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The Integration of Literature and Aesthetic Education: The Enlightening Effect of Wencheng on University Students' Aesthetic Competence

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CITATION

Yuan Y. The Integration of Literature and Aesthetic Education: The Enlightening Effect of Wencheng on University Students' Aesthetic Competence. *Advances in Curriculum Design&Education*. 2025; 1(2): 82.

<https://doi.org/10.63808/acde.v1i2.82>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 12 June 2025

Accepted: 3 July 2025

Available online: 9 September 2025

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Abstract: Aesthetic education is a crucial aspect of talent development, and sought to not only expand students' aesthetic literacy, but also help them grow emotionally, morally, and spiritually, within the university setting. This paper uses textual analysis to explore the aesthetic possibilities available in Yu Hua's novel *Wencheng* by considering narrative structure, character construction, language style, and emotional imagery. Based upon Schwartz's (1992) Theory of Basic Human Values, the purpose of aesthetic perception is articulated as value sensitivity, and based upon Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, the paper suggests moral judgment develops through aesthetic judgment and ethical reasoning. This paper asserts that *Wencheng* is a novel primarily concerned with tragic beauty, alongside a more taciturn resilience, allowing university students to engage in serious aesthetic experience and ethical reflection that expands the overall aims of aesthetic education.

Keywords: Literature; Aesthetic Education; Aesthetic Competence; *Wencheng*; University Students

1. Introduction

As higher education shifts from simply transmitting knowledge to fostering well-rounded individuals, aesthetic education has once again come into focus as a key

pathway for personal growth. Aesthetic education can therefore tell people about beauty, but also guide value orientation and personal development. In this regard, all literature should be given an increased focus as an aesthetic education's fundamental aspect. Compared to art forms such as music or visual arts, literature allows readers to use language to engage deeply with knowledge, emotion, and cognition.

Yu Hua's *Wencheng* represents a significant stylistic shift in the author's career. Unlike his earlier works characterized by violent aesthetics and social critique, *Wencheng* adopts a slower narrative pace and more implicit emotional expression. The novel intertwines tragic beauty with human resilience, forming a unique aesthetic tension. This paper aims to explore the novel's aesthetic features and how it fosters university students' aesthetic perception, judgment, and expression through close reading and theoretical engagement.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodology

This study adopts textual analysis, focusing on the novel's internal structure, language style, and character psychology to excavate its value in aesthetic education. Schwartz's (1992) Theory of Basic Human Values provides a theoretical framework for understanding aesthetic perception as a means of constructing value systems through emotional and aesthetic experiences. Kohlberg's (1984) stages of moral development theory elucidate how moral reasoning is integral to forming aesthetic judgment. The research centers on literary characteristics and their potential educational implications. This study mainly adopts the method of textual analysis, combined with qualitative coding and thematic analysis, to systematically analyze the narrative structure, language style, and character psychology of Yu Hua's novel "*Wencheng*", aiming to explore its aesthetic value and potential inspiration for aesthetic education of college students. In the data preprocessing stage, the original text was first digitally cleaned, including paragraph division, syntactic normalization, and keyword extraction. Subsequently, the text was subjected to semantic classification and emotional intensity scoring to enhance the objectivity and effectiveness of topic recognition.

2.2. Literature Review

The relationship between literature and aesthetic education has been emphasized since ancient times. As noted in the Chinese classic Book of Rites, “nothing is more effective than music in changing customs.” Modern thinkers such as Lu Xun, Zhu Guangqian, and Zong Baihua also underscore the role of literature in cultivating national spirit and aesthetic taste. More recently, Zhang Binxian (2019) proposed a process-oriented view of aesthetic competence, involving perception, understanding, judgment, and expression.

Studies on Yu Hua’s aesthetic contributions have largely concentrated on his earlier works. For example, Li Ming (2021) explores the ethical implications of violence and memory in *To Live*, while Zhang Wei (2020) focuses on the existential tension in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. However, few scholars have analyzed *Wencheng* specifically within the framework of aesthetic education, particularly from the perspective of reader cultivation or affective engagement. This study attempts to fill this gap by examining how *Wencheng* contributes to aesthetic literacy and moral reflection among university students.

3. Aesthetic Features of *Wencheng*

3.1. Rhythmic Beauty and the Aesthetics of Patience

Wencheng employs a nonlinear narrative combining flashbacks and fragmented storytelling, requiring readers to piece together the plot over time. This deliberate slowness shifts focus from dramatic developments to the characters’ emotional landscapes and quotidian experiences, fostering what Zong Baihua (2008) calls “aesthetic patience”. The novel’s slow and deliberate pace encourages readers to reflect more deeply on their emotions and inner thoughts, helping students learn to value quiet subtlety rather than dramatic events.

3.2. Tragic Aesthetics and Moral Awareness in Characterization



The character Lin Xiangfu is an archetypical but tireless individual. He has transitioned from a childhood of emotional abuse, to wanderer, and finally to adult with responsibilities. His representation of endurance and existence also represents the triumph of perseverance over physical calamity. The misfortunes of his life elicits pity from the reader, as well as imposes an imperative of introspection on the destiny of humanity. This pertains to the aim of aesthetically perceiving to develop emotional sensitivity and moral reflection.

3.3. Minimalist Language and Musicality

Of all Yu Hua's published works, he (Yu Hua) has instituted a style of minimalism in the novel *Wencheng* in regards to expressions of emotional surges in his phrases. Yu Hua's phrase, "He walked into *Wencheng* like a drop of water into a lake" captures this relationship between the concrete image and abstract. The structure of the novel flows like a piece of music with several movements, leaving a lasting impression much like poetry does, which makes the reading experience more emotionally rich and memorable.

3.4. Symbolism and Regional Imagery

The novel's repeated use of natural symbols—bridges, mountains, letters, and rain—serves metaphorical purposes. Bridges suggest connection and rupture, mountains solitude and endurance, letters hope and permanence. These images, enriched by the rainy ambiance of southern China, infuse the narrative with a poetic and symbolic aesthetic that transcends linear storytelling.

3.5. Poeticization of Narrative Form

As Friedman (1955) suggests, modern literature increasingly integrates poetic techniques. In *Wencheng*, this is evident in emotional flow, interior monologue, and symbolic structure. The novel's lyrical segments, such as Lin's money-making ventures or depictions of natural disasters, highlight its poetic character and philosophical undertones. The novel's "Chinese poetics"—including understatement, regional dialect, and emotional restraint—add depth to its aesthetic appeal.

4. The Educational Impact of Wencheng on Aesthetic Competence

Table 1

The embodiment of values

| VALUE DIMENSION | REPRESENTATION IN <i>WENCHENG</i> | IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS' AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT |
|-----------------|--|---|
| AUTONOMY | Lin Xiangfu's persistent decisions in the face of family and fate reflect deep emotional struggle and individual will. | Encourages students to form independent judgments and enhances their understanding of human complexity and empathy. |
| BENEVOLENCE | Acts of kindness and familial dedication amidst hardship show compassion and care for others. | Cultivates students' sense of empathy and social responsibility. |
| AESTHETIC | Vivid descriptions of southern China landscapes (e.g., misty rain, empty towns) create poetic and tranquil imagery. | Enhances students' sensitivity to literary beauty and cultural aesthetics. |
| SELF-EXPRESSION | The use of symbolic imagery and narrative ambiguity invites personal interpretation and recreation. | Stimulates creativity and allows students to express insights through writing, performance, or visual arts. |

Note. This table illustrates how selected value dimensions represented in *Wencheng* can contribute to the development of university students' aesthetic literacy and moral imagination. The values are categorized based on Schwartz's value theory and interpreted through close reading of literary scenes.

4.1. Enhancing Aesthetic Perception

As shown in **Table 1**, *Wencheng* provides rich narrative resources for value-based aesthetic education. By following Lin Xiangfu's journey through loneliness, hope, and responsibility, students can become more aware of the emotional and moral beauty in everyday life. This kind of emotional engagement helps them better understand their own feelings and values. As Schwartz (1992) points out, being

able to sense emotional depth and internal values is an important step in forming one's personal sense of what matters in life. Zong Baihua (2008) proposes an interpretation of aesthetic perception as “the awakening of the soul”, a concept that transcends the limitations of form, thereby facilitating engagement with the essence of being. Wencheng fosters this awareness through its deliberate pacing, which encourages readers to engage with texts in a thoughtful manner, facilitating introspection and deepening their emotional engagement with the narrative. The novel's restrained tempo invites readers to reflect more profoundly on their emotions and internal reflections, thereby helping students to appreciate the value of nuance and subtlety over sensationalism.

4.2. Developing Aesthetic Judgment

The novel maintains moral ambiguity, avoiding definitive judgments on issues such as whether Lin should continue search or whether Ji Xiaomei should conceal the truth. These dilemmas are consistent with Lawrence Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, which posits that progression occurs through increasingly sophisticated stages of ethical reasoning. By confronting such unresolved issues, students are encouraged to think critically and develop their own opinions. The inner conflicts faced by the characters—between personal desire and social expectations—reflect the tension Schwartz (1992) describes between autonomy and tradition. This helps students better understand ethical dilemmas and strengthens their ability to make thoughtful moral judgments.

4.3. Stimulating Aesthetic Expression

The language in Wencheng is simple yet emotionally powerful, filled with symbols and subtle meanings. It sparks readers' imagination and encourages creative thinking. Schwartz's theory highlights the value of “self-expression”, meaning that people need to express their inner world through art and language. Wencheng's use of understatement and symbolic imagery gives students space to interpret and recreate the story in their own way. Wencheng encourages readers to interpret and recreate the artistic conception in the novel through blank space and concise description.

From the perspective of aesthetic education, Lin Xiangfu's inner transformation and the rich symbolic imagery in the novel provide students with various ways to



express their aesthetic experiences. Students can deepen their understanding of novel content through writing, reading aloud, drawing, and other methods. This expression is not only a response to the work, but also a creative participation. Therefore, 'Wencheng' not only triggers aesthetic experiences, but also inspires students to express themselves in their own unique ways, making it a very valuable medium in the process of aesthetic education.

5. Conclusion

Wencheng is a representative work of static beauty in contemporary literature, which not only has strong literary value, but also contains rich aesthetic value. It provides college students with multiple possibilities to feel, understand, and express beauty through slow narrative rhythms, tragic character images, symbolic imagery, and implicit language expression.

Colleges and universities should pay more attention to the unique role of literary works in aesthetic education, systematically guide students to read deeply, generate emotional resonance, and make literature truly an important way to cultivate aesthetic literacy and sound personality. Future research can also be further extended to other contemporary literary works, constructing a richer dialogue framework between literature and aesthetic education, promoting the transition of aesthetic education in universities from concept to practice, and bringing aesthetic education from the pages of books into life.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, Yi Yuan; methodology, Yi Yuan; validation, Yi Yuan; formal analysis, Yi Yuan; investigation, Yi Yuan; resources, Yi Yuan; data curation, Yi Yuan; writing—original draft preparation, Yi Yuan; writing—review and editing, Yi Yuan; visualization, Yi Yuan; supervision, Yi Yuan; project administration, Yi Yuan. Author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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