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Textual Research on Doubts and Errors in Peking Opera the Execution of Chen Shimei and Its Enlightenment

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Abstract: As a Peking Opera piece with profound social significance and artistic appeal, *The Execution of Chen Shimei* is re-examined in this study from a historical perspective, adhering to the fundamental principles of Marxist literary criticism. Through textual research on aspects such as Chen Shimei's identity, marital logic, and the judicial mechanisms of the Song Dynasty, this paper analyzes the historical inaccuracies in the opera and explores the reasons for its success, aiming to provide insights for the creation and adaptation of modern Peking Opera and other theatrical works.

1. Introduction

The Execution of Chen Shimei is one of the classic repertoire pieces of traditional Chinese opera, performed in various regional styles such as Peking Opera, Qinqiang, Yu Opera, Haifeng Baizi Opera, and Haifeng Xiqin Opera. This masterpiece has achieved remarkable success in character portrayal, plot construction, and thematic depth, not only making Chen Shimei a byword for ingratitude but also highlighting Bao Zheng's integrity and impartiality. In short, *The Execution of Chen Shimei* possesses extraordinary artistic charm. The modern Peking Opera version of *The Execution of Chen Shimei* was adapted and re-edited by the China Pingju Theater from the play *Qin Xianglian*. This version has attained the highest artistic achievement and is widely popular, also attracting significant academic attention. Current researchers primarily analyze the opera from an aesthetic perspective, elaborating on their views from angles such as literary dissemination, stage performance, and character portrayal. However, an outstanding literary work should not be evaluated solely from an aesthetic standpoint; the historical perspective is equally important as a criterion for assessing literary works. As Balzac remarked on literary creation: "The artist's mission is to breathe life into the characters they create, to turn depiction into reality" [1]. Therefore, this study uses the 1959 script of *The Execution of Chen Shimei* published by Beijing Baowen Tang Publishing House as its foundation, re-examining the opera from a historical perspective. Through textual research on Chen Shimei's background, marriage customs, and judicial mechanisms in the opera, this paper identifies historical inaccuracies in *The Execution of Chen Shimei* and discusses the unified relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty in the drama. This research aims to provide a new perspective for contemporary understanding and appreciation of the opera.

2. Doubts Regarding Chen Shimei's Identity in Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*

As a remarkable dramatic work, the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei* has deeply imprinted the character of Chen Shimei in audiences' minds. In his pursuit of wealth and status, he not only abandoned his wife to remarry but even attempted to "kill his wife and eliminate his heirs" [2]1. His despicable behavior has been widely condemned by later generations. However, Chen Shimei's identity as portrayed in the opera lacks historical validity.

2.1 No Historical Record of Imperial Son-in-Law Chen Shimei During Emperor Renzong's Reign

In the opera, Chen Shimei's status as an imperial son-in-law serves as the crucial plot device that motivates both the Imperial Princess and the Empress Dowager to intercede on his behalf. Since the story is set during Emperor Renzong's reign, this section examines historical records of imperial sons-in-law during that period. Research confirms that no imperial son-in-law named Chen Shimei existed during Renzong's rule. First, the princess that Chen Shimei married has no historical counterpart. When the Empress Dowager pleads for Chen Shimei in the opera, she sings: "Restless I sit in palace chambers, awaiting my royal child's return to learn the truth" [2]15. This indicates the princess was the emperor's sibling. According to the History of Song: Biographies of Princesses, Emperor Zhenzong had only two daughters: Princess Hui Guo and Princess Sheng Guo. Princess Hui Guo, as Zhenzong's eldest daughter and Renzong's full sister, would match the princess's status in the opera. However, historical records state that "Princess Hui Guo died young" [3]. The other princess, Sheng Guo (given name Zhi Chong, daughter of Consort Du), was Renzong's half-sister. The historical texts note that "Princess Sheng Guo initially entered Daoist monastic life" [3]. Clearly, the princess character in the opera lacks historical basis.Second, none of Emperor Renzong's actual sons-in-law were top-ranked imperial examination scholars. Historical documents record four imperial sons-in-law during Renzong's reign: Li Wei, Qian Jingzhen, Cao Shi, and Guo Xianqing. Li Wei was the son of Li Yonghe (Renzong's maternal uncle); Qian Jingzhen was the grandson of prominent minister Qian Weiyan; Cao Shi was the younger brother of Empress Cao; and Guo Xianqing was the younger brother of Emperor Zhenzong's consort. All four came from aristocratic families or powerful official clans - none were examination scholars from humble backgrounds. Thus, Chen Shimei's portrayal as both a top scholar and imperial son-in-law during Renzong's reign is historically inaccurate.

2.2 Chen Shimei Was Not the Top Imperial Scholar During Emperor Renzong's Reign

Chen Shimei is most condemned for his ungrateful actions, particularly his abandonment of wife and children after achieving the highest imperial examination rank, which significantly deepens the audience's aversion. This plot element—where Chen Shimei becomes an imperial son-in-law only after attaining the top scholar status—is preserved across various regional opera traditions including Peking Opera, Sichuan Opera, and Qinqiang. However, historical evidence challenges this portrayal.First, Chen Shimei could not have been the top scholar from the Jingxi South Circuit during Renzong's reign. While the Peking Opera identifies his origin as "Junzhou", earlier versions mention "Junzhou" [4]—a discrepancy attributable to limitations in ancient textual transmission. Historical administrative records show both locations (modern Yuzhou City in Henan Province) belonged to the Jingxi South Circuit during the early Northern Song period. According to The Lifespan and Geographical Distribution of Top Scholars in the Song Dynasty, only one candidate from this region—Jia An of Dengzhou's Rang County—achieved the top scholar designation during Renzong's reign. Historical accounts describe Jia An as principled and upright, with contemporary scholar Ouyang Xiu praising his integrity. The moral contrast between Jia An's character and Chen Shimei's theatrical portrayal confirms they were different

individuals.Second, alternative textual variations reference Chen Shimei as a native of "Huguang Junzhou" (modern Danjiangkou City in Hubei Province). Historical records indicate only four of the Northern Song's 63 top scholars originated from this region: Feng Jing, Bi Jian, Song Xiang, and Zheng Xie. Among these, only three—Feng Jing, Bi Jian, and Zheng Xie—attained their status during Renzong's reign. All were renowned for their righteousness and none married into the imperial family. The History of Song documents Zheng Xie's official integrity, Song Xiang's judicial fairness, and Feng Jing's dedication to public service—earning him the posthumous honorific "Wenjian". The opera's negative depiction of Chen Shimei stands in stark contrast to these historical figures' exemplary records.In conclusion, comprehensive analysis confirms Chen Shimei was neither the top scholar from the Jingxi South Circuit nor from the Huguang region during Emperor Renzong's reign. No historical evidence supports the existence of a top scholar named Chen Shimei during this period.

2.3 Chen Shimei Was Not a Song Dynasty Official

Through textual research on external factors such as top scholars and imperial sons-in-law during Emperor Renzong's reign, it is evident that no top scholar or imperial son-in-law named Chen Shimei existed during that period. Examination of Chen Shimei's dialogue in the opera further reveals that he was not a Song Dynasty figure but rather a Qing Dynasty imperial examination graduate. First, the administrative divisions mentioned in the text do not align with Song Dynasty reality. In the play, Chen Shimei is identified as a native of "Huguang Junzhou." However, the Song Dynasty's administrative structure followed the Tang system, organized into circuits, prefectures, and counties. The term "Huguang" clearly reflects Ming and Qing Dynasty terminology. The "Junzhou" mentioned in older versions was renamed during the 24th year of the Jin Dynasty's Dading era (1184 AD) and later changed to Yuzhou during the Ming Dynasty. This confirms that the administrative divisions in *The Execution of Chen Shimei* do not correspond to actual Song Dynasty administrative structure. Second, historical records indicate that "Chen Shimei" was actually a Qing Dynasty figure. According to the *List of Ming and Qing Imperial Examination Graduates*: "In the 12th year of the Shunzhi reign (1655), under the cohort of top graduate Shi Dacheng, Chen Shumei passed the imperial examination as the 312th ranked graduate, having previously passed the provincial examination in Shuntian Prefecture during the Xinnian year" [5]. Both the *Local Records of Junzhou* and the *Dictionary of Hubei Historical Figures* clearly document Chen Shimei as a Qing Dynasty native of Junzhou who traveled to Beijing for further studies after passing the imperial examination. Additionally, tombstone inscriptions confirm Chen Shimei's Qing Dynasty origins. In the suburbs of Junzhou (submerged in 1969), a tombstone clearly identified the burial as Chen Shimei's father, with the inscription reading: "The second son, Nian Gu (Shumei), traveled to the capital for studies. Registered in Shuntian Prefecture, he passed the imperial examination" [6]. The epitaph was dated to the 6th year of the Kangxi reign in the Qing Dynasty. This confirms the tomb belonged to Chen Shimei's father and that Chen Shimei was indeed a Qing Dynasty imperial examination graduate. The character of Chen Shimei in *The Execution of Chen Shimei* was not an imperial son-in-law or top scholar during Emperor Renzong's Song Dynasty period but rather a provincial graduate from the early Qing Dynasty. Beyond the historical inaccuracy of Chen Shimei's identity, the marital arrangements depicted in the opera also raise historical questions.

3. Unreasonable Marital Logic in Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*

In the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei,* the newly appointed top scholar Chen Shimei's marriage to a princess appears to be a glorious achievement. From an aesthetic perspective, the union of a top scholar with royalty aligns with the intellectual class's identification with the imperial examination system and their fantasies of a promising future. This trope—"a princess falling in love with a poor scholar"—frequently appears in ancient Chinese literary works, creating a fixed mindset

among common people that top scholars would inevitably marry princesses [7]. However, from a historical perspective, it would have been impossible for Chen Shimei to become an imperial son-in-law during the Northern Song Dynasty.

3.1 Northern Song Princesses Never Married Top Scholars

Engels once stated: "For the princes themselves, marriage is a political act, an opportunity to expand their power through new alliances. What plays the decisive part is the interest of the house, and not the wishes of the individual" [8]. From a historical perspective, princesses' marriages have typically served political purposes since ancient times, and Northern Song princesses were no exception. Research confirms that no Northern Song princess ever married a newly appointed top scholar. First, examining the purpose of spouse selection: Throughout the Northern Song Dynasty and indeed the entire feudal era, emperors primarily selected imperial sons-in-law for political reasons, focusing more on the candidate's political capabilities and family influence to secure the allegiance of ministers and ensure future service to the court. Clearly, Chen Shimei, coming from a commoner background, fell far short of these requirements. Second, historical records indicate that Northern Song princesses mostly married into families of important ministers or those with military achievements. Since the founding of the Song Dynasty, imperial sons-in-law were predominantly chosen from among the sons of prominent families—particularly military generals and meritorious officials—with very few selected from the scholar-official class. According to the *History of Song: Biographies of Princesses*, while the Song Dynasty had eighty-eight princesses in total, only thirty are clearly documented as having married. Among these thirty, only three (10%) married imperial relatives; fourteen (47%) married descendants of important ministers or those with military achievements; and only five (approximately 13%) of the imperial sons-in-law were imperial examination graduates. Notably, three of these five graduates were themselves descendants of prominent officials. Clearly, the portrayal of Chen Shimei—a top scholar from a humble background marrying a princess—contradicts the historical logic of princess marriages. In summary, Northern Song princesses remained pawns in the political machinations of the feudal dynasty. Their marriages served as tools for feudal monarchs to secure the loyalty of ministers and consolidate imperial power. Therefore, a commoner like Chen Shimei would never have been permitted to marry a princess. Furthermore, ambitious scholar-officials themselves were generally unwilling to marry princesses.

3.2 Scholar-Officials Were Unwilling to Marry Princesses

The common people's fixed mindset regarded marrying a princess as the ultimate fortune in life, leading to frequent appearances of scholars wedding princesses in literary works. While this aligns with creative motivations, historical evidence shows that scholar-officials would generally refuse to marry princesses. First, becoming an "imperial son-in-law" was synonymous with the end of one's political career. The marriage between an imperial son-in-law and a princess was typically a direct product of political interests, saturated with political significance. Due to the special status of imperial sons-in-law, emperors usually granted them titular positions without real power. Their primary value lay in helping the emperor secure the allegiance of court ministers and stabilize ruling interests. Taking the Song Dynasty as an example: founded through military seizure of power, the Northern Song court strictly controlled the official positions of imperial sons-in-law, prohibiting them from holding any military authority. Thus, becoming an imperial son-in-law marked the end of one's political life. In feudal society, the Confucian ideal of "Cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world"[9] represented the ambition of scholars. A top scholar who had studied diligently for ten years would never sacrifice his political career for the title of imperial son-in-law. Clearly, an aspiring top scholar would not choose to marry a princess. Second,

even if Chen Shimei in the opera were vain and devoid of political ideals, he still would not choose to become an imperial son-in-law due to the unequal marital status between princesses and their husbands. In the early Song Dynasty, a unique system was implemented where after being selected as an imperial son-in-law, the husband and his father would address each other as brothers, while the princess would be considered of the same generation as her parents-in-law. This system was designed to uphold the superior status of the royal family. Furthermore, the special term meaning "to marry up" was used instead of the ordinary word for marriage, emphasizing the elevated status of the princess [10]. Clearly, the marriage between a princess and an imperial son-in-law was characterized by significant social disparity. Third, from a male psychological perspective, men were generally unwilling to marry princesses. In the patriarchal feudal society, men enjoyed greater privileges, such as taking multiple wives and concubines, while women were expected to submit to their husbands. However, marrying a princess meant that the imperial son-in-law would lose all these patriarchal privileges. Historical records document that Guo Ai, son of the famous general Guo Ziyi, once drunkenly rebuked a princess and was filled with terror upon sobering up. Zheng Hao, the only top scholar in history who became an imperial son-in-law, openly expressed his reluctance to accept the role. Clearly, in a male-dominated feudal society, men generally struggled to accept the special privileges held by princesses. Additionally, as daughters of heaven, princesses were often willful and spoiled. Historical accounts note that five Tang Dynasty princesses were known for their promiscuous and unconventional behavior, which imperial sons-in-law found difficult to tolerate. Thus, whether from a political perspective, the unequal marital relationship, or male psychology, historical evidence shows that few men were willing to marry princesses. The portrayal of Chen Shimei marrying a princess for wealth and glory merely reflects the fixed mindset of the common people and significantly deviates from historical reality.

3.3 The Age of Top Scholars Rendered Marriage Illogical

In the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*, Chen Shimei marries the princess only after achieving the top scholar designation. However, historical examination reveals that top scholars rarely became imperial sons-in-law, primarily because their age at the time of achieving this honor far exceeded the customary age for first marriages in ancient times.First, the age of top scholars typically surpassed the stipulated age for first marriage. Historical data shows that the age at which scholars achieved the top rank generally exceeded the common age for initial marriages. Since the establishment of the imperial examination system during the Sui and Tang dynasties, the process was exceptionally rigorous. When the poet Bai Juyi passed the imperial examination at age 29, he wrote: "Beneath the Ci'en Pagoda where names are inscribed, I was the youngest among seventeen." This illustrates the difficulty of passing the examination, let alone achieving the top rank. For example, among the 81 top scholars of the Ming Dynasty: 25 were aged 20-29; 38 were 30-39; 14 were 40-49; and 4 were 50-59. The largest proportion (38) fell within the 30-39 age group. The Qing Dynasty held 112 examinations, producing 114 top scholars, some of whom achieved this honor in their sixties. The average age for achieving the top rank was 34.25. By comparison, the legal marriage ages in the Song Dynasty were 15 for men and 13 for women. Clearly, the age of top scholars generally exceeded the customary first marriage age.Second, the age of top scholars exceeded the typical first marriage age of Song Dynasty princesses. While the official marriage age for women was 13, the actual age at first marriage was more flexible. Among twenty-seven princesses with documented marriage ages, twenty-three married before age twenty, only four married after twenty, and the latest marriage occurred at age twenty-three. The average first marriage age for these princesses was seventeen. Thus, the age at which scholars achieved the top rank significantly exceeded the typical marriage age of Song Dynasty princesses.Finally, historical records indicate only one instance of a top scholar becoming an imperial son-in-law: Zheng

Hao during the Tang Dynasty. The prominent scholar Professor Luo Jizu noted: "Combining the top scholar and imperial son-in-law roles in one person was nearly impossible" [11]. In conclusion, whether examining princess marriages, scholar-official attitudes, or the age of top scholars, the marital relationships depicted in *The Execution of Chen Shimei* lack historical logic. Beyond the implausible marital arrangements, the opera's judicial mechanisms also prove historically inaccurate.

4. Unreasonable Judicial Mechanisms in Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*

In the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*, Bao Zheng is portrayed as loyal to the emperor, caring for the people, upright, impartial, and pleading for justice on behalf of the common people. At the end of the case, he fearlessly executes Chen Shimei despite threats from the royal family. From an aesthetic and emotional perspective, Bao Zheng's execution of Chen Shimei aligns with the traditional moral concept of "goodness rewarded and evil punished," while also satisfying the audience's "horizon of expectations." However, from a historical standpoint, Bao Zheng could not have executed Chen Shimei, nor could he have used an executioner's blade to carry out the sentence, especially since Chen Shimei's crimes did not warrant the death penalty.

4.1 Bao Zheng Could Not Have Executed Chen Shimei

In the opera, Bao Zheng single-handedly tries Chen Shimei and orders his execution using a bronze executioner's blade in the final act. While dramatically effective and well-structured from an artistic perspective, this portrayal significantly deviates from the judicial mechanisms of the Song Dynasty. The historical inaccuracies are evident in several aspects: First, the judicial process depicted contradicts the standard judicial procedures of the Song Dynasty. During the Northern Song period, legal proceedings for commoners were extremely complex, and the opera's simplified representation does not align with historical facts. Key discrepancies include:

- The separation of investigation and judgment was mandatory under Song law. The same official could not both investigate a case and pass judgment.
- The principle of (ju-yan fen si) required that the official investigating the facts of a case and the official determining the applicable law had to be different individuals.
- The (chaguan luwen) system mandated that after the initial trial, a reviewing official had to verify the case before it could proceed.
- Collective review and judgment were required, meaning that after a verdict was proposed, it had to be collectively examined by officials of the same rank before implementation.
- The death penalty review system required that capital cases be reviewed, and those in the capital required the emperor's approval before execution. Even after approval, there was a mandatory three-day waiting period [12].

In the opera, Bao Zheng neither memorializes the emperor nor follows these complex procedures, making the portrayal historically inaccurate. Second, the treatment of Chen Shimei as a government official contradicts the specific judicial procedures for officials. As a top scholar, Chen Shimei was a court-appointed official, and his case would have required strict adherence to the judicial process for officials. Using the "Wutai Poetry Case" as a historical example, the proper procedure for trying officials included: impeachment and memorial, case registration, arrest, interrogation, review, drafting of judgment, and imperial [13]. Ordinary officials could only be sentenced after the emperor's approval. In the opera, Bao Zheng sentences Chen Shimei without imperial judgment, which violates Northern Song judicial protocols. Finally, as an imperial son-in-law, Chen Shimei would have been entitled to special judicial protections under the (Eight Deliberations) system for imperial relatives and nobility. The Song Criminal Code stated: "Those covered by the Eight Deliberations who commit

capital crimes must have the facts of their crimes and circumstances for deliberation listed, and a request for deliberation must be made first. After deliberation, a memorial is made for judgment" [12]. Clearly, Bao Zheng's direct judgment and execution of Chen Shimei in the opera contravene the Eight Deliberations system.In summary, the trial process depicted in *The Execution of Chen Shimei* significantly diverges from the strict judicial procedures of the Northern Song Dynasty. Bao Zheng could not have single-handedly tried and executed Chen Shimei.

4.2 Chen Shimei's Crimes Did Not Warrant the Death Penalty

In the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*, Bao Zheng condemns Chen Shimei's crimes as: "Abandoning his wife, showing contempt for the Emperor, and remarrying into the imperial household" [2]7. The opera thus presents two primary unforgivable crimes: first, abandoning his lawful wife to marry a princess, constituting deception of the emperor; second, ordering Han Qi to kill his wife and children, resulting in Han Qi's suicide, thus committing murder. While dramatically satisfying and morally aligned with poetic justice, historical examination reveals that neither crime warranted capital punishment under Song Dynasty law. First, bigamy did not carry the death penalty. Although portrayed as a grave offense, Song legal statutes prescribed only one year of imprisonment for bigamy. Even in cases where the bigamy was unintentional, the punishment remained one year of imprisonment, with the requirement to maintain the marriage arranged by parents. Clearly, execution for bigamy drastically contradicts Song legal practice. Second, deceiving the emperor—while serious—was not punishable by death. Song emperors carefully cultivated an image of benevolence, and since the dynasty's founding, there was an established principle of treating scholar-officials leniently. According to the *History of Song*, Emperor Taizu established an ancestral injunction against executing scholar-officials. As a top scholar, Chen Shimei would have been protected by this principle. Furthermore, Song law typically prescribed only two years of imprisonment for deceiving the emperor. The direct execution in the opera thus represents a severe overpunishment. Finally, the charge of murder was unsubstantiated. Chen Shimei's plot to kill his wife and children was attempted murder at best, and Han Qi's death resulted from suicide rather than direct execution. According to Song law, hiring someone for attempted murder carried a three-year imprisonment sentence, with reduced penalties for targeting one's wife. Additionally, the concept of "using official status to redeem life" allowed officials to mitigate punishments through their positions. As an imperial son-in-law, Chen Shimei could have used his status to reduce his sentence. Clearly, even if convicted of attempted murder, his crimes would not have warranted execution.Based on the crimes attributed to Chen Shimei in the opera, Bao Zheng's death sentence constitutes excessive punishment inconsistent with historical legal standards. Beyond the procedural inaccuracies and exaggerated charges, the execution method itself—using a bronze executioner's blade—lacks historical basis.

4.3 No Executioner's Blade Existed in the Northern Song Dynasty

The "Dragon-Head Blade," "Tiger-Head Blade," and "Dog-Head Blade" are names of three specially designed execution tools traditionally associated with Kaifeng Prefecture in popular folklore. These blades, collectively known as the "Three Blades of Justice," frequently appear in operas centered on Judge Bao. Literary works claim that these instruments were bestowed by Emperor Renzong, granting the authority to execute first and report later, thereby intimidating the court. In *The Execution of Chen Shimei,* the blade is not only Bao Zheng's iconic tool but also symbolizes the common people's yearning for justice. Historically, however, no such blades existed during Bao Zheng's lifetime in the Song Dynasty. Executioner's blades were never used as instruments of punishment in ancient China, and the Northern Song Dynasty did not possess privileged execution

tools.First, the term (zhá, meaning "to cut with a blade") was rarely used during the Song Dynasty. According to dictionary records, the character first appeared in *Zihui*, a dictionary published in the 13th year of the Wanli era during the Ming Dynasty. It was the *Kangxi Dictionary* of the Qing Dynasty that provided a clear explanation of the term. This indicates that the character did not come into common use until the Qing Dynasty. Thus, it was not widely used during the Song Dynasty, and the executioner's blade as a tool was not prevalent at the time. Second, the blade was originally a tool for cutting fodder for cattle and horses. It is highly unlikely that such a tool would have been repurposed for executions during Bao Zheng's time. From the pre-Qin period to the Northern Song Dynasty, there are no historical records of executioner's blades being used to carry out death sentences. In fact, there is no evidence of blades being used as execution tools anywhere in ancient Chinese legal history. Throughout the criminal history from the pre-Qin era to the Song Dynasty, beheadings were typically carried out using axes or Yue (a type of battle-axe). As recorded in *Records of the Grand Historian: Basic Annals of Zhou, No. 4*: "King Wu shot him three times before descending from his chariot, struck him with a light sword, and used a yellow Yue to behead King Zhou, displaying his head on a white flag" [14]. This indicates that beheadings in the pre-Qin period were primarily performed with axes. The Five Punishments system was established during the Sui Dynasty, with only "beheading" and "strangulation" constituting capital punishment. Beheading involved decapitation with a knife, while strangulation involved death by a short rope around the neck. The Tang and Song Dynasties continued this system, generally avoiding extreme punishments except for the most heinous crimes, where beheading or strangulation were used. Therefore, the executioner's blade did not exist as a punishment tool during the Song Dynasty. Finally, the Northern Song Dynasty did not have privileged execution tools. The opera features the "Three Blades of Justice" as instruments granting the special authority to "execute first and report later." However, such privileged tools would not have existed in the Song Dynasty, which achieved the highest level of legal development in feudal society. From its founding, the Song Dynasty placed great emphasis on the rule of law. Emperors Taizu and Taizong took care to cultivate an image of benevolence, often stating that "the law is something the Son of Heaven shares with the world" [14], and that "Song monarchs' judicial philosophy was deeply humanistic" [15]. The opera itself reflects this humanistic judicial, as seen in Bao Zheng's statement: "When a prince violates the law, he is treated the same as the common people" [2]. Clearly, the portrayal of Bao Zheng using specially bestowed blades to execute criminals is historically inaccurate. In summary, the executioner's blade depicted in the opera did not exist during the Song Dynasty and would not have been used as a privileged execution tool. Clearly, the punishment tools in *The Execution of Chen Shimei* do not align with historical facts.

5. Enlightenment of Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei* for Dramatic Creation

Although *The Execution of Chen Shimei* deviates from historical facts in terms of character identity, marital logic, and judicial mechanisms, literary creation is not a mere replication of real life. Literature allows for artistic creation based on reality. How to balance authenticity and fictionality in literary works remains a topic worthy of discussion. Despite its many historical inaccuracies, the creators of this opera not only made audiences overlook these flaws but also won widespread popularity. Its success lies in the skillful coordination of the relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty. The portrayal of Bao Zheng executing Chen Shimei—who did not deserve the death penalty—using a non-historical execution method within an ahistorical legal framework demonstrates the literary creators' accurate grasp of life's essence, their promotion of goodness, and their full pursuit of aesthetic ideals.

5.1. "Truth": Reasonable Grasp of Social Essence

The character of Chen Shimei in the opera embodies the literary creators' accurate understanding of social essence. Although Chen Shimei's identity and portrayal are fictional, he represents a deeper "truth" within the context of the opera. During the Qing Dynasty, acts of ingratitude and spousal abandonment were prevalent social phenomena. The depiction of Chen Shimei reflects the creators' insightful observation and rational analysis of these societal issues, as well as their intuitive grasp of human nature. It also demonstrates their skillful handling of artistic authenticity in literary creation. As Maxim Gorky noted: "Artistic truth, like honey collected by bees, is gathered from all flowers, yet it captures the most essential elements" [8]. Thus, even though Chen Shimei is not a historical figure, his character feels authentic and believable to audiences.

5.2 "Goodness": The Exaltation of Ultimate Values

The ultimate value of "goodness" in the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei* is manifested through Bao Zheng's three execution blades. Its intrinsic core lies in the reverence and respect for human dignity and worth, while externally it is demonstrated through the protection of the commoner Qin Xianglian's right to seek justice. This represents the highest embodiment of humanistic (humanistic care) within the judicial context. The three blades are the product of literary creators integrating humanistic into concrete imagery, (repeatedly blending) it with rational contemplation. *The Execution of Chen Shimei* with the blades in the opera serves as a powerful promotion of goodness and a severe condemnation of evil. The creators' arrangement of this plot point precisely concretizes the essence of "goodness," illustrating the relationship between virtuous values and noble character. The success of *The Execution of Chen Shimei* lies in its ability to express goodness through specific plot elements and objects, enabling the audience to derive intellectual enlightenment and spiritual satisfaction.

5.3 "Beauty": The Active Shaping of Aesthetic Ideals

The characterization of Bao Zheng represents an aesthetic paradigm formed through the fusion of specific historical and cultural traditions. The opera portrays Bao Zheng as an upright official who impartially upholds the law, remains loyal to the emperor, and serves the people. His ability to bypass Song Dynasty judicial procedures and execute Chen Shimei—who did not deserve the death penalty—with the blade stems from his embodiment of the nation's noble character. In feudal society, both loyalty to the monarch and advocating for the people were Confucian ethical values. The "monarch" and the "people" often represented two sides of the same coin. The common people projected their political aspirations onto upright officials, hoping they would properly balance the relationship between ruler and subjects. The portrayal of Bao Zheng (inherits and develops) this image of the "incorruptible official." At the same time, Bao Zheng's characterization reflects an alternative form of resistance against the feudal judiciary by the common people. Within the constraints of the feudal system, literary creators could only project this judicial ideal onto a(near-deified) upright official.In conclusion, due to its outstanding artistic achievements, the story of *The Execution of Chen Shimei* has been widely circulated in various forms across China. However, with the rapid development of China's economy and the further improvement of the people's cultural literacy, contemporary audiences have higher expectations for adaptations of this story. Therefore, theatrical adaptations in the new era face multiple challenges. The fundamental solution lies in continuously refining the dramatic adaptations of the story. The above research can provide reference and insight for understanding and appreciating the Peking Opera *The Execution of Chen Shimei*, correctly handling the relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty in the opera, and addressing the challenges of adapting the story.

6. Concluding Remarks

As a widely circulated classic within the traditional repertoire of Peking Opera, *The Execution of Chen Shimei* has garnered immense popularity for its distinctive character portrayals, rich cultural connotations, and exceptional moral edification. However, with the continuous elevation of public aesthetic standards, it has become necessary to re-examine the opera from a historical perspective. This study has therefore undertaken a historical analysis of Chen Shimei's identity, marital logic, and judicial mechanisms as depicted in the opera. While *The Execution of Chen Shimei* contains numerous deviations from historical facts, its significant artistic value and charm remain undeniable. The success of this opera lies precisely in its balanced integration of truth, goodness, and beauty, offering substantial reference value and inspiration for Peking Opera (creation) in the new era. Nevertheless, the significance of studying a single opera and dissecting its successes is limited. Only by expanding research to include a broader range of Peking Opera repertoire can the current challenges in the development of this art form be effectively addressed. Such an approach will better align Peking Opera with the demands of contemporary society and ensure its continued prosperity.

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