

# 20th-Century Chinese Opera

## —The Embodiment of Nationalism and Feminism in Female Character Images

Jianhang SUN<sup>1</sup>, Jiayong YU<sup>2</sup>

Kangwon National University, Chuncheon 24341, Korea

### Abstract

**[Background]** The development of female characters in 20th-century Chinese opera clearly reflects the change from traditional to modern, from monotonous to pluralistic. **[Objective]** An in-depth study of this process of transformation can not only deepen our understanding of Chinese opera art, but also provide valuable inspiration for the shaping of female character and the promotion of female status. **[Methods]** We will further excavate the artistic traits of female characters and the social significance they carry through in-depth analysis of specific works and roles. The author studied a large number of relevant literature, sorted out the image of female characters and the culture contained in the opera, and analyzed the feminism and nationalism of the female image in the opera. **[Results]** The development of Chinese opera has gone through several stages, each of which reflects social, political, and cultural changes. In the course of this development, the image and status of female characters have also changed significantly. The female character in 20th-century Chinese opera is a true portrayal of China's social change, cultural evolution and the advancement of women's status. **[Conclusion]** Through their diverse images and rich connotations, these characters display the unique charm and power of Chinese women in different historical periods. By studying these female characters, we can not only better understand the charm of Chinese opera art, but also gain in-depth insight into the changes in the cognition of female characters and women's status in Chinese society, and provide useful enlightenment for contemporary art creation and feminist research.

### Keywords

Chinese Opera; Female Character Images;  
Feminism; Nationalism

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### Corresponding Author

Jiayong YU  
ORCID: 0009-0007-4675-8465  
yjy0806wjk@gmail.com

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## 1 The general development of female characters in 20th-century Chinese oper

Although the Chinese opera art started hundreds of years later than the West, it has a profound cultural connotations of drama art that originates from thousands of years. In the eyes of some, Chinese drama is seen as the same art form as Chinese opera, and while this is not entirely accurate, it does show that Western opera has been heavily influenced by Chinese drama culture during its development in China. It is precisely because of this cultural connotations that when the art of opera took root in China, the classic work *"The White-Haired Girl"* was first considered by the creators to be presented in the form of opera. In the last century, creators have constantly tried to break the shackles of tradition and integrate various elements such as Chinese drama and folk music into opera creation, thus forming a unique opera art form. This innovative model not only retains the artistic charm of traditional drama, but also makes the development of opera art in China richer and more diverse.(Que, 2024)

However, due to the limitations of many factors in the creative process, such as musical form and performance method, they began to seek a new mode of creation. In this process, Chinese opera gradually formed its own unique artistic style, which was distinguished among the world opera stage. During the early period of New China(1949-1966), opera became an important tool for promoting the core values of Chinese socialism. Most of the opera works of this period were mainly based on revolutionary historical themes, showing the heroic deeds of workers, peasants and soldiers. The representative works of this period include *"The White-Haired Girl"* and *"The Red Guards on Honghu Lake "*, which have a significant revolutionary tendency in

terms of subject matter, form and expression technique.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), literary and artistic creation was subject to strict political control, and the eight model operas became the only art forms allowed. At this time, although the development of Chinese opera was stagnant, the portrayal of female characters in the model opera also provided valuable experience for the development of female characters in Chinese opera. These model operas are a fusion of opera, drama and dance, and most of their content is a celebration of the stories of revolutionary heroes, including *"The Red Lantern"*, *"Shachiapang"* and *"Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy"*.

After the reform and opening up (1978-1999), Chinese opera ushered in new development opportunities. With the opening of society and the diversification of culture, the themes of opera creation have become more and more rich and diverse. Many of the new works began to explore themes of modern social life and human nature, while some attempted to combine elements of traditional Chinese culture with modern opera forms, such as *"Mulan"* and *"Poet Li Bai"*.

Chinese opera in the 20th century developed through continuous exploration and integration, which not only absorbed the forms and techniques of Western opera, but also focused on embodying China's national characteristics and the time spirit. (Li, 2021)Through the evolution of different historical periods, Chinese opera has not only been enriched and diversified in terms of subject matter, but also innovated and improved in terms of art forms and expression techniques, thus forming a unique artistic style. The female characters with different styles created all embody the important role of liberating the traditional feudal ideology. In the following research, we will further explore the artistic characteristics and social

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significance of female characters through the analysis of specific works and characters.

## **2 The spirit of female characters in 20th-century Chinese opera**

In the long river of Chinese opera art in the 20th century, the shaping and development of female characters can be described as colorful. Their images have undergone a process from tradition to modernity, and their images have gradually become more colorful and multi-dimensional, which are different from the initial single and rigid images. Through the in-depth study of this evolution process, we not only have a more profound understanding of the progress and development of Chinese opera art, but also can learn from the valuable experience of how to shape and enhance the role and status of female in today's society. From the development of female characters and the profound national spirit behind them, we can further analyze the artistic characteristics of female characters and their important position in society and culture. In the early 20th century, female characters in Chinese opera mainly reflected national characteristics by displaying traditional virtues such as good virtuous, loyalty, filial piety and respect. These roles reflect the society's expectations of women's roles and the connotation of cultural inheritance. With the founding of New China, the female images in the opera began to show their desire for independent personality and status by resisting oppression and pursuing freedom and liberation. In the early days of the founding of New China, female character were often portrayed as revolutionary heroes and model workers, which not only highlighted the key roleplayed by women in social revolution and construction, but also showed their dedication and glorious image.

### **2.1 The creation of tragic female character**

The outstanding representative of this genre is undoubtedly Xi'er, the central character in the opera "*The White-Haired Girl*". This work, from the mid-40s to the mid-50s of the 20th century, is known as the pinnacle of artistic achievement in Chinese national opera. It can be said that "*The White-Haired Girl*" is a treasure of Chinese national opera, its birth not only pointed out a unique way forward for Chinese opera, but also accumulated rich experience in creation. This work is exemplary in its portrayal of female characters. With vivid story plots and beautiful music, this opera shows the suffering and struggle of women in the old society, as well as the yearning and pursuit of a new life.

The birth of "*The White-Haired Girl*" is inseparable from the in-depth excavation and reference of the New Yangko Movement and Yangko opera creation. It has absorbed the essence of Chinese folk music, selected national folk tunes, combined with folk songs and local dramas in Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi and other places, and has been carefully adapted and innovated, so as to create its own distinctive musical image. The theme of the music is closely related to the traits of the characters, and it deepens with the development of the plot and character traits. This creative technique has had a far-reaching influence at that time, and still has important guiding significance for the creation of Chinese national opera. It can be said that "*The White-Haired Girl*" has reached a high degree of artistic achievement in music, plot, character building, etc., and has become a classic of Chinese national opera.

In the opera, Xi'er's singing excerpt is particularly fascinating. Xi'er, an innocent, lively, hard-working and kind girl, has become

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a "white-haired ghost" who has suffered from life's hardships, she hides in the mountains, and is full of resentment. Her image is depicted as full and three-dimensional. Xi'er's personality and emotions are both full and real, she has become a typical representative of millions of oppressed women in society at that time. Xi'er's image deeply touched the hearts of the audience, and her indomitable spirit and yearning for a better life inspired people to pursue freedom and happiness.

The success of *"The White-Haired Girl"* not only set a new benchmark for the creation of national opera in the future, but also marked that the creation of Chinese opera has entered a new stage. This work was hailed as the first milestone in the history of Chinese opera, and since then, the creation of Chinese opera has begun to focus on female protagonists, and has continued to develop along with the changes of social life in New China. It can be said that *"The White-Haired Girl"* is not only the treasure of Chinese national opera, but also the treasure of Chinese opera history, its creation has had a profound impact on the development of Chinese opera.

## **2.2 The shaping of the national hero image**

The opera works with female heroes as the core show the lofty image of their perseverance, patriotism, dedication and justice, which together build the second glorious milestone in the history of Chinese opera. These operas not only highlight the female heroes' strong faith and lofty patriotism, but also show their perseverance and selfless dedication in the difficulties and challenges. With their unique artistic techniques and profound themes, these works are deeply loved by the audience and have become classic works in the history of Chinese opera.

The opera "Jiang Jie" is widely regarded

as the pinnacle of Chinese folk opera in the middle of the 20th century. And the opera has achieved an outstanding attempt to combine Chinese and Western in terms of dramatic performance and musical singing. Its music has the delicacy and euphemism of Jiangsu and Zhejiang opera, and at the same time, it skillfully integrates into the bright and refreshing Sichuan folk tunes. In addition, it also widely absorbs a variety of musical elements from Sichuan Opera, Yue Opera, Peking Opera, etc., making the musical performance of the whole play rich and colorful. This fusion of varied musical elements not only enriches the musical style of opera, but also makes it more Chinese characteristics and ethnic charm.

*"Red Plum Praise"*, which runs through the whole opera, is a vivid symbol of Jiang Jie's heroic image. Deeply inspired by the music of Sichuan opera and Sichuan folk songs, the song uses the dragging technique in opera, combines the technique of large leaps of intervals and multi-tone of one word, as well as the rich rhythmic changes and clever use of ornamental sounds, making the tone both bright, strong and lyrical. It highly praises Jiang Jie's noble personality charm and firm and brave trait with the meaning of red plum herald the arrival of spring. It shows the broad mind and firm belief of a female Communist Party member, and becomes the finishing touch to shape Jiang Jie's musical image. With its passionate melody and profound connotation, this song deeply touched the audience and became an eternal memory in their hearts.

## **2.3 The image-building of self-awareness**

In the new era of reform and opening up, female characters in Chinese opera began to pay more attention to the pursuit of individuality and self-worth, which reflects the

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society's recognition and respect for women's multiple identities and role values. The female characters of Chinese opera in the 20th century have gone through a profound transformation from tradition to modernity, from passive acceptance to active creation. This series of changes is closely related to the overall changes in China's society, and fully reflects women's continuous pursuit and exploration of freedom, equality and independence in different historical stages. With the spring breeze of reform and opening up, social diversification and cultural openness have made the female characters in opera more and more rich and colorful. They show not only traditional virtues, but also the pursuit of personal value and personality development, which reflects the multiple identities and diverse social roles of modern women. The opera *"The Wilderness"* is undoubtedly one of the outstanding masterpieces of national opera produced in the late period of the "Cultural Revolution", and its birth has not only attracted wide attention and discussion in China, but also won a high reputation on the international stage. It can be said that it set off a new wave of opera creation in the 20th century, and is praised as "the first great love tragedy in the history of Chinese opera". Its appearance is an important event in the history of Chinese opera. It is not only the first appearance of Chinese opera on the foreign stage, but also an important window for Chinese culture and art to show its charm to the world. With its bold and innovative spirit, ingenious plot conception and vivid characters, this work has deeply attracted the attention of a wide range of audiences, and the praise is surging like a tide. In the plot, the character of Jinzi is passionate and straightforward, and she has a beautiful vision and untiring pursuit of sincere love. At the critical moment when the investigation team were in hot pursuit of her, she resolutely chose to follow her lover

Qiu Hu, even if it meant that she had to pay with her life, she did not flinch from this firm and brave love, which was very touching.

In terms of theatrical expression and musical composition, the composer has shown a high degree of artistic attainment. He skillfully blends elements of traditional Chinese music with modern Western music, and uses a rich variety of musical expression techniques and materials, from classic folk tunes to Western romantic music, and even the radical musical language of the avant-garde. Among them, the two musical themes representing "wilderness" and "love" are intertwined, and the inner harmony is unified, showing a very high artistic realm. In particular, the music theme of "My Brother Huzi" in the main excerpt is permeated with strong romanticism, achieving a perfect fusion of lyricism and drama, and profoundly embodying the composer's strong call and desire for women's self-emancipation.

Through the above analysis, the female characters in 20th-century Chinese opera is a microcosm of China's social changes, cultural evolution and the promotion of women's status. Through their diverse and rich images, these characters show the unique charm and power of Chinese women in different historical periods. Through in-depth study of these female characters, we can not only better appreciate the unique charm of Chinese opera art, but also gain an in-depth insight into the changes in the cognition of women's roles and status in Chinese society, which will provide valuable reference and inspiration for contemporary art creation and feminist research.

In the modern society, we emphasize diversity and inclusion, and this is also reflected in the portrayal of female characters in opera. Looking back at the development of Chinese opera in the 20th century, we can observe that the female character has

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gradually evolved from the original single heroic image to an individual with multiple identities and complex personalities. This diversified development trend fully reflects the recognition and respect for female identity in modern society. From a modern perspective, we can more clearly trace the development of female characters in 20th-century Chinese opera, from traditional oppressed images to revolutionary heroes to modern independent women, which is not only a product of social changes, but also provides valuable clues and references for us to understand the development of contemporary feminism.

### **3 The feminist embodiment of female characters in 20th-century Chinese opera**

China's national opera has undergone a century of vicissitudes of life, and its development process is like a magnificent historical scroll. In this journey, the profound depiction and attention to female characters has always been its unique charm, and it is also a distinctive feature that distinguishes it from other art forms. It not only focuses on the realistic living state and historical fate of women, but also becomes the traditional essence of Chinese opera, which is integrated into every note and melody. Although Chinese opera has experienced ups and downs in the long history, as long as the cause of Chinese opera continues to develop, the core position of women in the creation, performance and theme of opera will be unshakable, and their power and light will always shine in the opera sky.

In today's fast-changing society, diversity and inclusion have become a clear trend, and this trend is also clearly reflected in the art form of opera. Especially the female characters in opera, their images and personalities have become more and more rich

and diversified. If we look back at Chinese opera in the 20th century, we can see this process of change in the female characters.

In 20th-century Chinese opera, the development of female characters can be seen as a process from single to multiple, from rigid to vivid. Their images have gradually evolved from a single heroic image to individuals with multiple identities and complex personalities. This change not only reflects the recognition and respect for women's identity in modern society, but also warmly praises the rise of women's power and self-realization. In these operas, we can see the change process of women from passively accepting the fate arrangement, to actively fighting against unfair treatment, and to modern independent choice and self-realization, each step is full of tenacity and strength. This not only highlights the women's important position in society, but also shows the awakening of women's self-awareness and increasing strength. Their images and stories have become the most moving chapters of Chinese opera in the 20th century.

We can feel the gradual penetration of feminist ideas in 20th-century Chinese opera, which reflects the deep concern for women's rights and the persistent pursuit of gender equality in the society at that time. From a modern perspective, we can better understand and appreciate the feminist ideas in these works, as well as the important role of women in social change and cultural evolution.

Between inheriting classical culture and innovating artistic exploration, the female characters of Chinese opera in the 20th century not only inherited the long-standing traditional virtues of the Chinese nation, such as filial piety, diligence and kindness, but also made innovative attempts under the background of modern society, showing the diversity and inherent complexity of women's

spiritual, emotional, and social roles. The depiction of these female characters in the opera not only reflects the expectations and positioning of female characters in traditional Chinese culture, but also integrates the recognition and respect of modern society for women's independence, self-improvement and equal rights. This characteristic is deeply rooted in tradition, but also innovative bravely, which has injected a steady stream of new vitality and inspiration into the development of modern opera, making it an art form that is both classical and modern, rich in traditional charm and full of vitality.

More importantly, the portrayal of these female characters not only provides rich materials for contemporary art creation, but also provides profound inspiration for feminist research. They challenge the stereotype of traditional gender roles and show the outstanding talent and unique charm of women in various fields, thus providing strong support and new thinking direction for feminist theory. To some extent, these female characters have become a symbol of contemporary women's self-identification and self-expression, and also provide a new perspective for the audience to recognize and understand women. Therefore, the inheritance and innovation of female characters in 20th-century Chinese opera is not only an important breakthrough in Chinese opera art, but also an important opportunity for the development of feminism and contemporary art innovation.

## 4 Conclusion

In the broad time background of the 20th century, the female character in Chinese opera has undoubtedly become a microcosm of the social change and cultural evolution of China and the promotion of women's status. With their rich and varied images and profound

inner meaning, these female characters vividly depict the unique charm and tenacious vitality of Chinese women in different historical stages. They are not only a unique landscape in Chinese opera art, but also witnesses to the changes in the cognition of women's role and status in the social changes. An in-depth study of these female characters will not only help us understand and appreciate the charm of Chinese opera art more comprehensively, but also provide us with a deep insight into how society's cognition of women's roles and status has changed over time. This has important enlightenment and reference significance for contemporary art creation and feminist research.

When we examine the growth and development of these female characters from a modern perspective, it is not difficult to find that their stories and power are a vivid portrayal of China's social progress and the advancement of women's status. The strength and wisdom of these female characters will continue to inspire future artists and the general public to contribute to the promotion of gender equality and the construction of a harmonious social environment.

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