



Research on the Theoretical Construction of Female Characters in Chinese National Opera from an Academic Perspective

Huixia Yang¹ and Palphol Rodloytuk^{2*}

^{1, 2}Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

¹E-mail: 2279237073@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6032-6937>

^{2*}E-mail: palphol@siu.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2276-5445>

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Chinese national opera is an important carrier of Chinese culture, reflecting the nation's pursuit of innovation while maintaining tradition. Among its artistic elements, female characters have played a crucial role, shaping aesthetic values and cultural narratives over time. This study aims to explore the development, artistic image, and reasons for change in typical female characters in Chinese national opera from an academic perspective.

Materials and Methods: This study used a mixed-methods approach. A purposive sample of 58 opera performers, directors, and educators was selected to complete a structured questionnaire. Representative operas were chosen for case analysis. Data were collected through literature review, historical research, surveys, and performance analysis. The questionnaire was reviewed by experts and demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Results: The findings identify three key peaks in the development of female characters in Chinese national opera: 1920–1957, 1957–1966, and post-1976. During these periods, the artistic images of female characters were enriched, evolving from oppressed and resistant figures to more diverse, emotionally rich, and noble portrayals. These shifts are closely linked to historical events, social changes, and innovations in music composition and stage performance.

Conclusion: The ongoing transformation of female roles in Chinese national opera underscores their centrality to preserving and promoting traditional culture. Their shaping reflects the dynamic interplay between historical context and artistic innovation. Strengthening research on these roles is of great value for enriching opera theory, enhancing cultural confidence, and inspiring future operatic creations that resonate with contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Chinese National Opera; Female Characters; Artistic Image

Introduction

Female characters in the Chinese national opera are one of the first things you will notice when visiting a performance. For example, in Peking Opera (京剧), female roles are defined as



dan (旦), which has many sub-categories, including qingyi (virtuous women), hua dan (lively young women), lao dan (elderly women), and so on. These categories not only provide different archetypes of femininity in the opera but also set and construct clear standards of femininity, which a female role in the opera should (and should not) be (Liu, 2017). By idealizing the female characters' appearance, gesture, costumes, makeup, and voice stylization, these characters represent femininity not just as a form of performance, but also as a cultural code (Liu, 2017).

Chinese women have often been depicted through a Confucian prism of idealized virtue, beauty, obedience, and morality. For example, the qingyi, often the heroine of the opera, is usually portrayed as a beautiful and chaste wife or daughter, who honors her husband or parents-in-law and dutifully obeys the “three obediences” and “four virtues.” By highlighting certain aspects of women's lives and exaggerating them, the national opera turns women into an object of representation that reinforces patriarchal hierarchies (Wichmann-Walczak, 1991). It is, however, worth noting that more comic or subversive characters, such as Hua Dan, also allowed for some degree of social critique and satire of dominant gender norms.

Female characters in the Chinese national opera have also been influenced by various historical, political, and social processes. The late 19th and 20th centuries, particularly the Republican and Maoist periods, saw female characters becoming tools to serve the state's political and ideological goals. Plays and operas often depicted women as revolutionaries, workers, or martyrs. As a result, the scope of female roles expanded beyond the traditional set of archetypes, such as daughter, wife, or concubine, to encompass more revolutionary and even martial figures. While a significant break with tradition, these new roles also built on a symbolic continuity with past eras, reflecting the dynamic character of national opera as a cultural form in China (Li, 2003).

In the 21st century, the female characters of Chinese national opera continue to play an important role in the state's policies of national identity construction and preservation of intangible cultural heritage. While younger generations of viewers and performers might not share older traditions, the symbolic paradigms of dan roles still influence the idea of how to perform femininity in opera (Zhang, 2020). In this way, female characters in Chinese opera can be considered a barometer of social change and an important area of inquiry into the complex dynamics of gender and culture in China.

Chinese national opera, as a comprehensive art form integrating drama, literature, music, and stage performance, occupies a unique position in the history of modern Chinese performing arts. Since the 1920s, Chinese national opera has undergone significant evolution in both its artistic style and thematic content, continuously responding to changes in social, political, and cultural





environments (Li & Meng, 2021). After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the art form entered a period of rapid development, producing many classic works such as *The White-Haired Girl* and *Jiang Jie*, which not only enriched the stage vocabulary of national opera but also established important aesthetic paradigms (Jia, 2022). These operas created representative female characters whose shaping reflected profound historical, cultural, and ideological narratives.

The study of female characters in Chinese national opera is of great significance. As highlighted by Jia (2022), the depiction of female roles has become a crucial avenue for expressing the social transformation and cultural values of different eras. From portraying oppressed women in traditional society to celebrating female revolutionaries in modern contexts, the images of women have gradually shifted to show resilience, independence, and the pursuit of personal freedom. These transformations are not only artistic creations but also mirror the progress of women's status in Chinese society, carrying important educational and cultural functions.

Against this background, a systematic academic analysis of female roles in Chinese national opera can deepen our understanding of how these artistic images emerged, evolved, and continue to influence audiences. It also provides a basis for strengthening cultural confidence and promoting the inheritance of traditional art forms in contemporary society. Therefore, exploring the theoretical construction of female characters in Chinese national opera is a meaningful subject with both academic and practical significance.

Objectives

1. Exploring the development of female roles in Chinese national opera.
2. Analyzing the classic female character portrayal in Chinese national opera.
3. Summarizing reasons for the change in the female role.

Literature review

Recent visual analyses of academic literature reveal a growing body of research on female characters in Chinese national opera. As shown in Figure 1, studies on this topic have generally followed an upward trend since the early 2000s, with a notable peak around 2022 when nearly 22 related papers were published. The focus areas of these studies are diverse, with the majority examining artistic image shaping (19.10%) and specific opera works (18.34%). Representative operas that have attracted scholarly attention include *The White-Haired Girl*, *The Red Guards on Honghu Lake*, and *Jiang Jie* (see Figure 2). These trends reflect increasing academic interest in the evolution, characteristics, and cultural significance of female roles in Chinese national opera.

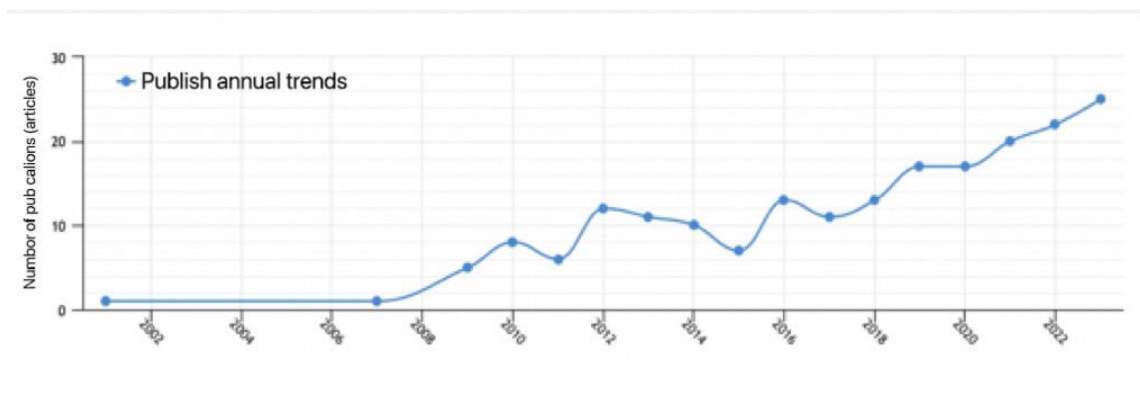


Figure 1 Publish trend

Note: Constructed by the researcher

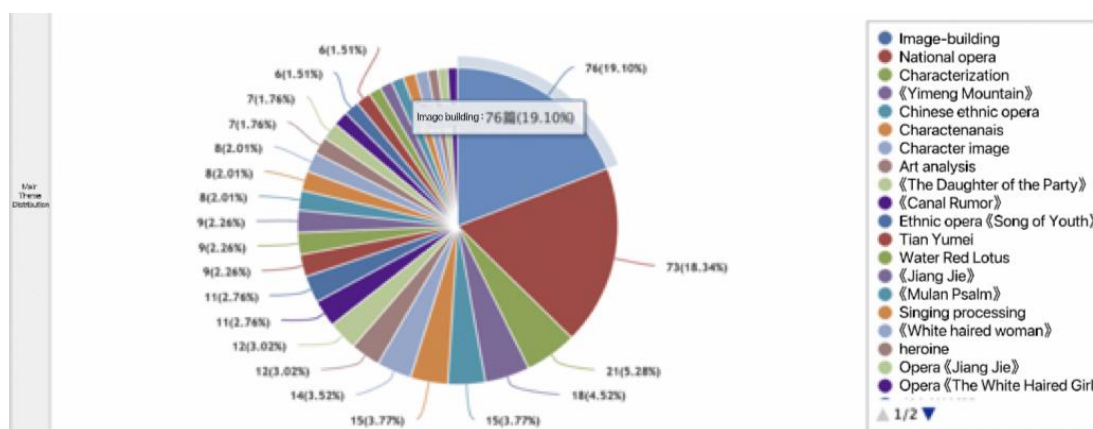


Figure 2 Categorizing

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Yan (2020) analyzed the phenomenon of female-centered narratives in Chinese national opera from a feminist perspective. Her research emphasized how the emergence of female protagonists mirrored broader gender consciousness and highlighted the struggles and aspirations of women across different eras. Yan argued that the focus on women's subjectivity in opera reflects not only artistic needs but also social demands for gender equality, providing a richer interpretive framework for understanding national opera's cultural functions.

Shi (2018) investigated the awakening of female subject consciousness in contemporary Chinese national opera. Through detailed analysis of modern productions, Shi found that female roles have gradually evolved from passive victims to active agents pursuing self-realization and social change. Her study noted that this transformation aligns with contemporary values of empowerment and has brought new vitality and artistic tension to Chinese national opera's performance traditions.

Li and Meng (2021) explored the red cultural qualities embedded in Chinese national opera, with particular attention to how female characters serve as vehicles for conveying revolutionary values. Their research argued that operas such as *Jiang Jie* and *The White-Haired Girl* used female protagonists to symbolize resilience, sacrifice, and the collective revolutionary spirit. The authors further suggested that these artistic portrayals played a vital role in constructing a national identity during key historical periods.

Wang (2014) focused on the portrayal of female images in ethnic opera, offering detailed analyses of character formation in representative works. She examined the interplay between music composition, stage performance, and social context in shaping female roles, emphasizing the balance between traditional artistic elements and contemporary thematic innovations. Her study highlighted how female characters reflect both individual emotional expression and collective cultural identity.

Wang (2018) examined the use of female roles in classic Chinese national opera, focusing on the dramaturgical and musical techniques employed to create emotionally rich and multifaceted female characters. Wang argued that these operas not only showcased women's resilience and nobility but also advanced the artistic maturity of national opera through innovative combinations of Western and Chinese forms. Her work underscored the importance of female characters in the opera's aesthetic and ideological development.

Conceptual Framework

This study builds a conceptual framework focusing on the theoretical construction of female characters in Chinese national opera through three dimensions: the historical context that shaped their evolution, the artistic features that supported their vivid portrayal, and the cultural values they convey. Together, these elements provide an integrated perspective on how female roles have contributed to both the artistic development and cultural heritage of Chinese national opera (Figure 3).

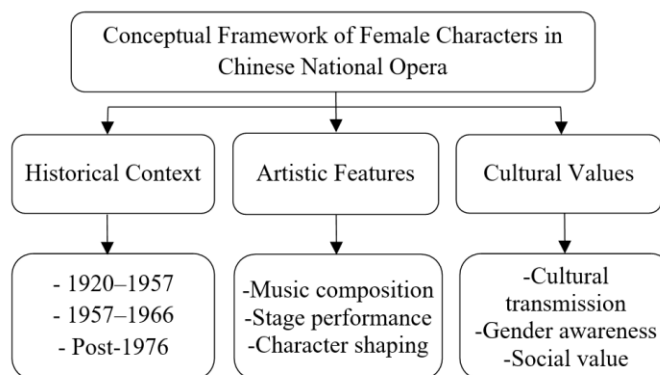


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Note: Constructed by the researcher



Methodology

This study adopts a comprehensive mixed-methods research design to systematically examine the theoretical construction of female characters in Chinese national opera. The research methods include the following components:

1. Literature Research Method

Through extensive literature review, the study collects and synthesizes relevant academic papers, dissertations, and news reports published in recent decades. Using keywords such as “*Chinese national opera*”, “*female characters*”, and “*artistic image*”, the researcher retrieved a wide range of sources to build a solid theoretical foundation. This process helps clarify the current academic landscape, identify research gaps, and develop a clearer analytical framework.

2. Historical Research Method

Historical research is employed to trace the development trajectory of Chinese national opera and its female characters. By examining historical documents, musical archives, performance recordings, and critical reviews, the study reconstructs how female roles evolved across three significant periods (1920–1957, 1957–1966, and post-1976). This method provides a temporal context for understanding the shaping and transformation of these roles over time.

3. Case Analysis Method

To explore specific artistic representations in greater depth, the study conducts case analyses of representative operas, including *The White-Haired Girl*, *Jiang Jie*, and *Wilderness*. Each case is examined in terms of character development, musical composition, performance style, and audience reception. This micro-level analysis complements the broader historical research by revealing how theoretical and artistic considerations translate into practical stage works.

4. Questionnaire Survey Method

In order to supplement the above methods with audience and practitioner perspectives, a small-scale questionnaire survey was distributed to 58 participants, including opera performers, directors, and music educators. The sampling was purposive to ensure representation across roles and experiences. The questionnaire was developed through expert consultation and tested for reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86. Data from this survey offered additional insights into practical experiences and audience expectations, helping to validate and enrich the theoretical framework.

By integrating these four approaches, the study aims to comprehensively analyze the historical, artistic, and cultural dimensions of female characters in Chinese national opera, thus supporting a more robust academic understanding of their theoretical construction.

Results

1. Three High Points of Female Character Development in Chinese Opera

Since its birth in 1920, Chinese national opera has seen three development peaks: 1920-1957, 1957-1966, and after 1976.

1.1 The First Climax and *The White-Haired Girl*

"The White-Haired Girl" marked the beginning of Chinese opera with distinctive characteristics. Xi'er's image represents the oppressed women in the old society and highlights the class struggle contradiction of the time. Her character evolves through four stages: naive peasant girl, bitter and hateful "White Immortal Girl," resilient and unyielding resistor, and reborn "Xi'er."

1.2 The Second Climax and *Jiang Jie*

"Jiang Jie," adapted from the novel "Red Rock," became a symbol of the second wave of Chinese opera development. Jiang Jie's image combines revolutionary firmness with female delicacy. She is portrayed as a calm, resolute underground party member; a fearless revolutionary leader; and a heroic woman who faces death with equanimity.

1.3 The Third Climax and *Wilderness*

More than 20 years after Jiang Jie, Chinese opera experienced a downturn but recovered post - Cultural Revolution under the reform and opening - up policy. New plays like *Starlight* and *Wilderness* emerged, presenting diverse styles. *Wilderness*, based on Yu Cao's work and adapted by Wan Fang and Xiang Jin, freed the female image from the revolutionary hero mold. It tells the story of Hu Qiu's escape and revenge, and his relationship with Jinzi, who symbolizes the longing for love and freedom. The opera's success was a result of its innovative combination of national and Western techniques, marking the third climax in Chinese opera development.

2. Case Study of Classical Female Characterisation in Chinese National Opera

This paper explores the portrayal of female characters in Chinese national opera through specific works and case analysis, focusing on music creation and performance.

2.1 *The White-Haired Girl* -- "Xi'er."

"The White-Haired Girl" is a seminal Chinese national opera. Xi'er, the protagonist, undergoes significant character development through four stages: naive peasant girl, bitter and hateful "White Immortal Girl," resilient and unyielding resister, and finally, a reborn figure.

Xi'er is depicted as a young, innocent girl who grows up in a poor rural environment. She is characterized by her simplicity, hard work, and strong bond with her father. Her early life, filled with hardship, is still hopeful, as seen in her songs like "Tie the Red Headband," which reflect her playful and tender side. After her father's death and her subsequent suffering at the hands of Huang Shiren, Xi'er's character becomes bitter and vengeful. Her songs, like the 56th and 57th



cantos, express deep hatred and resilience, highlighting her transformation from a naive girl to a wronged and angry spirit. Xi'er's character evolves further into a strong, rebellious figure. She confronts her oppressors with defiance, showing her unwillingness to endure their cruelty any longer. This stage is marked by her vocal and physical resistance, symbolizing her fight against injustice. The final stage sees Xi'er's rebirth with the help of the Eighth Route Army. Her character is revitalized, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. The chorus in Act 5 highlights her redemption and the dawn of a new life.

2.2 *The Red Guards on Honghu Lake* --“Ying Han.”

In *The Red Guards on Honghu Lake*, Ying Han is a multifaceted character, embodying the spirit of a revolutionary. Her portrayal includes three distinct facets: a simple fisherwoman, a wise and courageous woman warrior, and a heroic revolutionary.

Ying Han is initially depicted as a native girl from Honghu Lake, embodying the simplicity and optimism of her locale. Her background is highlighted through songs like "The Water of Honghu Lake". Her everyday interactions with villagers and Red Guard members show her kindness and deep connection to her community. As the plot develops, Ying Han emerges as a leader with a strong revolutionary consciousness. She demonstrates wisdom and courage in strategic decisions, such as persuading her comrades to retreat and explaining complex instructions in simple terms. Her leadership skills and patience with her team highlight her role as a guiding force.

Ying Han's heroic traits are fully realized when she takes extreme measures to save her comrades, even at the risk of her own life. Her resilience and unwavering commitment to the revolution, despite severe torture and coercion, make her a powerful symbol of revolutionary spirit.

2.3 *Jiang Jie* -- “Jiang Jie.”

Jiang Jie is a significant Chinese opera from the 1960s and the early reform and opening-up period. It combines Chinese musical elements with European opera creation techniques. The composer uses theme music, backing vocals, and chorus to create characters like Xueqin Jiang and Yangzhai Shen. Jiang Jie is the core character, whose musical portrayal has three aspects: loose plate type (open and emotional), slow plate (calm and lyrical), and fast plate (bold and strong). These elements define her personality, and all her arias derive from these musical factors.

Firstly, Jiang Jie is depicted as a calm and resolute underground party member. In the first scene, she criticizes Zhigao Fu's suspicious behavior, showing her experience and composure. When she sees her husband's head displayed publicly, she struggles between grief and duty but ultimately turns her sorrow into strength, demonstrating her rationality and inner strength. Secondly, she is portrayed as a fearless revolutionary leader. Jiang Jie leads guerrilla fights with the old woman with two guns, causing headaches for the Kuomintang. When secret agents come



to entrap her due to Zhigao Fu's defection, she decisively covers for her comrades, showing her fearlessness and self-sacrifice. Thirdly, Jiang Jie is a heroic woman who faces death bravely. After imprisonment and torture, she remains unshaken. In prison, she and her comrades embroider the red flag to inspire perseverance. Before execution, she calmly says goodbye to her comrades, showing unwavering revolutionary will and heroism. These aspects highlight her sublime revolutionary image.

3. Reasons for the Change in the Female Role in Chinese National Opera

After outlining the evolution of the image of women in Chinese opera, we naturally ask what caused this evolution. This question can be answered from two aspects: firstly, due to the historical background; The second reason is, the updating of artistic techniques.

Music composition began with children's song and dance dramas and gradually integrated Chinese aesthetics and ethnic materials. For example, *The White-Haired Girl* drew on Hebei folk songs and Hebei Bangzi, innovatively shaping character personalities and showcasing the unique style of ethnic opera. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the focus of opera creation shifted to urban areas with diverse themes, and female characters became prominent due to women's liberation, with music composition blending local folk songs and Western techniques. Following the reform and opening up, opera themes expanded even further, with innovation in music and structure, integrating with Western opera trends to achieve a "fusion of Chinese and Western elements." (Li & Meng, 2021)

In terms of vocal techniques and singing styles, from folk singing to opera singing, and then to the introduction of bel canto, Chinese opera has developed a diverse range of styles. Folk singing is characterized by its natural and amiable nature, while opera singing combines Western and ethnic elements to create a new style. Works such as "Sister Jiang" integrate the essence of traditional opera and Western opera, enhancing the artistic level of ethnic opera. The introduction of bel canto, as practiced in *The Wilderness*, has strengthened the artistic appeal of opera.

Regarding stage performance and artistic treatment, from "expressive singing" to "drama with singing", and then to the birth of new opera, Chinese opera has gradually formed a unique performance form. New opera combines realistic and expressive styles, innovating the connection between plot and character image, as successfully practiced in *The White-Haired Girl*. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the operatic performance form's tendency towards operatization was adjusted, returning to the Western opera form, achieving "using the foreign for the domestic, and combining the foreign with the local." After the reform and opening up, opera performance forms have become more diverse, including light opera and musicals, enriching the expressiveness of opera art.





Discussion

This study set out to investigate the theoretical construction of female characters in Chinese national opera through a multi-dimensional framework, examining their historical evolution, artistic representation, and cultural value. The findings effectively support the initial assumptions outlined in the conceptual framework, namely that female characters have undergone significant transformation due to historical, artistic, and socio-cultural factors.

First, the research confirmed the assumption that female characters in national opera evolved through three distinct stages, each corresponding to major historical and ideological shifts. This aligns with the theoretical work of Yan (2020), who argued that national opera reflects gender ideologies of specific eras. For instance, the transformation of Xi'er in *The White-Haired Girl* from a victim to a liberated figure confirms both Yan's feminist perspective and the study's own hypothesis regarding opera as a vehicle for promoting female subjectivity. Similarly, Jiang Jie's portrayal supports Shi's (2018) assertion that opera has moved from representing passive heroines to showcasing empowered and ideologically sophisticated female figures.

Second, from the perspective of artistic construction, the research confirms that musical innovation played a crucial role in shaping nuanced female portrayals. The incorporation of folk elements and Western opera techniques, as discussed in Li and Meng's (2021) work on red culture and revolution-themed operas, resonates with the case studies in this research. For example, the opera *Wilderness* demonstrates how integrating bel canto techniques enhanced the expressive power of the female lead Jinzi, offering a new model of artistic diversity and emotional realism. These findings affirm the conceptual claim that aesthetic shifts mirror broader changes in artistic ideology and practice.

Third, in contrast to earlier research that treated female characters as symbols of political or collective struggle, this study highlights a growing trend toward emotional depth and individual agency. The portrayal of Ying Han in *The Red Guards on Honghu Lake*, for example, reflects both traditional revolutionary spirit and modern psychological realism. This duality is less emphasized in previous works, indicating that the current study offers a novel contribution by blending macro-level historical analysis with micro-level character and performance insights.

Lastly, the questionnaire results add empirical support to the theoretical assumptions, revealing that contemporary practitioners and audiences value complexity and diversity in female roles. This reinforces the claim that audience aesthetics have evolved, prompting a rethinking of how female characters are written and performed in modern national opera. The perspectives gathered from directors, singers, and educators suggest that new works must strike a balance between traditional ideals and modern narratives of empowerment—a topic underexplored in past literature.





In summary, the findings not only meet the initial assumptions of the research but also extend the discussion by introducing new perspectives on female character construction in national opera. Through a combination of case studies, theoretical analysis, and field data, the research presents a comprehensive and academically grounded debate on the role of women in the evolution of this vital art form.

Conclusion

Scholars should strive for understanding, and practitioners should seek to overcome difficulties. Given the rapid changes in the world today, it is even more essential for artists to approach theoretical creation and practical output with a more rigorous attitude, gaining true knowledge through practice. Backed by the sinicization of Marxism and the great ideals of socialism, they should continue to embrace the Chinese Dream, uphold integrity while innovating, and strive with sincerity. It is believed that with the ongoing promotion of the national opera inheritance project, and under the nurturing of favorable policies, the cause of Chinese National Opera will surely flourish and grow vigorously. On the centenary of Chinese National Opera, operatic creation will continue to adhere to a people-centered approach and core values of quality, and the output of works in the opera community will continue to reflect a new image of China and the grandeur of a great nation.

Overall, the development of Chinese National Opera has gone through many periods, each with its own characteristics, and the shaping of female roles has always been very important in every period. In character shaping, they may have arduous fates but do not succumb to destiny; they resist tenaciously or live in a beautiful era, striving and pursuing their lives and love, or dedicating themselves to the revival of the nation and country amidst war. This has shaped many rich, emotionally full, and noble female artistic images, which are important subjects for the development of academic research and are also significant accumulations for the inheritance of Chinese National Opera. Therefore, whether in career pursuits or in the inheritance of artistic values, relevant practitioners should continue to make significant efforts in exploration and excavation, thereby providing more theoretical foundations for operatic performance and research in the new era.

Recommendation

On the theoretical exploration front, we need to further deepen the excavation of the uniqueness and cultural value of female roles in Chinese national opera, revealing their significant role in artistic and cultural heritage. At the same time, the government and relevant departments





should introduce more supportive policies to encourage original works, promote the inheritance and development of national opera, and provide more platforms and opportunities for its display.

In terms of practical application, future research can further expand to cross-cultural comparisons of female roles in national opera, discussing their dissemination and impact in the context of globalization, as well as their integration and innovation with other art forms. Moreover, the findings of this research can be widely applied to opera teaching in universities, enriching the teaching content, improving the quality of education, and laying a solid foundation for the cultivation of more outstanding opera talents. Additionally, for opera performance, this study also provides valuable guidance for character portrayal, suggesting that actors focus on the combination of depth and breadth in their performances to fully display the unique charm and artistic value of national opera.

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