customs and the spirit of the times", and also known as the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, which could be found in the “incorruptness trilogy” from two aspects. For one thing, the two protagonists of Zhang Boxing and Bao Shizhao are real in history and belong to the part of culture. In fact, traditional Chinese culture required the scholar-officials in feudal China to be virtuous, benevolent, clean and upright. Confucianism encourage scholar-officials to be clean, honest and serve for the masses. This kind of thought not only affected the value of ancient scholar-officials, but also imperceptibly influence the ideological realm and behavior of contemporary officials. Thus, the “incorruptness trilogy” inherits the noble traditions of Confucian scholar-officials, and encourages on temporary officials to be clean and honest. For another, as an important part of Chinese Opera culture, whose style is sturdy and elegant. And as a part of the local culture of Henan, which is realistic performance and is close to the lives of common people. The two works Zhang Boxing and Bao Shizhao centred on two historical figures of the Central Plains and represent the traditional values of the ancient scholar-officials. And the work A Family Photo tells the great harm that contemporary corrupted official Han Yingjie has brought to the family. All in all, the “incorruptness trilogy” embodies the inheritance of excellent traditional culture, combines the beauty of traditional and modern art, meets the characteristics of the era, and reflects the distinct literary and political orientations. As Goethe once said: “Art must speak to the world through a complete body” [2], thus, the “incorruptness trilogy” represents that the Chinese culture throughout the history speaks to the world and calls to the era.

### **3.The Unity of the Formal Beauty and Rich Connotations of Opera**

Unlike other categories of performing arts, opera stresses the unity of the beauty of form and the richness of connotations. Besides, opera has prescriptive acting and various characters who wear different facial makeups, and it is constrained by the specified show time under the influence of modern Western drama. The specified show time, prescriptive acting and various characters who wear different facial makeups represent to the infinite and inevitable parts of the essence of life. In *Feeling and Form*, Susanne K.Langer says that the creator needs to select the art form that is the most suitable for expressing feelings in order to realize the unity of artistic form and feeling, and express different feelings according to different art forms at the same time, which means that the form and feeling complement each other and co-exist harmoniously. From this point of view, the “incorruptness trilogy” has realized the unity of the form and feeling of opera. Taking *A Family Photo* for example, the pause of music is consistent with the changes of the characters’ feelings and attitudes, which heighten the atmosphere. What most striking is that the shifts in mentalities of Han Yingjie when he was seeing two provincial staff, he was firstly enthusiastic for he thought that he would be promoted, then he was nervous when he learned that the two staff came from the Commission For Discipline Inspection, but he tried to keep calm and asked them to show evidence and he wanted to see Secretary Liu, eventually who became despair when he learned that his crime had been completely exposed. The show is marvelous for the changes of emotion and mentality are accompanied by the pause and shift of instrumental accompaniment as well as the changes of characters’ looks. For another example, when Han Yingjie’s wife proposed to leave the house in Shanghai, Han Linlin (the daughter of Han Yingjie) sang: “I know that a high-end house is valuable, and what my parents have done is good for me. However, my father has been blinded by greed, and this is a house bought by ill-gotten wealth.” This aria is enlightening, smooth and rhymed with “ao” in every last word. Besides, this aria is resonant for adopting the syllables of vowels at the beginning of each line, which not only expressed Han Linlin’s strong will to return to the house, but also conformed to the theme “anti-corruption”. What’s more, Han Yingjie’s wife became crazy when she heard that Han Yingjie not only had lover, but also were sentenced to death, in this play her lines all rhymed with “I”, which sounded mournful, and it was in line with the sadness of Han Yingjie’s wife. At the same time, the play *A Family Photo* used the large electronic screen to show the old family photo, the photo of villa as Han Linlin’s birthday gift and the electrocardiogram of Han Yingjie’s father on the hospital bed, etc, which made up for lack of media in the previous plays, used the modern media technology to retrospect the family history, showed the fate of three generations of Han’s family, and expressed

the moods of the characters to achieve a better performance effect. It is the unity of feeling and form (including playscript with stage directions, looks, music, stage property, and clothing) that makes the “incorruptness trilogy” become the “meaningful form” proposed by the famous art theorist Clive Bell in the book *Art*, which means that there must be special properties in art, otherwise, works of art can't exist without it.”[3]

In addition to the beauty of form, the “incorruptness trilogy” also has rich connotations. Hegel said in the book *Aesthetics* that “connotation is always a more profound thing than the form that appears directly. Works of art should have connotations.” [4] The “incorruptness trilogy” centers on the theme of “clean governance”, fits the style of the era, which is not only emphasizes the political civilization, also delves deeper into human nature and the relationship between the subject and the world. [5] The French thinker Maurice Blanchot once said: “As a product of art, works of art have more complex and rich connotations. The main characteristics of the humanities art lie in imitation or its concern for people.” [6] The creators' (namely authors) attention to the creation object (various elements of the text including the characters) reflects self-recognition, which indicates the strong will and essence of humanity. Therefore, the essence of art is to realize the examination of conscience of humanity in imitation. In this sense, the “incorruptness trilogy” is an innovative play. On the one hand, it meets the needs of building a clean government, and reflects the CPC's belief and determination to strictly rule the party in the anti-corruption construction; on the other hand, the characters differ from the stereotyped facial makeup of the protagonist in the previous political plays. For instance, the character Han Yingjie in *A Family Photo* was no longer an absolute evil corrupt official. In daily life, he was also a dutiful son and a father who cared for his daughter. In the transformation of a little child born in the poor mountain village to deputy mayor, he was diligent and worked hard, and really did a lot of things to improve people's livelihood. From the above two levels, Han Yingjie is a complex figure, who is a “circular figure” written by Foster. His complicated characters are fully reflected in the play, which remarks an improvement in the exploration of characters for the play which describes how an ambitious, clean and upright official became corrupt, and how to choose when humanity faces temptation. In fact, in *The Great Chain of Being* written by American thinker Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, he believed that the sequence of human beings has been locked. In other words, the status of human beings is between animals and god, which is the combination of animals and divinity. [7] There is no reason to require everyone to be a saint for everyone has his own interests. Therefore, audiences can easily be affected through the character on Han Yingjie, especially the family's relationship as a breakthrough. Besides, the

audience could combine daily and aesthetic experience to produce empathy effect for a better understanding of the damage of the kinship caused by the corruption. However, Lovejoy also pointed out that the most distinguished difference between human beings and other living beings is that people have some motivations. They are not willing to sneak in the existing chains, and to climb the giant ladders that close to the divine. Therefore, in the face of the displacement and sorrow of the people in the disaster area, Gali, the Governor General of Jiangnan and Jiangxi Provinces, Zhang Boxing condemned him of wasting money on his mother's birthday celebration. Bao Shizhao refused Xu Hujie's gold and silver bribes and the intimidation of superiors again and again, and acted in accordance with the law. Besides, he even took his own money to repair the bridge, and finally he had no clothes to wear and no rice to eat. There is the “first honest and upright official in the world” Zhang Boxing and he eventually dismissed Bao Shizhao who disregarded the threat of coercion, precisely because of the yearning for divinity and the spirit of independence and free will. And Han Yingjie, whose image contrasts the image of integrity, these three figures discuss together, the depth of human nature and analyze the inner world of people. “Incorruptness trilogy” not only explores the inner world of the individual but also discusses the relationship between human and the world (the society and others). Just as Han Yingjie, his behavior implicates that he has not adhered to the bottom line of the integrity, which shows the influence of the officialdom (for example, Han Yingjie vaguely talked to Han Linlin that she could do whatever she wants to do, except to do political working) and supervision omissions among various departments of the party (Secretary Li reflected deeply after Han Yingjie being investigated) under the influence of the overall social atmosphere. Han Yingjie's family tragedy is the result of internal and external factors, and certainly the internal factors still account for the main part; just like Bao Shizhao, who was guilty about his wife lived in poverty, lost his position facing the spites from the corrupt superiors' magistrate, cared for people's life and won their approvals and respects, and left a historic story. These intricate aspects have shaped three-dimensional figures and explored the relationship between people and the outside world (others and the society).

#### **4. The Unity of Narrative layering and Artistic Aesthetics**

Compared with other art categories, the images of opera become livelier and richer for creators to convey ideas, and also for viewers to understand and accept it. Therefore, opera in folk art is deeply loved by people. The three screenwriters of “Incorruptness trilogy” Yao Jincheng, Chen Yongquan and Li Xueting are famous mas-

ters among opera writers. Through their layered narrative and logical plot arrangement, the vivid and understandable characteristics of the art opera have been fully showed.

In *A Family Photo*, the first scene is that Han Yingjie's wife were waiting the arrival of Han Yingjie's father to explain the identity and attitude of Han Yingjie's wife (Han's wife has filial piety to Han's father, received gifts because of the pride of Han's status of deputy mayor), Han Yingjie's identity (as a deputy mayor, he will be promoted to the mayor by and by), and his daughter Han Linlin's identity (she has come back from studying abroad). The beginning of the article has already explained the respective identities of the characters, through which we can see the small sign of Han Yingjie's corruption, that is, Han's wife does not know who sends the presents but she accepts them with pride and arrogance. With the development of the plot, the plot was unfolded in turn, which dated Han Yingjie's struggle from poverty to success. Since Han Yingjie was investigated, Secretary Liu blamed himself. Then Han Linlin asked Secretary Liu to give a explanation, and finally Han Linlin and Han's wife decided to return all the received presents. Shortly afterwards, Han's wife became mad and Han's father was hospitalized. During this process, Han Yingjie made a profound review in prison. Han's father scolded Han Yingjie for his corruption and his father died before long. In this way, characters, plots of theme's every part, which were logically clear. So does Bao Shizhao. At the beginning, the character Xu Hujie in the Xiaoyao Pavilion abducted the girl Hehua to flatter the officer Kui, which described the ugly act of trading in power of Xu Hujie. Then the plot such as saving the girl Hehua, constructing Yongning Bridge and other plots all reflected to the Bao's working style of doing practical things for people and fighting against the powerful superiors. In the end, the scenes of many people sending rice to him have sublimated the theme. The first act of Zhang Boxing is a stark contrast. On the one hand, Gali mother's birthday celebration is lavish, and on the other hand, the homeless people are moaning with sorrow. As the saying goes "While the rich wine and dine, the poor die of cold by the roadside", Zhang Boxing cared about the suffering of people and gave Gali's mother a Chinese cabbage as a birthday gift to teach him to be honest. This plot clearly points out that the conflict of two sides, and also shows Zhang Bo xing's integrity, through which the conflict-based plot design allows audience to quickly enter the set drama situation. Then in the narrative of the main plot of Jiangnan Science Examination Case, Zhang Boxing always sticks to his heart and keeps integrity when facing the temptation, which finally sublimates the subject.

The "Incorruptness trilogy" not only reflects the layering of the narrative, but also takes into Artistic aesthetics. Although *A Family Photo* has a happy and joyful reper-

toire name, it is really a tragedy. Mr. Lu Xun said in *The Reconsideration of the falling of Lei feng Pagoda* that "tragedy is to destroy people's valuable things in life." *A Family Photo* has destroyed a completely happy family. Han's wife is mad and Han's father has passed away. The main culprit of all is corruption. The screenwriter Yao Jincheng does not pay great attention to deteriorating process of corrupt officials and the disaster caused to the people, but starts with the harm caused by corruption to the family and maximizes the "compassion" of the audience by a new way. Han Yingjie was gradually addicted to corruption to the family and he wanted to live a good life but finally what he did with the ending of the happy life of his family. In fact, the corruption behavior not only destroys Han Yingjie's family, but also the moral sense in Han Yingjie's heart. It is a huge tragedy in itself when Han Yingjie ruined his inner integrity. The different tragic feelings expressed by *A Family Photo*, *Zhang Boxing* and *Bao Shizhao* which give the audience a sublime aesthetic experience. "There is a kind of power that is above all else, and that is love, because the purpose of love is to promote the happiness of another person, subordinate to another person, and be loyal to the promotion of his happiness... The wider the object of love, the more we feel sublime, because the benefits of love expand with the scope of the application." [8] One of unrelated people is willing to sacrifice his life for the happiness of others, which is from responsible love. It is in such great love that Bao Shizhao has abandoned the little love for himself and his family; Zhang Boxing always adheres to his heart is honest as ever. These behaviors stem from the great love, which give audiences a deep sense of sublimity. Longinus believes that the sublime style is the echo of a great soul. [9] Immanuel Kant believes that sublimity enhances our spiritual strength beyond the usual standards and discovers another resistance capability in our hearts, which gives us courage. [10] What he calls "another resistance capability" refers to the transcendental spirit of the subject. When audiences (aesthetic subject) is watching a drama with a noble spirit of transcendence, the aesthetic subject is no longer a "daily and practical self" but a "self-reflection" [11], and audiences will get purified by self-view. The aesthetic object is no longer object itself, but combination of the aesthetic subject with life experience, which is another existence form of the subject's life. Therefore, the lofty sense of the "Incorruptness trilogy" purifies audiences' minds, which makes them re-examine themselves, and encourages them to become a person with transcendence spirit and high moral sense.

## 5. Conclusion

Bred in the soil of the era, the Henan Opera "incorruptness trilogy" is the fruit of the "anti-corruption" construction, absorbs traditional Chinese culture, and has a new

development in accordance with the era. It combines the stylized form with the rich aesthetics of the opera, and forms a “meaningful form.” From the characters, plots to the theme, the narratives of the three Henan Operas are logical, which make the audience understand and grasp the content of the opera, and highlight the theme. Besides, it also gives audience a multi-aesthetic experience of tragic and sublime feelings, plays the roles of the publicity and purification. Thus, it is “not only the unity of content and form, but also the unity of sensibility and rationality” [12], and has profound aesthetic value.

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