

Discussing *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and Ballet from the Perspective of Female Characters

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Abstract: The scope of this dissertation is to study the female protagonist, Hei'er, in the White Hairy Maiden Opera and Ballet and to exemplify the historical context of the White Hairy Maiden Opera and Ballet and the characteristics of the status of women in this era. The purpose of the research is to draw the characteristics of the era of the female characters in Bai Mao Nü in relation to the female lead's plot and the women's characteristics of the era in the context of Chinese history. The writing process of the thesis is firstly to find the tableaux and scores of the White Hairy Woman's operas and dance dramas in Chinese websites for reading and to collect the literature related to the White Hairy Woman's operas and dance dramas, and to collect the literature on the historical background of China and the status of women in the period of the 1940s to the 1970s. Secondly, I set out a framework for the thesis, matched and categorised the collected literature with the framework, and wrote the thesis; finally, I revised the final version and submitted the course thesis. My research found that the female drama of the White Hairy Daughter opera and ballet fully embodies the unequal gender treatment and social status of women in 1940s China. This work of White Hair Woman also portrays a more vivid image of Chinese women in the 1940s. However, the limitation of this thesis is that this thesis discusses the character lines and the related historical background from the score of White Hairy Woman, but it is difficult to find the literature that elaborates on the music of White Hairy Woman, and almost all of them focus on the content of White Hairy Woman's textual plot. The reason why the authors have some difficulty in discussing the musical score examples and the women's period characteristics is because there is very little literature that can help the authors to provide good ideas for their analyses. The final conclusion is that the female zeitgeist after the 1940s has given the female role of the White-haired Woman a deeper historical significance, and has provided scholars studying the White-haired Woman's operas and ballets with a new interpretation of female perspectives. It is also enough to show that White Hairy Woman is not only a successful musical theatre in 20th century China, but also a female theatre work that can promote Chinese women to gradually weaken sexism.

Keywords: The White-Haired Girl Opera, Gender literature, Female characters.

1. Introduction

The White-Haired Girl Opera was not only a cultural product of the Second World War in a region liberated by the Chinese Communist Party but also the first revolutionary opera in modern Chinese history to add a touch of Western romanticism. It also pioneered the history of current Chinese opera composition. [1] The opera of the same name was transformed into a ballet by the Shanghai Dance School in 1964. Wilkinson, J, and Norman argue that *The White-Haired Girl* Ballet remained active on national and international stages until the second half of the 20th century. This work spans over 50 years of Chinese political history [2]. So its cultural and artistic values and revolutionary overtones are extreme. This essay will discuss the characteristics of the female characters in *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and Ballet to conclude by exploring the different ways in which the female characters of *The White-Haired Girl* have been interpreted in different eras. The changing status of women in modern Chinese history can be seen through the portrayal of the role of women in different periods of *The White-Haired Girl* [3]. This essay will be written in two main parts: the femininity of *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and the femininity of *The White-Haired Girl* Ballet. The specific representation of female characters in the works will be analyzed by using historical, political, and gender literature as well as musical examples from *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and the Ballet [4].

2. The Origin of The Opera

The Lugou Bridge Incident 1937 was the starting point for the Chinese nation's full-scale entry into the Japanese War of Aggression against China. At this time, Chinese culture entered a state of culture shock confrontation due to the Japanese invasion [5]. The Communists realized the cultural crisis that Japan had brought to Chinese rural society and started building a gun barrel army in the Chinese peasant base. However, the artistic part still needed to be addressed. In the same year, communist literary groups began propagating the Yangtze opera in the war zone. But they did not stir up water for the Yangtze opera to form a sizeable academic subject because of the short and simple structure of the dramatic scenes [6]. In 1940, the Yan'an Lu Xun Academy trained hundreds of Yangtze opera performers, dancers, and musicians. They began to write many plays to be performed on various bases. They gradually started many Yangtze opera works after years of running around and creating performances [7]. These included some of the popular productions of the time, such as *The Farce*, *The Wedding* and *The Village Witch Doctor*, and *The Pioneer Sisters and Brothers*. *The White-Haired Girl* Opera is one of the most successful of the Yangtze operas because its story is based on real life and is a household name among the people. Good art needs to connect with people if it is to build bridges with them, and it needs to be inspired by their lives and work. Albert Borowitz also mentions that the Yangtze opera tunes come almost exclusively from folk tunes and are sung as songs and dialogues. At the same time, it was a product of the art found

by the Communist Party to establish a mass line and to bring the Communist Party closer to the peasantry [8]. So the reason for the success of *The White-Haired Girl* Opera is first that the opera libretto was adapted from an actual folk tale. The second is that the opera has lines sung by rural men and women that are relatable to the general public and also reflect the real life of the peasants during the war against Japan [9].

3. The Storyline of The Opera

The White-Haired Girl is an opera created in 1945 by students of the Lu Xun Academy in Yan'an under the leadership of its director Zhou Yang, and it is also based on a folk tale from the Jinchayi border area [10]. The original story of *The White-Haired Girl* Opera takes place in a remote village in northern China. Xi'er is the daughter of a poor farmer whose name is Yang Bailao, and she also falls in love with a young farmer who is named Dachun Wang [11]. But the landlord, who is called Huang Shiren, wants to force Xi'er to be his concubine and intensify his efforts to make Yang Bailao pay his debts. He moved Yang Bailao to continue adding interest to the six buckets of grain he owed him. Yang Bailao needed to pay him back twenty-five yuan by the end of the waxing moon, or he would have to give his daughter in exchange for the debt. When Yang Bailao took the seven dollars and fifty cents he had earned over the winter to the Huang family to pay back the interest, Huang asked him to pay back the interest and principal together and forced him to draw a pledge on the deed of sale of Xi'er [12]. Yang was heartbroken and felt very sorry for his daughter. So he committed suicide on New Year's Eve by drinking brine. At this time, Xi'er has just lost her father, and she wants to seek justice for him. But unfortunately, she is robbed by Huang Shiren's little brother and raped by him on the first morning [13]. Dachun failed in rescuing Xi'er and had to defect to the Red Army before coming to a long-term plan. Later, Xi'er escaped from the Huang family and hid in the jungle with the help of an older woman from the landlord's family. Xi'er gave birth to a child less than a month old on the mountain, and then the child died. Due to the prolonged absence of sunlight and salt supplementation of her food, Xi'er's dark hair gradually turned into a head of grey hair [14]. Xi'er used to go

to their grandmother's temple in the mountains to fetch fruits and incense. When someone met her, they mistook her for a "white hair fairy." Two years later, Dachun returned home with his troops and launched a campaign to reduce rents and interest rates [15]. Dachun leads a group of people to lurk at the Granny Temple on the 15th night and searches for the whereabouts of the White Hair Fairy to crush the landlord's plot to sway the people with the rumor of the "white hair fairy." Dachun didn't expect the "white hair fairy" to be her fiancée, Xi'er. After rescuing Xi'er, Dachun also suppresses the bad guy Huang Shiren's landlord. The villagers meanwhile beat Huang Shiren, and his land was divided up [16]. Xi'er also deservedly received her share of the land. Xi'er then rejoined her village and established a happy family with Dachun. Her hair is also fading to black.

4. Femininity in The White-Haired Girl Opera

The White-Haired Girl Opera is divided into five acts and thirteen scenes. The opera uses the tunes of northern Chinese folk music [17]. It also draws on opera music and its expressive techniques and borrows from Western songwriting experience. It also contains the famous Chinese songs *Tie the Red Head Rope* and *The North Wind Blows*. The following section will introduce the classic songs from Acts I to V of *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and analyze the female character of the female protagonist Xi'er from a gender perspective [18].

This is the classic rendition of *The North Wind Blows* from Act I of *The White-Haired Girl* Opera (see example 1). Xi'er sings in Act I,

"The year of the snowflakes has come and gone, and my father has gone out to hide from the accounts."

Xi'er hopes her father will return home soon [19]. This song is based on the Chinese folk song *Xiao Bai Cai* (Little White Cabbage) from the Province of Hebei. This folk song is about a young girl who receives abuse from her stepmother. The composer uses the tune of this folk song to suggest the tragic life of Xi'er, who the landlord later abuses [20].

Example 1: *The North Wind Blows*

The musical score is presented in a standard Western format with multiple staves. The vocal line is the central focus, with lyrics in Chinese characters. The instrumental parts include woodwinds (Long笛, 单簧管, 大管), piano, and strings (第一小提琴, 第二小提琴, 中提琴, 大提琴, 低音提琴). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (p, mp, mf, f), articulation (div., arco, Pizz.), and performance instructions like 'Cresc.' and 'Cresc. sfz'.

We move on to the song *Aunt and Uncle, help me!* From Act I, bar 517 (see example 2), Xi'er sings,

"Last night, when Father came home in the dark, something was on his mind, and he did not speak."

"Fiercely, I heard it was better to sell me to someone than burn in flames."

"Uncle and aunt help me. Never go with the rich man!"

It is clear from these lyrics that the landlord Huang Shiren forced Yang Bailao to put his fingerprints on Xi'er's deed of sale because he did not have enough interest to pay his debt [21]. Xi'er was furious about this but could do nothing about it. Xiongya illustrates that in some rural areas of China, marriages are arranged by parents and matchmakers. As the saying goes, "Parents' orders, matchmakers' words." This also explains why Yang Bailao could help his daughter sign the

sale deed. The development of individuals, especially women, was greatly hindered by the pernicious effects of a patriarchal society that rose before the founding of China [22].

And women still experienced unequal treatment in marriage with the imperfection of Chinese marriage laws at the time [23]. In particular, families seek to maximize their profits by trading young girls of marriageable age as commodities in the marriage relationship [24]. It was not until 1950 that the provisions of the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China were amended at the initiative of the Communist Party, and it was only after 1950 that the status of women in the marriage relationship was improved. This shows that Xi'er suffered from unequal marital relations in old China, where marriage laws were inadequate [25].

Example 2: *Aunt and Uncle, help me!*

In Act II, in bar 290, Xi'er sings (see example 3),

"The sword kills me. The axe cuts me. You shouldn't have spoiled me like that!"

By this time, Yang Bailao has committed suicide, and Wang Dachun has left Xi'er [26]. Landlord Huang Shiren also rapes a despondent Xi'er. They express the bitter resentment in their hearts for the misery they have suffered through sharp weapons such as knives and axes [27]. In the first half of the 20th century, wealthy Chinese men were allowed to take several concubines in addition to their wives, and they were also known as 'concubines.' The "first wife" woman can only watch in dismay as her husband marries another woman. In

The White-Haired Girl Opera, the landlord Yang Bailao is also the husband with a wife. As men were allowed to have multiple wives and concubines at the time, Xi'er was forced to become Yang Bailao's concubine and was mistreated. Prostitution was not illegal in China before 1949, either. It was also a prevalent feature, especially in rural areas [28]. At the time, Xi'er was unable to protect herself by legal means. Relatives in the neighborhood were indifferent to her family's plight and could not help her seek justice [29].

Example 3: *Kill me with a knife. Cut me with an axe!*

In Act II, bar 179, Xi'er sings (see example 4),

"They were going to kill me. They were going to harm me. I escaped from the tiger. I escaped from the wolf's den!"

Due to the patriarchal society of arranged marriages, women are sent to live with their husbands whether they know them or not. Some young women in low-income families also

received abuse from their husbands and mothers-in-law. And husbands are also free to assault women without the protection of marriage law [30]. Women were not only used as a tool for reproduction within the family but could also be sold into slavery or prostitution at any time. As a result, thousands of women choose to take their own lives in the morning. The character of Huang Shiren is not only a leader of the rural bourgeoisie but also a follower of the Kuomintang. At the same time, he is also a ten-fold rapist [31]. He squeezed Xi'er's surplus value and subjected her to abuse. Xi'er had to flee a place that abused her and left her with no future. At this point in the play, Xi'er is being used by Huang Shiren, and she

is also pregnant with a child. If she does not choose to escape, she will have to kill herself or be sold. From 1923 onwards, the Chinese Communist Party wanted to involve the oppressed Chinese women in the communist revolution [32]. This would help women gain freedom in marriage and family life and further the process of building a socialist state in China. There was a chance for her if she escaped. If she joins the Party, she may gain some freedom for women rather than stay in the house of a landlord who has no future and is abused [33].

Example 4: I want to live!



In Act 5, bar 193, Dachun meets the "white hair fairy" Xi'er in the cave. Both of them are overcome with emotion and weep. Dachun sings (see example 5),

"We were both born in Yangge village."

Xi'er sings back (see example 6),

"We fetched firewood together and dug wild vegetables

together."

At this time, Xi'er has received assistance from Dachun and can finally get out of the gloomy cave and gain an everyday human life [34].

Example 5: A duet By Dachun Wang, who is the Fiancé of Xi'er



Example 6: A duet By Xi'er



Xi'er is the center of the opera, but she is not the agent of its subject. The story of the opera is written around the ownership of Xi'er's body. His father, Yang Baillou, had the power of distribution over Xi'er in the patriarchal society of his time [35]. As he failed to protect his daughter, he lost his sense of social gender identity. Yang Bailao chose to commit suicide. Wang Dachun is even more significant because he lost his lover as well as his manhood [36]. These losses drove him towards the route of manly heroism later in life. After he joins the Communist army and recaptures Xi'er to punish the social class scum Huang Shiren. Xi'er, or rather her body, becomes a vehicle for socialist justice. In fact, Wang Dachun represents the socialist class, and Huang Shiren represents the bourgeoisie in this opera. They symbolize the class struggle of the different types over the female body and sexuality [37].

5. Femininity in The White-Haired Girl Ballet

The Shanghai Dance School created *The White-Haired Girl* Ballet on the blueprint of *The White-Haired Girl* Opera, drawing on the experience of *The Red Detachment of Women*

Ballet in 1964. Alexandra and Sophia Kalogeropoulou believe that the ideas expressed and elements created in the ballet somewhat insult the *objectified* female persona. And there is also a fundamental concept of female pleasure that is overlooked in ballet [38]. Women are foot-bound and wrapped in corsets to dance on stage, contributing to male stereotypes of women. Clare explains that while patriarchy only surfaces the gender imbalance between men and women, men are still the symbols of 'power' when women and male dancers physically touch on stage [39]. At the same time, female ballet dancers are marginal figures in the genre of ballet and do not have the same prestige as the leading actors played by men. This shows that ballet was once considered a work of art that objectified women and was socially and culturally discriminated against based on gender. The appearance of *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl* in the genre of ballet in China's fledgling proletarian society also shows that they were works of art calling for the emancipation of oppressed women [40]. The exploitation of women is also a social topic in old China by imperialism, feudalism, and the bourgeoisie. The exploitation of women was made visible through the genre of ballet. It

contributed to the elevation of women's status in the old society and laid the foundation for the women's liberation movement.

Wu Qing Hua is a Communist Party representative of the United Proletarian Women, and she is also the heroine of *The Red Detachment of Women Ballet*. In the play, she is also enslaved in the home of the landlord Nanba Tian and suffers severe beatings by him. Then she met the Red Army political commissar of the Chinese Communist Party. Wu Qinghua joined the Red Women's League and escaped a life of exploitation under his leadership. On a survey mission from headquarters, Wu encountered a landlord who had bullied him. In a fit of rage, Wu shot and killed Nanba Tian. From this moment on, Wu developed a desire for class struggle [41]. She realized that the proletariat could only be liberated if all humanity was liberated. The women's liberation movement also depended on the victory of the proletarian movement. This plot has a similar class struggle to that of *The White-Haired Girl* play in which the proletarian Wang Dachun finally rescues Xi'er and punishes the landlord Huang Shiren. Some changes also have been made to the plot of *The White-Haired Girl Opera* in *The White-Haired Girl Ballet*. For example, Yang Bailao commits suicide and dies in the opera. In the ballet, Yang Bailao is killed by the landlord Huang and Huang's little brother Mu to protect his family and daughter. At this point, the heroic manhood of Yang Bailao's character is more than worthy of portrayal in Chinese society. For Xi'er, she does not commit suicide or be raped but chooses to be unforgiving and undaunted by the harshness of her immediate life. In the ballet, Xi'er is rescued by Wang Dachun after the villagers demand severe punishment for landlord Huang and his little brother Mu. Xi'er also joins the militia army led by Wang Dachun. She is ready to join the proletariat in their fight to continue to help the exploited people and women win their liberation. Here the ballet ends. As can be seen from the plot modifications in *The White-Haired Girl Ballet*, the proletariat had become the main building force in China's primary stage of socialism by this time. Xi'er was also given a new image of a proletarian woman because the status of women gradually increased during the Great Leap Forward. She was unbearably humiliated in her efforts to break free from the prison of feudalism and the bourgeoisie. She eventually joins the women's unit of the Chinese Communist Party, and it is here that the female figure and theme of *The White-Haired Girl* is sublimated. In literature and art, heroic female characters sometimes use self-decoration and beauty to achieve their political goals. Xi'er's white hair and image of a rural woman reveal her dedication and hard work to gain free agency and fight for her family. The simple dress of the rural woman also hints at the oppression of the wealthy bourgeoisie and her imminent path toward class struggle and the liberation of women. As a representative of proletarian women, Xi'er's rebirth also increases the determination of Chinese women to change their social status radically.

From 1950 onwards, the image of rural and ethnic women became the cover theme of the Maoist era. This shift in the social situation shows that not only did the central government shift its development goals to rural collectivization but also that the issues of marginalized rural women began to receive social attention. Mao Zedong attached great importance to the rights of Chinese women even before he joined the Communist Party. According to the theory of the Chinese communist revolution, Chinese women needed to be freed from patriarchal society and arranged

marriages if they wanted to be liberated from feudal marriages. The Party also supported the Chinese women's liberation movement and gave women a new role in society. Women's participation in the workforce and employment opportunities, and the repeal of provisions in marriage laws that exploit the value of women's bodies and sexuality due to the change in women's social status. From 1950 to 1953, the Party launched a nationwide campaign to "smash the marriage law." It gave women the right to divorce freely, and marriages had to be registered by a government official to be considered valid. The movement was not only a long-term campaign for the emancipation of women but also a massive campaign against the remnants of feudalism. However, the Great Leap Forward period of 1958 was a watershed moment in the women's liberation movement for most women. At this time, Deng Xiaoping emphasized the anti-feudalism project, especially the persecution of women's rights by forces such as Sexism, Patriarchal Society, and Patriarchal Ideology.

During the Great Leap Forward, feminism also began to preach about the socialization of women in the export of domestic labor. Using images to represent women's labor was extremely important in this period. This will also make the public image of women more visible in the social division of labor and further improve society's stereotypes of exploited women. Pictures can help them escape the confines of the home and return to social production, particularly for women placed in the house. Although the Great Leap Forward period ushered in a better state of life for women relative to China's pre-statehood period, it was controversial in addressing women's right to personal freedom and improved social status. In the mid-1950s, the flourishing of rural collectivization and the Great Leap Forward movement led to women's labor tasks becoming more onerous. Female leaders organize women's work in the field and reconcile female and family conflicts. Examples include increasing childcare and protecting menstruating and pregnant women from the harmful effects of tedious farm work. The Chinese Communist Party helped 'women workers' to maintain equality in the family. Communist leaders encouraged women to assert their status as mothers and traditional homemakers. Women are still responsible for household tasks such as washing and cooking, caring for their husbands and children, etc. Kimberley Ens draws on interviews with some women whose lives were recorded during the Great Leap Forward to arrive at the view that women's evaluations of the Great Leap Forward period were subjective. Some women who do not live in the village but in the city are very nostalgic about the period of the Great Leap Forward, while those who have jobs in the town and are responsible for household labor recall this period with great pain. The interviews also revealed that some 'women officials' fled construction projects and ran home to express resistance, while others resisted the Great Leap Forward policy by running away from home. It can be seen that the procedure for women during the Great Leap Forward was still inadequate and relatively contradictory to the Communist Party's idea of giving women the right to personal freedom and the right to divorce at will.

6. Conclusion

The artistic ideals of the proletarian school are: to unite the people, to educate them, and to defeat and destroy the enemy, not to fall into the trap of the bourgeoisie. The central theme of *The White-Haired Girl Opera* and Ballet is to break the

cage of feudalism and the bourgeoisie and fight for the proletariat's freedom. These two works are also the product of proletarian art, and their artistic ideology is in line with the ideas of the proletariat. An analysis of the characteristics of the female protagonists in *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and Ballet of different eras provides insights into the gender identity and social status of Chinese women from the 1920s to the 1960s. It is necessary to look at this challenging period of cultural heritage with a critical eye to gain a clearer understanding of how Chinese women's femininity was constructed during Mao's time. Although Chinese femininity was bleak from the 1920s to the 1960s, it gave equal value to beauty. So the two works, *The White-Haired Girl* Opera and Ballet are highly referential and epoch-making for the study of the status of women in China in this era. However, *The White-Haired Girl* not only represents the femininity of the Chinese proletariat, but it is a work that is still being performed again and again in the 21st century. This shows that exploring the femininity of *The White-Haired Girl* is something that has to be explored as it evolves. And it is ongoing and changing, something that cannot be taken off the track of history. The different adaptations of the era have also given a new definition to the work of *The White-Haired Girl*. As women play a central role in the division of labor in society and the family, the female gender can also be considered a true reflection of social phenomena in different times. It is essential to explore femininity in music not only about the musical ideas but also concerning the period in which the work was written. This is why it is crucial to combine musical ideas with the context of the period to portray women in music honestly.

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