

A Concerto Resonance Between the Chinese Zhuang Customs and the Topic of Poverty Alleviation: Exploring the Artistic Value and Spiritual Connotation of Zhuang Drama *Huang Wenxiu*

GAO Jian

Guangxi Arts University, China

Received: July 14, 2022

Accepted: September 18, 2022

Published: December 30, 2022

To cite this article: GAO Jian. (2022). A Concerto Resonance Between the Chinese Zhuang Customs and the Topic of Poverty Alleviation: Exploring the Artistic Value and Spiritual Connotation of Zhuang Drama Huang Wenxiu. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(4), 165–172, DOI: [10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0204.021](https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0204.021)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0204.021>

This article is supported by the Innovation Project of Guangxi Graduate Education (YCSW2022410) in 2022 entitled “Research on Guangxi’s Local Drama Creation in the Perspective of the Centenary of the Founding of the Party”.

Abstract: *Huang Wenxiu* is a Zhuang drama based on the poverty alleviation work of Huang Wenxiu, who is an outstanding selected graduate from Guangxi and also the first secretary of Baini village. The drama has not only humorous and emotional stage effects, strong romantic sentiment, and realistic critical spirit, but also typical characteristics of the era, vivid artistic images and a strong ethnic style. This drama embodies unique aesthetic values, vividly interpreting the values of the era and the spirit of Guangxi, highlighting the artistic consciousness and practical innovation of Zhuang drama art to express the era and eulogise it, and responding to the aesthetic expectations of the Zhuang ethnic group. Displaying the unique national spirit and the great spirit of the era in the narrative and stage presentation of the drama will also become a feasible path for the innovative development of Zhuang drama.

Keywords: Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu*; Poverty Alleviation; Dramatic Narrative

Notes on the contributor: GAO Jian, a postgraduate student at the School of Guangxi Arts University, his research direction is art theory and criticism.

1. Introduction

The era creates art, and art belongs to the era. *Huang Wenxiu* is another modern Zhuang drama based on the



poverty alleviation deeds of Huang Wenxiu, who is an outstanding selected graduate of Guangxi and also the first secretary of Baini village. It is another modern Zhuang drama after *The First Secretary*, which reflects the theme of poverty alleviation and vividly reflects the practice of poverty alleviation in Guangxi and is also one of the few modern Zhuang dramas that closely follow the themes of the era and show people's real life. Through the study of Zhuang Drama *Huang Wenxiu*, from the two aspects of narrative art and aesthetic values of drama, it is believed that the innovative development of Zhuang Drama should present the unique national spirit and the great spirit of the times on the stage.

2. The Narrative Art of the Zhuang Drama *Huang Wenxiu*

With its rich storyline, vibrant stage forms and varied artistic vocabulary, drama has created a unique spiritual world for us, allowing us to marvel at the creativity of human beings themselves (Wang Tingxin 2015: 5). Narratology brings a new theoretical space to drama and analyzes *Huang Wenxiu* from the aspects of drama's narrative method, character building, and narrative perspective. The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* takes the last moments of Huang Wenxiu's life as a clue, using reminiscence to link four touching stories between her and her truant students, an expert of orange pole grower, an orphaned old man, and a grassroots cadre. The characters are enhanced with delicate emotions, and the stage presentation highlights the characteristics of Zhuang drama characterization, presenting the artistic effect of a light comedy with romantic sentiment and realistic criticism.

2.1 *Image building: Portraying heroic figures with emotions*

Human beings are the heart of the drama. All matters of technique indirectly serve, or should serve, the effective representation of the character, for in any good drama, the dramatic structure serves no other purpose than to represent the character (Acher, Wu Junxie 1964: 293). The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* is based on a story and leads with complex emotional changes, using emotions to touch people and touch the audience with true feelings. It can be said that the work's tense inner monologues and rich emotional changes greatly enrich the audience's emotional experience, which makes the characters more relatable and touching, and makes the tragic effect even stronger.

The work unfolds from the most intense conflicts, with the tensest scenes repeated as clues, straightforward, clear, and well-structured. The moment of the accident is artistically recreated, and the four short stories are linked by Huang Wenxiu's innermost attachments. Huang Wenxiu, holding a red umbrella, tells the story of what she saw, what she thought and what she felt in the harsh environment of the storm and the falling rocks, which show her confusion, panic and hesitation. She sings with affection: "The reservoir behind the village has hidden dangers, the flood control dam needs to be widened, Uncle's old house often leaks, Auntie is alone and anxiously waiting." Although Huang Wenxiu is in a boat in the waves, in the midst of a thunderstorm and a rocky cliff, she is still concerned about the villagers. Her emotional turmoil and inner struggle are delicately portrayed in the lyrics and the performance of the actors.

The characters' personalities in the drama are always presented in words and shaped in actions, and the characters' words and actions become an important way of portraying them. The portrayal of Huang Wenxiu's character is not only reflected in the structure of the drama, but also in the detailed portrayal of the character in

the narrative, which presents Huang Wenxiu's unique personality from different perspectives. The character's personality is always closely linked to her identity, and the noble spirit of the character is revealed in several choices. As a child from the countryside, she gives up the opportunity to study for a Ph. D. and stay in the big city and chooses to return to her hometown. The story of life is used as a backdrop, and the flashback structure highlights the conflict, presenting the audience with a multi-faceted image of a female who never forgets her original intention, who is not afraid of hardships and is willing to give.

2.2 Stage presentation: Artistic features of Zhuang drama and light comic effects

Since its creation during the reigns of the Qianlong and Jiaqing emperors of the Qing Dynasty, Zhuang drama has always been nourished by the Zhuang folk culture and has long been called "earth drama". After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the name was changed to Zhuang drama. The Zhuang drama of North Road has gone through stages of development, such as eight-tone singing, bench drama, doorway drama, flatland drama and garden drama, and has always grown up in folk culture, meeting the aesthetic needs of the Zhuang ethnic group and forming its own unique performance system and artistic style. Since Huang Yonggui returned from his trip to Nanning to learn from the Guang drama, the classification of Zhuang drama in the North Road has gradually become more detailed, with "one clown, two Dan, three Sheng and four officials" (Wei Wei, Xiang Fan 1990: 215). The clown role is given first priority, followed by the Dan, and then the Sheng. One of the salient features of the classification system of Zhuang drama roles is that they are headed by clowns, and the roles headed by clowns depend on the Zhuang people's taste for drama and are related to their own history of development. Such positioning of theatrical roles gives Zhuang drama a humorous and witty stage effect.

The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* changes the sublime and tragic emotional tone commonly used to portray heroic characters and combines the artistic characteristics of Zhuang drama with an overall closer to life, witty and humorous, presenting a light comic effect that makes the audience laugh with tears and can't help but think deeper. Among them are Ni Ni's childish flirtation with the poverty alleviation task, Tian Gada's various excuses for being lazy to work, and Huang Wenxiu's tragic and heroic run to the mountain village in the midst of the storm. The lifelike supporting characters are intimate and three-dimensional, laughing with tears, bringing the audience a refreshing breath of fresh air and a rich emotional experience. In the story of helping the orphan Ni Ni, in the face of Huang Wenxiu's concern, Ni Ni is slick and teases Huang Wenxiu that she is here to gild the lily; in the passage of Persuade Tian Gada's action and thinking, Tian Gada believes that his lazy and idle life is better than a god and better than a civil servant. The gags and witty gestures of Ni Ni and Tian Gada are a light comic expression of Zhuang theatre's characteristic of being led by clown's roles, and the interweaving and contrast of joy and sorrow.

2.3 Creative idea: Romanticism and realistic criticism

The drama is very subtle in its treatment of Huang Wenxiu's sacrifice, artfully recounting the event through the context of the red umbrellas of the woobie boats fluttering in the torrential rain. In addition, at the end of the drama, with the calls of the villagers of Baina Village, Huang Wenxiu dreamily returns to the stage and sings the song of youth, a song of memory and imagination that fulfil the audience's expectations, with a rich romanticism

that shows the unique artistic charm of the theatre stage.

In addition to the romantic atmosphere, the work also embodies the spirit of criticism of reality. The children of Baini village compete in terms of family's financial conditions; the factory manager lives extravagantly and takes bribes; the butcher sells sick pork for black money, but their sons are not ashamed of it but proud of it, and the value orientation of money first is severely rebuked and criticised by Ni Ni. In the summary of the causes of poverty in Baini village, women in the village conclude that even the birds know that apart from the harsh natural environment, illiteracy is also an important problem, but in order to get out of poverty unless the money printing machine keeps printing money day and night. For example, the village chief, who is the leader in fighting against poverty, has to resign and leave the village to make a living. The plot hits the nail on the head, bringing to the audience the acute, profound and representative problems and the current situation in poverty alleviation, and behind the bantering effect is the complex and grim reality.

3. The Aesthetic Values of the Zhuang Drama *Huang Wenxiu*

The phenomenon of aesthetics amplifies the excellence of human beings themselves that is essential to their survival and development, turning the need for human survival and development into an emotional pursuit that improves people's quality in physical, spiritual and behavioral terms (Huang Haicheng 1993: 56). The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu*, as a drama which reflects the great project of poverty alleviation and promoting the icon of the era, embodies a unique aesthetic value with its typical characteristics of the era, vivid artistic image and a strong ethnic style.

3.1 Typical characteristics of the era

The art sociologist Arnold Hauser stated, "There is only an artless society and no art without a society. Art and society are in a relationship of interdependence" (Hauser 1987: 37). The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* presents the most complex and profoundly transformative event that Chinese society is experiencing at the moment, which is the great project of poverty alleviation; the protagonist of the drama is the secretary Huang Wenxiu, who is a representative of the front line of poverty alleviation. Since the 18th Party Congress, more than 250,000 village teams have been dispatched across the country, and a total of more than three million village cadres have fought on the front line of poverty alleviation. More than 1,500 poverty alleviation cadres have sacrificed their lives on the battlefield of poverty alleviation nationwide. Poverty is a global problem, which is also a persistent problem that China has been unable to change for thousands of years, and there is no doubt that this great journey is the main theme of the era. Such a trend and character of the era is rare in China and the world before. The heartfelt portrayal of a poverty-alleviation cadre who meets the requirements of the era contains a reverence for the era and the role model. In addition to this, *Huang Wenxiu* presents the characteristics of the era not only in terms of its subject matter and content, but also in terms of the adaptability of Zhuang drama itself to modern themes and its attitude to the pursuit of aesthetic modernity.

3.2 Vibrant artistic images

Dramatic characters always act more from emotion than from rationality, and the strong emotions in a

character's personality can be infectious and exciting (Gu Zhongyi 2016: 266). Characters endow drama with soul and emotions endow drama with power. Huang Wenxiu's advanced deeds have been publicized, reported and learned by the national mainstream media, and have also been transformed into films, documentaries, dramas and other art forms. For example, the film *Huang Wenxiu*, the folk drama *On the Road to Poverty Alleviation*, the documentary *Hello Wenxiu* and *Role Model 4* have also raised the bar for the level of creation of the Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu*, and audiences have high expectations for the use of local drama to promote Huang Wenxiu, the daughter of the Zhuang ethnic group. The spectacular drama *Huang Wenxiu* has done a good job of portraying the character of Huang Wenxiu and satisfying the audience's expectations. In addition to maintaining and restoring Huang Wenxiu's character traits as much as possible in the visual presentation, moreover, Huang Wenxiu's emotions and psychology are delicately expressed, and her outstanding qualities such as bearing in mind her original heart, willingness to devote herself, and defying hardships are incorporated into the story and plot details. She is thrilled and excited and righteously chooses to return to her hometown to make a contribution; she plans to bring a kind-hearted son-in-law to see her father in the future; when faced with the resignation of the village cadres she works with, she struggles from doubt to trust herself, when she learns that Grandpa Shi has never had bread or mineral water at the age of 80, she weeps tears and can hardly contain her sorrow and sadness. Even in the face of hardship, she still does not forget her responsibility to the village. Huang Wenxiu's touching story gives drama tension, and the delicate portrayal of emotions in the theatre production presents Huang Wenxiu completely to the audience.

3.3 Strong ethnic style

The Zhuang ethnic group is the people who sing instead of speaking and use songs as a medium. Zhuang drama is a minority theatre developed on the basis of folk songs, folk literature and rap art of the Zhuang ethnic group. The music of Zhuang drama is divided into South Road and North Road and is formed by the respective development of South Road and North Road Zhuang drama. Zhuang drama singing style mainly includes South Road singing style, North Road singing style and Zhuang master singing style.

The singing style of the South Road Zhuang drama is derived from the Zhuang folk rap "Molen Tune", the Zhuang puppet show and folk songs, and is characterised by its spacious melodies, majestic and spontaneous. The singing style of Zhuang drama in the north is derived from the "Old State Mountain Song" and the "Napo Mountain Song". It is characterised by its lyricism and graceful flow; the Zhuang Shi Gong drama is formed by absorbing folk songs and minor tunes, and is characterised by its ruggedness, simplicity and naturalness (Liao Mingjun 2008: 71). The folk song style is a prominent feature of Zhuang drama music. The three main singing styles of Zhuang drama have absorbed melodies and singing styles from Zhuang folk songs to varying degrees, and although they have formed their own unique singing styles, their folk song styles are still retained in the musical expression of Zhuang drama. At the end of the 1950s, there was a trend toward the fusion of North and South Zhuang dramas. The official establishment of the Zhuang Drama Troupe of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in 1965 marked the official merging of South and North Zhuang dramas, thus entering a new historical stage in the development of Zhuang drama. After the merging of the South and North Zhuang dramas, the South and North Road singing voices began to be found in the same repertoire. The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* makes use of a variety of Zhuang drama cantatas, from the use of small mountain songs to the grand

vocal style of the Panchat. The tunes in *Huang Wenxiu* are mostly from the folk opera, operatic songs and mountain songs of Huang Wenxiu's hometown, such as Zhengtune, Xi tune, Crying tune, Caihua, Gaoqiang, Yahahai, PingBan, Sanban, Mailun and Tianyang mountain songs, etc. The drama music technique of using a combination of panels, cadences and tunes is used to express the thematic ideas and main theme of the drama (Liu Shizhen 2021: 12). In addition to this, the lyrics of the Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* are mostly sung in five- and seven-character lines, mostly in waist-foot rhyme, using the poetic rhythm of Zhuang folk songs, and using original singers in the articulation of scenes.

The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* not only fuses and promotes the artistic style of Zhuang drama in terms of singing, diction and articulation, but also makes every effort to highlight the ethnic style in stage art. The props in traditional Zhuang drama were relatively simple, with tables, fans and hand towels, and the stage set-up was relatively simple. As theatre companies progress and the aesthetic needs of the audience improve, stage equipment is being given more and more attention. In *Huang Wenxiu*, modern light and shadow techniques are used to present a fusion of the Zhuang region and the background of the drama, showing the landscape of the Zhuang region with its green hills and beautiful dwellings.

4. The Spiritual connotation of the Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu*

The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* not only reflects the vivid value of the era, but also vividly interprets the spirit of Guangxi. The modern consciousness of drama creation is integrated into the shaping of characters, giving it rich spiritual connotations, and showing the artistic exploration and innovation consciousness of modern Zhuang drama.

4.1 *Dramatic presentation of the value of the era*

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered into a new era. I hope you will undertake the mission of recording, writing and eulogizing the new era, be brave in answering the topics of the era, discover the theme of creation from the great creation of contemporary China, capture the inspiration of innovation, deeply reflect on the great changes in the history of our era, depict the spiritual map of our era, draw a portrait of the era, create a biography of the era, and clarify the virtue of the era." (Xi Jinping 2019) The Zhuang Drama *Huang Wenxiu* is a profound reflection of contemporary Chinese social reality, praises the excellent quality of Huang Wenxiu herself formed in the great practice of poverty alleviation, reflects the drama works that meet the aesthetics and expectations of the people, and strives to move towards the artistic goal of painting, creating a biography for the era and being virtuous for generations. Yu Qiuyu believes that more and more modern dramas require artists to make various excavations in connotation and strive to observe life from a higher level with a sharper vision and different perspectives. This is the requirement of the era. It is proposed that any work contains the artist's judgment of life, including moral judgment, social inevitability judgment and life value judgment, which is difficult to be separated and developed gradually (Dong Jian & Hu Xingliang 2017: 270). Zhuang Drama *Huang Wenxiu*, as a drama work describing the theme of realism, shows the characteristics of excellent character groups from the perspective of morality and social inevitability. At the same time, it gives a detailed description of the character's psychological movement, which

deeply shows the evaluation of personal life values, and highlights the pursuit of life and deep-seated psychological activities. The deep-seated spiritual pursuit and values of outstanding poverty relief cadres represented by *Huang Wenxiu* are presented in a new aesthetic way. In-depth analysis of the source of motivation for the dedication of poverty alleviation cadres, beyond individual psychological factors, but also with collective deep psychological exploration, highlighting the value of the era and the image of a role model and generating universal empathy among the audience, which is truly infectious.

4.2 *A vivid interpretation of the spirit of Guangxi*

The spirit of Guangxi folk songs is mainly embodied in the three keywords “true, wild and interesting”, and the words “true, wild and interesting” are in fact an excellent summary and embodiment of the spirit of Guangxi. Only by being “True” does it reflect the open-mindedness and honesty of the people of Guangxi. Only its “Wild” reflects the fearlessness and courage of the people of Guangxi. Only its “Interesting” can reflect Guangxi people’s self-gratification and seeking fun from pain (Lai Xue Rui & Luo Yan 2021: 5). The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* vividly illustrates the Guangxi spirit of “truth, wild and Interesting”. It is full of true feelings, the sincere and passionate love of the Zhuang children for their homeland, and their uncompromising choice to return to their hometown after graduating from a prestigious university, to devote themselves to the front line of poverty alleviation, impressing the villagers with their sincerity and heart, and leading them all on the road to prosperity. She is a daughter who will always be remembered and infinitely missed by the Zhuang people. The call of the villagers of Baini is heartfelt. She is a woman who has no fear in the face of the poor mountains and stormy nights and is determined to move forward. The optimistic temperament and unconquerable struggle spirit in the life of poverty alleviation show us the wildness element of the Guangxi Spirit. In the face of closed doors and difficulties from poor households, she talks to them about their future and drinks with them through the door. She is optimistic and always believes that this land will have a brighter future. The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* puts into practice the meaning of the Guangxi spirit of “true, wild and interesting”, and the Guangxi spirit becomes the most touching core of this drama.

5. Conclusion

The Zhuang drama *Huang Wenxiu* is humorous and emotional, with a strong romantic sentiment and realistic critical spirit, which reflects unique aesthetic values with its typical characteristics of the era, vivid artistic image, and strong national style. It vividly interprets the values of the era and the spirit of Guangxi, highlighting the artistic consciousness and practical innovation of Zhuang theatre art in expressing and eulogising the era. Displaying the unique national spirit and the great spirit of the era in the narrative and stage presentation of the drama will also become a feasible path for the innovative development of Zhuang drama.

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(Editors: JIANG Qing & LENG Xueyuan)