



Male Characterisation in Chinese National Opera in an Academic Context

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Received 07/07/2025

Revised 08/08/2025

Accepted 15/09/2025

Abstract

Background and Aims: Chinese national opera has historically focused on male characters, who have carried forward the art form's core values and artistic traditions. Their portrayal reflects a fusion of Chinese cultural heritage with Western operatic influences, creating a distinct style. This study aims to analyze the evolution, artistic characteristics, and cultural significance of iconic male roles in Chinese national opera while exploring how their characterization contributes to national artistic identity.

Methodology: This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining literature review, historical research, case studies, and survey analysis. Representative operas such as *Sparrow and Child*, *The White-Haired Girl*, and *Mount Yimeng* were selected to investigate male character shaping. In addition, a targeted survey among vocal performers and educators was conducted to collect practical insights about singing techniques and performance styles for male roles.

Results: The findings trace the development of male characters through three historical phases: early exploration and creation, the foundational period, and in-depth innovation. Male roles evolved from early revolutionary images to more nuanced and emotionally complex figures, reflecting the changing cultural and social context. Typical male characters, such as Bailao Yang, Juansheng, and Sheng Lin, embody bravery, sacrifice, and cultural continuity, underpinned by a blend of Western vocal techniques and traditional Chinese aesthetics.

Conclusion: The study concludes that male characters in Chinese national opera play a vital role in preserving and transmitting Chinese cultural values while innovating performance art. Their continued evolution demonstrates the integration of tradition with modern artistic expression. Strengthening research and practice in this field is essential to support the sustainable development and global appreciation of Chinese national opera.

Keywords: Chinese National Opera; Male characters; Singing Style; National Opera Singing

Introduction

Chinese national opera occupies a unique and important position in China's modern performing arts, standing at the crossroads of Western operatic tradition and Chinese folk opera.



Originating in the 1920s, it has developed a distinct aesthetic system and performance style characterized by its fusion of Chinese vocal techniques with Western musical forms. In particular, male characters have long served as the backbone of national opera narratives, representing themes of patriotism, sacrifice, social change, and the pursuit of justice. These roles not only carry dramatic storylines but also reflect deeper historical and cultural values embedded in Chinese society (Jia, 2023). Classic works such as *The White-Haired Girl*, *Jiang Jie*, and *The Canal Ballad* have provided richly layered portrayals of male figures, illustrating their courage, tragic choices, and emotional complexity. Yet, despite their prominence on stage, male roles have received relatively less scholarly attention than their female counterparts, leaving a critical gap in academic research.

Since its inception, Chinese national opera has been closely tied to the country's broader social and political transformations. Male characters have consistently been central to expressing national spirit and cultural ideals, evolving from revolutionary heroes in the mid-20th century to more emotionally complex and humanized figures in contemporary works. This transformation mirrors the shift in audience expectations and artistic philosophies over time. Operas from different historical stages demonstrate how Chinese composers and directors have continuously adjusted vocal styles, musical language, and stage presentation to suit changing ideological and aesthetic requirements (Mei, 2019). In the foundational period after 1949, for instance, many male characters embodied collective revolutionary ideals, whereas later works began to explore more personal, nuanced portrayals that resonated with modern sensibilities.

Against this backdrop, academic research on male characterisation in national opera has become increasingly significant. Studies have examined how musical features, dramatic techniques, and vocal performance contribute to the shaping of male roles. For example, Wang (2021) highlighted the importance of voice classification—such as the adoption of baritone and tenor timbres—to represent specific character traits and life stages. These vocal choices add authenticity and emotional richness to male portrayals, supporting the overall dramatic structure of operas. However, despite such valuable studies, systematic research on the theoretical construction of male characters—especially combining music, performance, and cultural symbolism—remains relatively underdeveloped.

Therefore, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of how iconic male characters have been shaped throughout the history of Chinese national opera, focusing on their artistic, cultural, and historical significance. By exploring their vocal styles, personality portrayals, and narrative functions, this study intends to bridge gaps in existing scholarship and promote a more comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing Chinese national opera. Ultimately,

strengthening this field of research not only supports academic discourse but also contributes to the sustainable development and global dissemination of Chinese operatic culture.

Objectives

1. To analyze the historical development of male characters in Chinese national opera across major socio-political and artistic stages.
2. To examine the vocal techniques, performance styles, and dramatic functions of representative male roles in key national opera works.
3. To evaluate the cultural significance and symbolic value of male characterisation in shaping national identity and operatic aesthetics.

Literature Review

Recent visual analyses of relevant academic literature reveal a consistent increase in research output concerning male roles in Chinese national opera. As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of studies has risen steadily since 2003, peaking in 2022 with 160 results. Among these studies, topics related to “image shaping” account for 22.08% of the total, while general national opera studies represent 16.88% (see Figure 2). This pattern suggests that scholars have paid considerable attention to the characterization and artistic performance of male roles, highlighting their importance in the broader framework of Chinese national opera research.

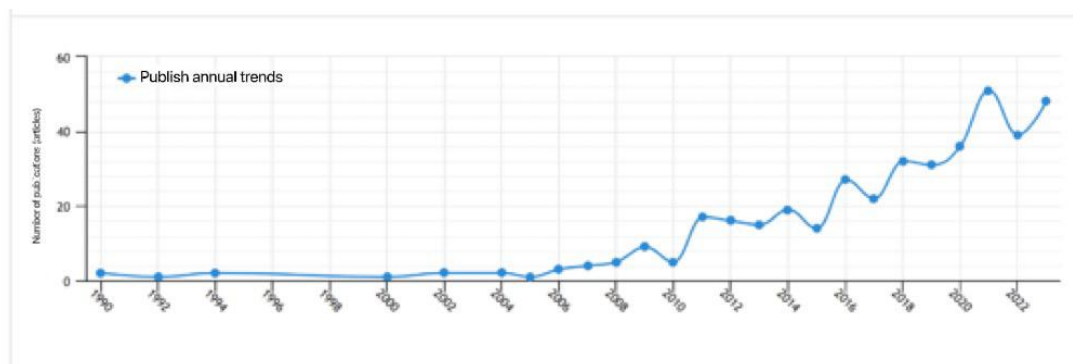


Figure 1 Publish trend

Note: Constructed by the researcher

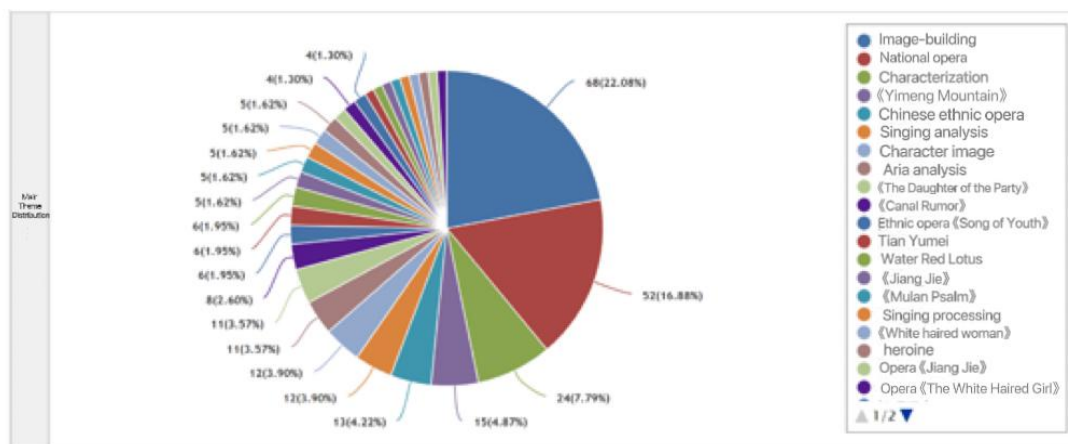


Figure 2 Categorizing

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Liu (2018) analyzed the current status of Chinese national opera, reflecting on its achievements and existing challenges. His research emphasized that male characters have been a constant thread linking revolutionary, educational, and social themes in national opera, and argued for more systematic exploration of these characters' narrative roles to enrich the genre's dramatic tension and social impact.

Xie (2018) focused on *The White-Haired Girl*, providing a detailed analysis of male characters' vocal performance and image shaping. He highlighted how performance techniques—such as the integration of folk music elements with Western opera methods—enhance the portrayal of tragic and heroic male figures. Xie's study underlined the necessity of matching vocal timbre and acting style to character identity, which can offer more authenticity and depth to the audience.

Zhang (2022) explored innovation practices in contemporary Chinese national opera, stressing that traditional male roles need continuous adaptation to remain relevant. His work argued that while the core values embodied by male heroes should be preserved, their dramatic construction must evolve to meet modern aesthetic tastes and social realities. This forward-looking perspective provides an important framework for assessing the sustainability of male character portrayals.

Jin (2022) offered a historical reflection on the development of Chinese national opera, including an in-depth discussion of how male roles have mirrored China's sociopolitical changes. He pointed out that these characters evolved in style, function, and symbolic meaning, helping shape the cultural identity of Chinese national opera throughout its modern history.

Zhu (2021) contributed to the literature by examining male vocal segments in *Mount Yimeng*, with a focus on the aria "Love Forever." He analyzed how Sheng Lin's musical expression

combines personal emotion with a sense of collective mission, demonstrating the power of male roles to convey layered and inspiring messages. Zhu's insights reveal the technical challenges and interpretative choices that define high-level operatic performance.

Conceptual Framework

This study constructs a conceptual framework beginning with the development of Chinese National Opera and its relationship with traditional Chinese opera, focusing on the image, style, and value of male roles. It adopts both macro and micro perspectives, considering socio-cultural and historical influences alongside the roles of performers, educators, and audiences. The framework covers a broad population ranging from professionals to students, with data gathered through interviews and surveys. Temporally, it spans from the May Fourth period to the present, addressing three key phases of operatic evolution. Finally, the framework identifies independent variables—including historical context, artists, scripts, musical elements, and dissemination modes—and dependent variables, namely the characterisation and stylistic features of male roles in Chinese National Opera (see Figure 3).

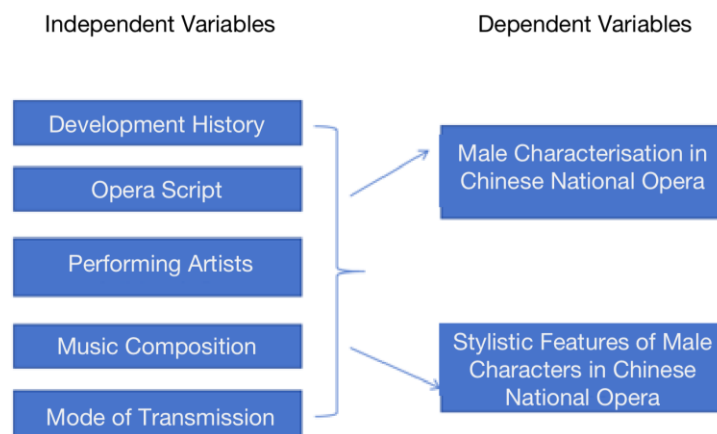


Figure 3 Conceptual Framework

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach to investigate male characterisation in Chinese national opera. It combines qualitative and quantitative techniques across three primary methods:

1. Literature Research Method



This method involves collecting and analyzing existing academic literature to understand key theoretical perspectives and current research trends. The researcher conducted a comprehensive search using keywords such as “Chinese national opera,” “male roles,” and “characterisation” across major databases, including CNKI, Wanfang, and ProQuest. A total of 68 peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and conference papers were selected based on relevance and recency. This review provided the theoretical basis and conceptual foundation for the study, especially in relation to vocal style, narrative function, and cultural symbolism.

2. Case Study Method

Representative operas such as *The White-Haired Girl*, *Jiang Jie*, *Wilderness*, and *Mount Yimeng* were selected as case studies to analyze the shaping of typical male characters. These works were chosen for their historical significance, artistic diversity, and influence on the evolution of national opera. In each case, the study focused on vocal techniques, musical structure, dramatic content, and audience reception. Performance recordings, musical scores, and critical commentaries were reviewed to construct a multi-angle analysis of the artistic formation of male roles.

3. Historical Research Method

This method traces the development of male characters over different historical periods of Chinese national opera. By examining archival materials, original librettos, and published analyses, the study identifies shifts in characterization strategies from the May Fourth Movement to contemporary works. It highlights the transformation of male roles from collectivist revolutionary icons to emotionally nuanced figures, linking them to broader sociopolitical contexts and aesthetic transitions.

4. Supplementary Empirical Data Collection: Surveys and Interviews

To complement the theoretical and case-based analyses, the study conducted a structured survey and semi-structured interviews with a sample of 30 vocal performers and 10 music educators from national opera troupes and conservatories in Beijing and Shanghai. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their professional experience in performing or teaching male roles. The survey gathered data on interpretive strategies, vocal challenges, and perceptions of character symbolism. Interviews further explored personal insights into the evolution of male portrayals and the integration of vocal techniques.

Results

1. The Development of Male Roles in Chinese National Opera

Chinese national opera began evolving after the May Fourth Movement, with *The White-Haired Girl* marking its formal rise. Shifting ideologies and growing appreciation elevated it from



early experiments to national recognition. This section explores male role development through staging, lyrics, and vocal style.

Across decades, national opera adapted to social change, with each era reshaping character portrayal and artistic form. Its script and stylistic variety reflect Chinese cultural identity and creativity.

While adopting Western vocal types like tenor and baritone, it retains national singing traditions. From Sparrow and Child (1920) to *The White-Haired Girl* (1945), the genre peaked, later stagnated, then revived post-reform. Its themes range from revolution to daily life, with vocal timbres conveying age and emotion—baritone roles often expressing maturity and sorrow.

2. Shaping of Typical Male Character Images in Chinese National Opera

The core of opera performance lies in whether the characterisation can truly reproduce the character and whether the actor can have the sense of integrity and innovation.

2.1 Abing in the National Opera *Erquan*

In *Erquan*, Abing's image is shaped by his own music, making him inseparable from the piece. Unlike other characters, his theme is not composed for him—it comes from Abing himself, lending authenticity and depth.

Erquan embodies Abing's spirit, reflecting the blind street musician's essence. Composer Du Ming expands on Abing's original melodies, preserving their emotion and using motifs to trace his musical identity.

The opera reconstructs these melodies to maintain emotional truth, allowing the audience to experience Abing's personality and story through his own themes—revealing both his inner world and artistic brilliance.

2.2 Bailao Yang of the National Opera *The White-Haired Girl*

Bailao Yang is a tragic figure whose voice evolved from tenor to baritone by the 1980s. His mournful tone reflects guilt toward Xi'er and despair in life. The baritone voice, with deep resonance, fits his aging, broken character.

The aria's melody, adapted from folk tunes, captures emotional conflict. Musical phrasing contrasts upward struggle with downward despair, expressing Bailao Yang's helplessness in poverty and cold. Audiences connect through his vocal timbre, driving innovation in baritone use.

His aria blends dramatic vocal movement with restrained stage action. The choice of baritone deepens emotional authenticity and became a turning point for voice classification in national opera, influencing future portrayals of middle-aged roles.

2.3 Shuiyao Zhang in the National Opera *The Canal Ballad*



Shuiyao Zhang is a sinister antagonist. His music features dragged endings and upward inflections to reflect slyness. Recitatives are structured to emphasize his arrogance, using vocal thickness and ethnic articulation to match his persona.

The role blends Chinese folk style with Western bel canto, balancing tone beauty and dramatic flair. The baritone voice effectively embodies his shady and domineering traits, aligning with the character's theatrical design.

Musically, his part develops from declamation to lyrical tension, using shifting time signatures and rhythmic layers to show internal turmoil. As the aria climaxes, dense accompaniment and broken chords convey psychological collapse and villainy.

2.4 Sheng Lin of the National Opera *Mount Yimeng*

Sheng Lin's role captures heroism and emotional depth. When with Haitang, his tone is tender; with villagers, it's confident; facing enemies, it's fierce. This emotional range is portrayed through dynamic musical contrasts.

Themes like 'Wait for Me, My Dear' represent love, while pieces like 'Haitang, Let Him Go' highlight righteousness. In 'Roads of Life, Roads of Death,' Sheng Lin prepares for sacrifice, blending patriotic resolve with dramatic intensity.

The aria 'Love Forever' challenges performers with its difficulty and has become a favorite among tenors. Sheng Lin's music exemplifies dramatic and lyrical integration, making him a modern operatic hero.

3. The Significance of Characterisation in National Operas

Characterisation involves more than music—it integrates song, dance, and stagecraft. Composers build musical personalities using melody, harmony, and rhythm. Performers enhance depth through expressive tone and physicality.

3.1 Artistic Value of Characterisation in National Operas

Stage action follows stylized patterns, blending classical dance steps and operatic gestures. This enhances visual appeal while grounding roles in traditional aesthetics. Audiences absorb emotional narratives through trained perception and musical literacy.

Effective performance requires collaboration between composer, singer, and audience. The result is a complete artistic expression where musical identity and dramatic emotion align, fostering a deeper appreciation for national opera's beauty.

3.2 The Relevance of National Opera Characterisation

National opera developed from Western influences into a distinctly Chinese form. It moved through phases—from education-focused pieces to wartime and revolutionary works—forming a core part of modern Chinese music.



Though its history is short, the national opera faces challenges in musical complexity and performance. Future progress lies in balancing accessibility with artistic depth while preserving its national character.

Supported by state initiatives, revived classics and new operas like The Long March, The Canal Ballad, and Mount Yimeng now enrich university curricula, promoting cultural identity and music education.

Discussion

This study investigates the shaping of male characters in Chinese National Opera through the lens of musical performance, stage design, and cultural context. The findings confirm that male roles have historically embodied both heroic and tragic archetypes, reflecting broader social ideals and collective memories. From the revolutionary themes of early national opera to contemporary reinterpretations, male characters have evolved to capture not only the spirit of their time but also the complexity of human emotion and moral struggle. As Liu (2012) argues, the success of national opera depends on its ability to balance dramatic depth with audience accessibility, which requires careful characterisation and consistent technical innovation.

Furthermore, the discussion reveals that the combination of traditional vocal skills with Western singing techniques has provided male roles with a unique expressive language, sustaining audience engagement across different generations. Wang (2018) supports this perspective, suggesting that the hybridisation of vocal styles has expanded the artistic possibilities of Chinese National Opera, allowing male characters to achieve greater emotional resonance and dramatic authenticity. By integrating these stylistic and cultural elements, national opera continues to strengthen its educational and social functions, preserving cultural heritage while exploring modern artistic possibilities.

Overall, this study highlights the need for continued research on male characterisation, with an emphasis on refining vocal techniques, adapting to new aesthetic preferences, and responding to changing audience demographics. Such efforts will help maintain Chinese National Opera's vitality, ensuring that its portrayal of male roles remains both culturally relevant and artistically compelling in the future.

Recommendation

This research promotes linking theory with practice to study male roles in both historical and modern contexts. It urges stronger educational support for national vocal music to cultivate future talent.





Future studies should explore Chinese National Opera's place in global music and cross-cultural exchange, broadening its international visibility and enhancing cultural confidence.

The findings offer teaching and performance insights. Fieldwork and empirical research are needed to apply theory in practice and ensure the genre's lasting development and creative continuity

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