



## Exploring the Narrative and Aesthetic Aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County Jilin Province China

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### Abstract

**Background and Aims:** Huanglong Opera is a traditional Chinese opera form deeply rooted in the cultural tapestry of Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China. The objective of this study is to investigate the narrative and aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China.

**Materials and Methods:** With a multidisciplinary approach drawing from sociology and anthropology. The research site, Nong'an County, was chosen for its historical significance in preserving and promoting this traditional art form. Three key informants played a pivotal role in providing insights into the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of Huanglong Opera. The research tools employed observation forms and interview forms to collect comprehensive data on these aspects, with meticulous data analysis to categorize and identify patterns in the observations.

**Result:** The study unveiled historical storytelling, the delicate balance between authenticity and fiction, universal themes, character development, and cultural preservation embedded in Huanglong Opera's narratives. It also highlighted the musical composition, elaborate costumes and makeup, choreographic precision, stage design, and props that constitute the opera's captivating aesthetics.

**Conclusion:** The study's findings underscore the cultural significance and enduring appeal of Huanglong Opera while suggesting avenues for its preservation, modernization, and broader cultural impact.

**Keywords:** Huanglong Opera; Chinese Performing Arts; Narrative Analysis; Aesthetic Exploration; Cultural Preservation

### Introduction

Chinese traditional performing arts hold a unique place in the country's cultural tapestry, serving as custodians of history, culture, and artistic expression. Among these diverse art forms is Huanglong Opera, a captivating and distinct branch of Chinese opera that has thrived for generations in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China (Siu, 1996; Clunas, 1997; Sullivan, 2023). Rooted deeply in the region's historical and cultural heritage, this variant of Huanglong Opera offers a captivating window into the intricate narratives and aesthetic expressions that shape the identity of Nong'an County. This research embarks on a captivating journey to delve into the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of Huanglong Opera, seeking to unravel the intricate threads that have woven this regional treasure into a vibrant and enduring art form (Jessup, 2001; Howard, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019; Zhou, 2022).

Huanglong Opera stands as a cultural emblem deeply connected to Nong'an County's past, present, and future. Understanding the narrative aspects of this art form is akin to opening a portal to a bygone era, where stories of valor, love, and sacrifice resonate through the ages. Equally significant are the aesthetic dimensions of Huanglong Opera, encompassing the visual allure of costumes and makeup, harmonious compositions, and graceful choreography. These elements not only serve as a bridge to the past but also offer valuable insights into the region's cultural identity and heritage (Goldstein, 1999; Nyíri, 2011; Lei & Lei, 2006).

To fulfill the research objective, this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that draws upon the fields of sociology and anthropology. This interdisciplinary lens enables the exploration of how Huanglong Opera intricately weaves historical narratives and cultural aesthetics into its performances, creating a profound sense of connection between the audience and the region's heritage (Duff & Doherty, 2015; Susam-Sarajeva, 2016). By peeling back the layers of meaning embedded in this traditional art form, the study seeks to shed light on its enduring relevance and importance in contemporary society. This research is a testament to the enduring spirit of Nong'an County's people and a tribute to the artistry of Huanglong





Opera. It goes beyond academic inquiry, serving as a celebration of cultural heritage and a means of preserving the collective memory of a community (Yung, 2008; Law & Ho, 2011; Ferrari, 2020).

The research site selection, Nong'an County, situated in Jilin Province, China, holds profound significance for the investigation into Huanglong Opera. This specific choice of Nong'an County as the research site stems from its historical importance and active cultural preservation, rendering it an ideal setting to comprehend the intricate nuances of this traditional art form. By focusing on Nong'an County, this study seeks to not only explore the narrative and aesthetic facets of Huanglong Opera but also illuminate broader implications for the safeguarding and propagation of cultural heritage. Through this multifaceted examination, the research endeavors to portray a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and aesthetic essence embedded within Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China.

## Objective

To investigate the narrative and aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China.

## Literature review

The vibrant tapestry of Chinese traditional performing arts is characterized by its diversity and cultural richness, with each region contributing its own unique artistic expressions. Among these, Huanglong Opera stands as a captivating and historically significant form of Chinese opera. In this literature review, we delve into the existing body of knowledge surrounding the Huanglong Opera and its role as a cultural treasure in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China. By examining previous research, we aim to contextualize the narrative and aesthetic aspects of this art form within the broader landscape of Chinese opera traditions.

**Historical Roots of Huanglong Opera:** Huanglong Opera, also known as "Yellow Dragon Opera," finds its origins in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and has since evolved into a unique regional variant with distinct storytelling and performance styles. It takes its name from the Yellow Dragon Mountain, which has played a central role in shaping the cultural and geographical identity of Nong'an County. Historically, Huanglong Opera has been an essential medium for transmitting the country's history, folklore, and moral values. Scholars, such as Nyíri (2011), have explored the intricate relationship between Chinese tourism, regional identity, and the role of opera as a cultural authority, shedding light on how Huanglong Opera has contributed to the identity of Nong'an County.

**Narrative Techniques in Huanglong Opera:** Central to the research objective of investigating the narrative aspects of Huanglong Opera is understanding the storytelling techniques that underpin its performances. This genre of opera is renowned for its compelling narratives, often drawing inspiration from historical events and folk legends. Lina (2012) has illustrated the thematic richness of Huanglong Opera, emphasizing its capacity to encapsulate both the ordinary and the profound aspects of human existence. We want to understand the intricate narratives that audiences have cherished for generations through an examination of Huanglong Opera's storytelling.

**Aesthetic Elements in Huanglong Opera:** In addition to its narrative prowess, Huanglong Opera captivates audiences with its visual and auditory aesthetics. The elaborate costumes, distinctive makeup, and graceful choreography are integral components of this art form. Fengqi (1994, 2009) has offered valuable insights into the music of Huanglong Opera, highlighting its role in enhancing the emotional impact of the performances. Understanding these aesthetic elements is crucial to comprehending the holistic experience of watching and participating in Huanglong Opera. The interplay between narrative and aesthetics within this art form has a profound impact on its cultural significance.

**Significance of the Research Objective:** As we embark on the journey to investigate the narrative and aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China, it is imperative to recognize the broader significance of this research. Beyond the academic exploration of a regional art form, this study has implications for the preservation of cultural heritage, the promotion of traditional performing arts, and the revitalization of local identities. By examining how Huanglong Opera has evolved over the centuries, we contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of traditional arts in contemporary society and the transmission of cultural values to future generations.





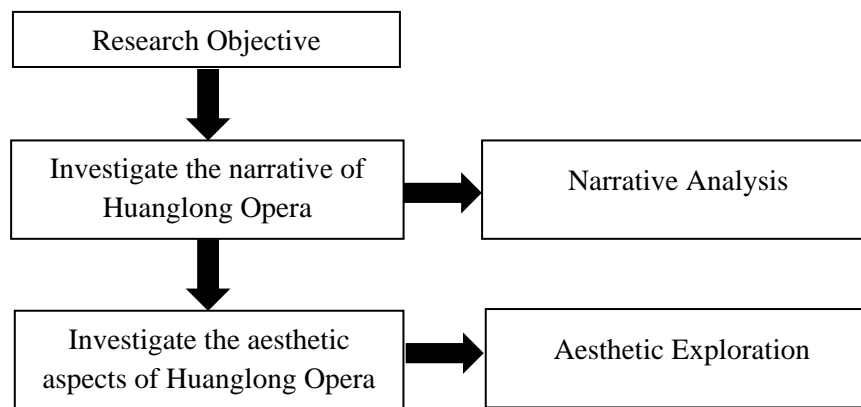
In conclusion, this literature review provides a foundational understanding of the historical roots, narrative techniques, and aesthetic elements of Huanglong Opera, setting the stage for our in-depth investigation into its narrative and aesthetic aspects in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China.

### Theory Used

**Narrative Analysis:** Performance Studies enables a thorough examination of the narrative elements within Huanglong Opera performances. Researchers can investigate the storytelling techniques, character development, and thematic content of the operatic narratives. This analysis helps uncover how historical events, folklore, and moral values are woven into the storytelling, reflecting the cultural identity and heritage of Nong'an County (Kochman et al., 2012).

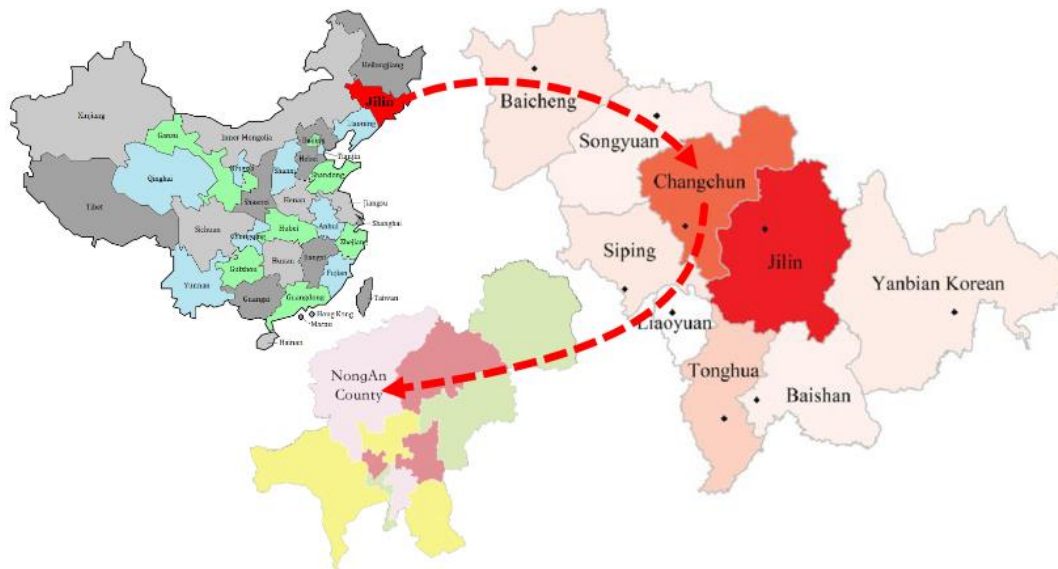
**Aesthetic Exploration:** Performance Studies facilitates the exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of Huanglong Opera. This includes the study of visual aesthetics, such as costume design, makeup, and stage design, as well as auditory aesthetics related to music and vocal performances. Researchers can analyze how these aesthetic elements contribute to the overall impact of the performance and how they represent the artistic sensibilities of the region (Katz, 1994).

### Conceptual Framework



### Methodology

**Research site:** The study was conducted in Nong'an County, located in Jilin Province, China. Nong'an County is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and is a significant hub for the performance of Huanglong Opera. The selection of Nong'an County as the research site is based on its historical significance in preserving and promoting this traditional art form, as well as its active community of Huanglong Opera practitioners and enthusiasts.



**Figure 1** Map of the research site in Jilin Province

Source: Chinafolio (n.d.)

**Key Informants:** The selection of three key informants will be based on their expertise, experience, and willingness to participate in the research. Key informants will play a vital role in providing insights and perspectives related to the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of Huanglong Opera, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of this traditional art form in Nong'an County.

**Research tools and data analysis**, as shown in Table 1:

**Table 1** Research Tools, Creation and Quality, Steps for Use, and Data Analysis

Research Tool	Creation and Quality	Steps for Using the Tool	Data Analysis
Observation Form (Huang, 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developed based on relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. Ensured clarity and specificity in observation criteria</li> <li>- Comprehensive checklist to capture various narrative and aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera</li> <li>- Pre-tested for reliability and validity. Refinements made based on feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attend Huanglong Opera performances in Nong'an County</li> <li>- Use the observation form to note details of each performance</li> <li>- Pay close attention to narrative elements, character portrayal, and artistic expressions</li> <li>- Reflection and Notes: Expand notes after each session to capture detailed observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Record observations during performances</li> <li>- Organize and categorize observation data</li> <li>- Identify patterns and trends in observations</li> <li>- Analyze how narrative and aesthetic aspects interact</li> </ul>
Interview Form (Wan, 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Structured questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions. Designed based on research objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct interviews with selected key informants</li> <li>- Follow the interview form to guide discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transcribe and code interview responses</li> <li>- Perform thematic analysis of interview data</li> </ul>



Research Tool	Creation and Quality	Steps for Using the Tool	Data Analysis
	- Ensured clarity and relevance of questions. Pre-tested with a pilot group for effectiveness	- Encourage informants to provide insights on narrative and aesthetic dimensions	- Identify key themes and subthemes in responses - Compare interview findings with observation data

From Table 1, These research tools, the observation form, and the interview form are designed to collect comprehensive data on the narrative and aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County. They have been carefully created to ensure the quality and reliability of the information gathered during the research process

## Results

### 1. Narrative of Huanglong Opera

Huanglong Opera, a traditional Chinese opera form, has captivated audiences for generations with its unique blend of history, culture, and artistry. In this research, we explore the narrative aspects of Huanglong Opera as performed in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China. The opera's narratives have been shaped by historical events, cultural values, and artistic creativity, and our study aims to shed light on the storytelling techniques, themes, and cultural significance that make Huanglong Opera a cherished cultural treasure, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Narrative of Huanglong Opera

Research Findings	Description
Historical Storytelling	One of the distinctive features of Huanglong Opera is its deep-rooted connection to history. The narratives of Huanglong Opera often draw inspiration from actual historical events, providing a window into the past for its audience. These historical events serve as the backdrop for dramatic storytelling, allowing the audience to connect with their cultural heritage while being entertained. This historical storytelling is not limited to recounting facts but involves infusing artistic interpretations that breathe life into the narratives. The blending of history and artistry is a testament to the opera's ability to transport its audience to different epochs while offering a fresh perspective on historical events
Balancing Authenticity and Fiction	Huanglong Opera masterfully treads the fine line between authenticity and fiction. While specific events in the opera may be fictional, the opera itself carries genuine significance. This balancing act is crucial as it makes the opera accessible and relatable to the audience. By infusing fictional elements, the opera adds layers of artistic interpretation that deepen its cultural connotations. It becomes a medium through which history is not merely recounted but reimagined, making it both convenient for the audience to appreciate and a source of aesthetic depth and cultural value. This delicate balance between authenticity and fiction sets Huanglong Opera apart as a unique form of cultural expression
Universal Themes and Moral Lessons	The narratives of Huanglong Opera explore themes that resonate universally with the audience. The themes of heroism, love, justice, and morality are woven into the fabric of the opera's storytelling. Beyond mere entertainment, the opera often imparts valuable ethical lessons to its audience. Through the trials and tribulations faced by its characters, the opera communicates enduring moral principles. These narratives serve as a mirror through which the audience can reflect on their own lives and choices, making Huanglong Opera, not just a source of cultural enrichment but also a moral compass







Research Findings	Description
Character Development and Ethical Dilemmas	Character development is a hallmark of Huanglong Opera's narratives. Characters in the opera undergo intricate journeys that reflect moral and ethical dilemmas. These character arcs add depth to the storytelling, engaging the audience on an emotional and intellectual level. The ethical dilemmas faced by the characters often mirror the complexities of real-life decision-making. Audiences are presented with scenarios that challenge their own moral compass, fostering empathy and introspection. This aspect of the opera's narratives elevates it beyond mere entertainment, making it a vehicle for profound reflection
Cultural Preservation and Identity	Huanglong Opera plays a pivotal role in preserving the cultural identity of Nong'an County. The narratives of the opera are not just stories; they are a repository of local history and traditions. Through its performances, the opera ensures that the cultural heritage of the region is passed down through generations. It serves as a custodian of the collective memory of the community, safeguarding its unique identity in a rapidly changing world. The narratives, infused with local flavors and customs, provide a sense of continuity and belonging to the people of Nong'an County

From Table 2, the narrative aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China, reveal a tapestry of storytelling rich in historical significance, cultural depth, and artistic creativity. The opera's ability to seamlessly blend history and artistry, balance authenticity with fiction, and explore universal themes while imparting moral lessons makes it a cultural treasure. Character development and the presentation of ethical dilemmas engage the audience on a profound level, fostering introspection and empathy. Moreover, as a custodian of local culture and history, Huanglong Opera contributes significantly to the preservation of cultural identity in Nong'an County. Its narratives are not just stories but a living testament to the enduring power of traditional Chinese opera.

## 2. Aesthetic Aspects of Huanglong Opera

Huanglong Opera, a traditional Chinese opera form, is celebrated not only for its captivating narratives but also for its profound aesthetic elements. In this exploration of the aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China, we delve into the artistic nuances that define this cultural treasure. From the mesmerizing music to the elaborate costumes and intricate choreography, Huanglong Opera's aesthetics are a testament to the rich heritage of Chinese performing arts, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Aesthetic Aspects of Huanglong Opera

Research Findings	Description
Musical Composition	The musical composition of Huanglong Opera is a symphony of intricate melodies and unique rhythms. Traditional Chinese instruments, such as the erhu and pipa, are skillfully incorporated, adding depth and resonance to the performance. The opera's music is not merely an accompaniment but an integral part of the storytelling process. It sets the mood, conveys emotions, and heightens dramatic tension. The combination of traditional instruments and melodious compositions creates a mesmerizing auditory experience that resonates with the audience on a profound level
Elaborate Costumes and Makeup	One cannot discuss the aesthetics of Huanglong Opera without marveling at the performers' elaborate costumes and makeup. Each character's attire is a work of art, adorned with vibrant colors, intricate designs, and symbolic elements. The costumes not only serve as visual spectacles but also play a crucial role in character portrayal. They reflect the character's social status, personality traits, and narrative arc. Similarly, makeup is a form of artistic expression, with intricate patterns and colors that enhance the performers' facial expressions and emotions. The combination of costumes and makeup adds a layer of visual richness to the opera, captivating the audience's eyes and immersing them in the world of the performance





Research Findings	Description
Choreographic Precision	The choreography in Huanglong Opera is a testament to precision and symbolism. Every movement on stage is carefully choreographed to convey emotions, character traits, and narrative elements. From graceful dances to martial arts sequences, the choreography adds depth to the storytelling. It is through these movements that characters express their inner turmoil, engage in conflicts, or celebrate moments of joy. The precision in choreography ensures that every gesture carries meaning, making it an essential component of the opera's aesthetics. The audience is not just witnessing a performance but is partaking in a visual language that transcends words
Stage Design and Props	The stage design and props in Huanglong Opera are integral to its aesthetics. The opera transforms the performance space into a vivid representation of the narrative setting. Elaborate backdrops, props, and set pieces transport the audience to different eras and locations. The attention to detail in stage design is remarkable, as it creates a visual environment that enhances the storytelling. Whether it's a bustling marketplace or a serene garden, the stage design immerses the audience in the world of the narrative. Props, too, play a vital role, from symbolic objects representing a character's journey to practical items that drive the plot forward. Together, they contribute to the opera's immersive and visually stunning experience
Cultural Significance	The aesthetics of Huanglong Opera are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Every element, from the choice of colors to the symbolism in costumes and props, reflects traditional values and regional identity. The opera serves as a repository of cultural heritage, preserving customs, rituals, and artistic traditions. It not only entertains but also educates the audience about Chinese history and cultural symbolism. Through its aesthetics, Huanglong Opera reinforces a sense of cultural identity and pride among the people of Nong'an County, Jilin Province, and China at large

From Table 3, the aesthetic aspects of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China, are a testament to the richness and depth of traditional Chinese performing arts. The opera's musical composition, elaborate costumes and makeup, choreographic precision, stage design, and props combine to create a multisensory experience for the audience. These elements not only captivate the senses but also convey cultural significance, reflecting traditional values and regional identity. Huanglong Opera stands as a vibrant cultural treasure, where artistry and heritage coalesce to create an immersive and visually stunning performance.

In sum, Huanglong Opera employs diverse narrative techniques to enrich its internal structure, allowing the audience to experience heightened aesthetic enjoyment through subtle influences. These innovative approaches have opened up new artistic frontiers within the realm of opera, effectively addressing the challenges posed by the contemporary media landscape and providing invaluable insights for the preservation and modernization of traditional regional art forms.

Huanglong Opera, a historical drama, brings to life the stories of the Liao and Jin dynasties through the medium of operatic music. It features plays that weave fictional characters into tales inspired by real historical events. Some of its prominent repertoire includes "Fan Lihua," "The Soul of the Huanglong House," "Empress Dowager Xingguo," "String of Pearls," "Mu Guiying Hanging Commander," "Shengming Building," "Iron Blood Nvzhen," "Lady Yingge," "Chen Sanliang Climbing the Hall," "The Bell of the Emperor's Son-in-law," "Wu Shu and Yingge," among others. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 is a still from the historical drama "Empress Dowager of the Xingguo."





**Figure 2** Empress Dowager of the Xingguo  
**Source:** Qianqian Liu (from fieldwork in March 2023)



**Figure 3** Empress Dowager of the Xingguo  
**Source:** Qianqian Liu (from fieldwork in March 2023)

## Discussion

The introduction sets the stage for an exploration of Huanglong Opera's narrative and aesthetic dimensions in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China. The study, anchored in the rich cultural tapestry of Chinese traditional performing arts, posits Huanglong Opera as a custodian of history, culture, and artistic expression. The literature review contextualizes Huanglong Opera's historical roots, narrative techniques, and aesthetic elements within the broader landscape of Chinese opera traditions. Nyíri (2011) and Lina





(2012) contribute insights into the intricate relationship between Chinese tourism, regional identity, and the cultural authority of opera, emphasizing how Huanglong Opera has shaped the identity of Nong'an County.

The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach drawing from sociology and anthropology, aligning with Kochman et al.'s (2012) assertion that performance studies facilitate a thorough examination of narrative elements within Huanglong opera. Theoretical grounding in narrative analysis and aesthetic exploration (Katz, 1994) provides a robust framework for investigating storytelling techniques, character development, and visual aesthetics. The selection of Nong'an County as the research site is consistent with the literature's emphasis on the historical roots of Huanglong Opera, affirming its role as a cultural emblem deeply connected to the county's past, present, and future.

The study unveils the historical storytelling prowess of Huanglong Opera, drawing inspiration from actual historical events and infusing artistic interpretations to transport audiences to different epochs. The delicate balance between authenticity and fiction, a consistent theme in the narratives, aligns with the findings of Fengqi (1994, 2009), showcasing the opera's unique cultural expression. Universal themes and moral lessons within the narratives resonate with Goldstein's (1999) exploration of Chinese opera themes, emphasizing their enduring relevance and moral compass. Character development and ethical dilemmas highlighted in the study align with Lina's (2012) emphasis on the thematic richness of Huanglong Opera, engaging audiences on emotional and intellectual levels.

The research concludes by underscoring the cultural preservation and identity role played by Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County. This echoes the findings of Nyíri (2011), emphasizing the opera's contribution to the identity of the region. The aesthetic exploration underscores the rich tapestry of traditional Chinese performing arts, consistent with the broader implications for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage outlined in the literature review.

Theoretical principles in narrative analysis and aesthetic exploration prove integral to understanding the multifaceted dimensions of Huanglong Opera. The study consistently aligns with these principles, utilizing them as lenses to unravel the intricate threads woven into the opera's performances. Performance studies, as suggested by Kochman et al. (2012), serve as a robust analytical tool to dissect the narrative and aesthetic elements, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the cultural treasure that is Huanglong Opera.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County, Jilin Province, China, has provided valuable insights into both its narrative and aesthetic aspects. The findings are consistent with theoretical principles in narrative analysis and performance studies, demonstrating how the opera blends history, artistry, and culture to create a unique and culturally significant experience.

These findings have implications for the preservation and modernization of traditional regional art forms. They highlight the enduring power of Huanglong Opera in engaging audiences on multiple levels and reinforcing a sense of cultural identity and pride. As a custodian of local culture and history, Huanglong Opera continues to play a pivotal role in passing down cultural heritage to future generations.

## Recommendation

The findings of this study on Huanglong Opera offer valuable insights that can be applied in various practical contexts. First and foremost, cultural authorities and local government bodies in Nong'an County should leverage the research to promote Huanglong Opera as a cultural heritage asset. Initiatives should be launched to raise awareness about the opera's narrative and aesthetic richness among both residents and tourists. These efforts could include regular performances, workshops, and educational programs for schools, aiming to instill an appreciation for this traditional art form in younger generations and attract cultural tourists seeking authentic experiences. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on the role of Huanglong Opera in preserving cultural identity underscores the need to support and sustain local opera troupes and practitioners. Financial aid, training programs, and collaborations with cultural institutions can help ensure the continued vitality of Huanglong Opera in Nong'an County.

On the academic front, future research endeavors should build upon this study's foundation. Researchers can explore the nuanced variations of Huanglong opera across different regions of China, deepening our understanding of how regional identities influence the art form. Comparative studies between Huanglong Opera and other Chinese opera styles can shed light on the broader landscape of traditional





Chinese performing arts. Additionally, investigations into the digitization and preservation of Huanglong Opera, incorporating modern technologies and archival techniques, are essential to safeguarding its legacy for future generations. Collaborative research efforts with international scholars and institutions can foster cross-cultural exchange and enrich the global discourse on traditional performing arts. By applying the findings of this study and continuing to explore the multifaceted aspects of Huanglong Opera, we can contribute to the preservation, promotion, and revitalization of this cherished cultural treasure, both within China and on the international stage.

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