

## **The Development of Chinese Opera in the 20th Century: Take „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards of Honghu” as Examples**

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**Abstract:** *The development of Chinese opera in the 20th century profoundly reflects the revolutionary transformation of Chinese society from a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society to a socialist society with Chinese characteristics, embodying modernistic, national, and global artistic appeal. „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” are classic operas that emerged during this process. This paper focuses on the history of Chinese opera in the 20th century. Previous research in both Chinese and English academic circles either lacked the necessary depth due to researchers' lack of understanding of politics and history or lacked professional depth due to their unfamiliarity with music. Using literature review and case analysis methods, this paper traces the development of Chinese opera in the 20th century, examining aspects such as musical composition, dramatic structure, and performance forms. It argues that Chinese opera has achieved a fusion of Chinese excellent traditional music and Western modern opera techniques artistically, and its themes deeply reflect the revolutionary journey of the Communist Party of China leading the Chinese people toward independence, freedom, democracy, and national rejuvenation. This has accumulated rich creative experience for the future development of Chinese opera, provided valuable references for the development of operas in other countries, and offered strong spiritual impetus for contemporary China's efforts to build a world-class socialist modernized power.*

**Keywords:** *20th century; Chinese opera; modernity; nationality; worldliness;*

### **Introduction**

The development of Chinese opera in the 20th century was profoundly influenced by its historical context. At the beginning of the 20th century, China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, facing deep national crises, with the Chinese nation yearning for independence, liberation, and rejuvenation. During this period, Western opera provided significant inspiration for the development of Chinese opera. In the process of the Chinese Communist Party leading the people to overthrow the „three mountains” of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism, Chinese opera served as a powerful tool to mobilize the masses. This history also provided strong impetus for the development of Chinese opera. After the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, opera became an important means of promoting the party's policies and guidelines. Artists used opera to showcase the Chinese people's spirit and great achievements in overcoming poverty and backwardness. By the end of 1978, when China began its reform and opening-up policy, opera creation placed greater emphasis on the breadth of themes, diversity of artistic forms, and innovation in creative techniques, leading to a significant enhancement in artistic expression. In the 20th century, „The White-Haired Girl” and

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„The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” became representative works of Chinese opera, earning widespread acclaim on the world stage.

## 1. Research purpose, research significance and review of previous studies

In terms of research purpose, this paper is committed to studying the development history of Chinese opera in the 20th century, analyzing its characteristics in the creative background, theme, music style, dramatic structure and performance form, revealing its status and role in the development history of Chinese opera, and trying to summarize its creative experience for future opera creation.

In terms of research significance, studying the development of Chinese opera in the 20th century not only holds important theoretical value but will also have a profound impact on future Chinese opera creation practices. By examining representative works such as „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake”, we can uncover the trajectory of Chinese opera’s development and its unique patterns in music, performance, and other fields.

Regarding the research achievements of Chinese and British academic circles on this topic, early studies mostly focused on the localization process of Western opera after its introduction to China and its impact. In recent years, scholars have begun to pay attention to the deep connections between opera and various aspects of Chinese society<sup>2</sup>. Despite the richness of existing research, current studies still have some shortcomings: Researchers may lack academic rigor, political depth and historical depth due to a lack of understanding of politics and history,<sup>3</sup> or may lack in-depth analysis from a musicological perspective due to a lack of knowledge of music<sup>4</sup>. Given this situation, this paper will use „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” as case studies to explore the historical development, artistic characteristics, and contemporary value of Chinese opera in the 20th century, aiming to provide valuable references and insights for the future development of Chinese opera.

### 1.1. Research Methods

This paper will employ the literature review method and case analysis method. The literature review method will be used to comprehensively trace the historical development, creative characteristics, artistic achievements, and social impact of Chinese opera in the 20th century by analyzing relevant literature. The case analysis method will be used to reveal the creation background, artistic features, and historical contributions of classic operas „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake”.

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<sup>2</sup> Rong Jiang & Nur Izzati Jamalludin. 2023. „Modern Chinese Opera in the formative years: Extrapolation of music and its socio-cultural development”. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities* 4(4): 8-21. Retrieved May 22, 2025, from <https://www.royallitglobal.com/advanced-humanities/article/view/1313/628>.

<sup>3</sup> Qing Zhang. 2018. „The Development Road of Chinese National Opera”. 458-460. Retrieved May 22, 2025, from [https://webofproceedings.org/proceedings\\_series/ESSP/EMCS%202018/EMCS15110.pdf](https://webofproceedings.org/proceedings_series/ESSP/EMCS%202018/EMCS15110.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Hu Xiaojie. 2024. „Tradition and Modernity of Chinese Opera Performance in the 20th Century”. *KNOWLEDGE - International Journal*, 62(5): pp. 625–630. Retrieved May 22, 2025, from <https://ojs.ikm.mk/index.php/kij/article/view/6641>.

## **2. The development of Chinese opera in the 20th century**

### **2.1 Early exploratory phase (from early 20th century to 1949)**

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western opera began to enter China. With its rigorous structure, beautiful melodies, rich harmonies, and splendid stage designs, it provided valuable references for the birth and development of Chinese opera. Among these, Western opera emphasized the construction of dramatic conflicts and plot design, offering a model for Chinese opera. Their ingenious stage designs and exquisite scenic arrangements also set examples for Chinese opera. During this period, the exploration of Chinese opera mainly focused on music composition, dramatic structure, subject selection, and performance forms. In the field of music composition, some composers attempted to blend Western operatic musical forms with Chinese excellent traditional musical elements, creating a refreshing stage effect for Chinese audiences. In terms of dramatic structure, Chinese opera adopted Western models such as acts and scenes while retaining the performance characteristics of traditional Chinese theater. Regarding subject selection, Chinese opera paid attention to real life and social contradictions. In performance form, Chinese opera tried to combine Western operatic techniques with the integrated and stylized performances of traditional Chinese theater, thus catering to the tastes of a wide audience in China.

### **2.2 The prosperity and development of opera in the People's Republic of China after its founding (from 1949 to the end of the 20th century)**

The Communist Party of China and the Chinese government have created a favorable environment for opera creation, performance, and market development, leading to a proliferation of excellent operas on stage. As the ruling party in a poor and backward agricultural country, after establishing the People's Republic of China known as „New China”, the Communist Party of China, from a political perspective, regarded opera creation as an important tool for promoting revolutionary spirit, mobilizing the working masses, and advancing modernization to surpass developed countries and become a world-class power. The government has significantly increased funding and talent investment in opera creation, encouraging opera artists to serve the majority of the working masses, observe and learn from real life, stimulate inspiration, and create masterpieces. The government also places great emphasis on the cultivation of opera talent, widely establishing opera performance programs and troupes, nurturing a batch of performers with high opera literacy. With the continuous optimization of the opera creation environment and the socialist cultural market environment, new opera masterpieces continue to emerge and spread to vast regions, including rural areas, and even to the world stage. Among these, classic operas such as „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” not only possess strong modernity but also profoundly reflect the revolutionary changes and historical progress of Chinese society.

### **2.3 Representative opera composers and major themes**

In the process of the development of Chinese opera, the older generation of composers such as Ma Ke, Zhang Jing'an, and Ouyang Qianshu were committed to transform Western

opera into Chinese and contemporary by combining excellent traditional Chinese theatrical culture to it. Their representative works, „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake”, skillfully blend Western operatic techniques with elements of Chinese national music. In terms of subject matter, 20th-century Chinese opera is rich and diverse, not limited to realistic themes reflecting revolutionary struggles and construction achievements. It also includes historical stories and folk legends, as well as local themes that showcase ethnic customs and regional characteristics, such as „Liu Sanjie”. Among these, realistic themes hold a significant place, imbued with a strong sense of the times and practical significance.

### **3. The creative characteristics and historical contributions of „The White-Haired Girl”**

#### **3.1 Background and theme of creation**

In 1942, Mao Tse-tung explicitly proposed that literature and art should serve the people of labor<sup>5</sup>, providing a theoretical basis for the creation of „The White-Haired Girl”. Compared to areas controlled by the Kuomintang reactionaries and fascist Japan, the clean and enlightened governance and social progress in the Communist liberated areas provided a relatively stable political environment and necessary fertile ground for literary and artistic creation. The vibrant development of cultural groups in the liberated areas and their experiences of contrasting old and new societies laid a solid foundation for the birth of the opera „The White-Haired Girl”. The main themes of „The White-Haired Girl” focus on revealing the social roots of the tragic fate of peasants in the old society and praising the revolutionary spirit of peasants. Through the tragic experiences of characters like Yang Bailao and his daughter, Xi’er, the work vividly portrays the cruel exploitation and oppression of peasants by the feudal landlord class. At the same time, it also highlights the significance of peasant revolution for China’s liberation through the resistance of characters like Dachun against landlords and the rescue of Xi’er under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

#### **3.2 Characteristics of music creation**

##### *3.2.1 The combination of Chinese and Western music in composition and orchestration*

On the basis of inheriting the excellent traditional music culture of the Chinese nation, composers have further enhanced the stage performance of works by employing Western modern compositional techniques. For example, the musical creation of „The White-Haired Girl” is renowned for its skillful use of ethnic musical elements. In terms of melody composition, composers extensively draw on the characteristics of Chinese folk music. For instance, the melody of „The North Wind Blows” originates from the Hebei folk song „Little Cabbage”, which portrays the hardships of common people. It retains the sorrowful flavor of traditional folk songs while appropriately enhancing the effect of opera music. In harmonic treatment, the harmony in the aria „The North Wind Blows” adopts the traditional five-tone scale of China, creating a harmonious sound that brings tears to the eyes and suits the taste of Chinese audience.

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<sup>5</sup> Mao Tse-tung. 1942. Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, pp. 1-48. Retrieved May 22, 2025 from <https://dai.mun.ca/PDFs/radical/TalksattheYenanForumonArtandLiterature.pdf>.

The selection of instruments is also a highlight of the musical creation of „The White-Haired Girl”. The use of traditional Chinese national instruments such as the Erhu, Bamboo flute, and Pipa not only enriches the musical means of the opera but also showcases the national style. At the same time, „The North Wind Blows” adopts the two-part structure of Western opera, maintaining the simplicity and briskness of folk songs while adding the dramatic elements required by opera.



Example 1: Hebei folk song „Little Cabbage”



Example 2: The first act of the opera „The White-Haired Girl” in which Xi'er sings „The North Wind Blows”

### 3.2.2 Innovation in performance form

Composers have pioneered a unique singing style by skillfully combining ethnic music elements with Western opera techniques. The grand choral sections and emotionally nuanced solos vividly portray the characters’ personalities, psychological states, and emotional changes as the plot unfolds. The extensive incorporation of Chinese folk singing styles such as Erhuang, Xipi, and Anti-Erhuang, along with various vocal techniques from Western opera like duets, choruses, and rounds, further enhance the musical expressiveness. „The White-Haired Girl” ingeniously integrates traditional Chinese opera performance methods like singing, recitation, acting, and martial arts with the realistic style of spoken drama, making the opera’s stage presentation more layered and compelling.

### **3.3 Construction of dramatic conflict**

„The White-Haired Girl” showcases unique artistic charm in the construction of dramatic conflicts. In the play, old farmer Yang Bailao falls into the trap of high-interest loans set by landlord Huang Shiren, forcing him to commit suicide by poisoning himself. His daughter Xi'er was originally in love with Dachun but was first taken by Huang Shiren and later fled into the mountains. It wasn't until the Chinese Communist Party led the peasants to overthrow the landlord's rule in the countryside that Xi'er finally gained her freedom. By then, she no longer looked like a young girl but had turned gray-haired. In this opera, due to his cowardice, Yang Bailao chooses to leave home before the New Year to avoid the landlord's debt collection. On New Year's Eve, when he secretly returns home, the only New Year gift he can bring for his daughter is a two-foot red hair band. Even such a meager gift brings great joy to her. It not only highlights the greed and cruelty of the landlord class but also reveals through Yang Bailao's forced suicide that the peasant class has no other choice but to resist, thus leading the dramatic conflict to its climax.

### **3.4 Historical Contributions and Influence**

„The White-Haired Girl” as a classic work of Chinese opera, has enjoyed enduring popularity on the world opera stage, becoming an important model for innovation in opera performance. It profoundly reveals the truth that „only what is national can be universal”. The opera successfully integrates ethnic musical elements with modern opera techniques, accumulating valuable experience for subsequent operatic creations. In terms of artistic expression, „The White-Haired Girl” achieves a fusion and innovation of various performance methods from China and the West, breaking through the limitations of Western opera's over-reliance on singing and stage design, thus laying the foundation for new developments in Chinese national opera.

## **4. Artistic achievements and contemporary value of Honghu Red Guard**

### **4.1 Background and story source of creation**

In the 1950s, the newly established People's Republic of China faced the threat of war from both internal and external enemies, economic blockades, and sabotage of espionage. It was experiencing severe economic difficulties and also grappling with the conflict between old and new cultures on a spiritual level. Against this social backdrop, inheriting and promoting the spirit of struggle from the revolutionary war era to provide spiritual sustenance for the working masses, thereby ensuring the survival of the new China, is a challenge that advanced cultural workers, especially opera creators, must undertake. Only by meeting this challenge can China have the qualifications to envision and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In such a social context, drawing spiritual resources from revolutionary history became a timely necessity. Therefore, „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” was born and became an operatic masterpiece that profoundly reflects the spirit of the times. The story is based on the armed revolutionary struggle led by the Communist Party of China in 1930, primarily involving peasants against the reactionary forces of the Kuomintang.

## 4.2 The style of music design combining Chinese and Western styles

In the musical composition of „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake”, the composer extensively draws on the characteristics of Hubei folk music in melody design, making the melodies rich in local flavor while also reflecting a distinct contemporary spirit. For example, the use of pentatonic scales and the combination of interval leaps and steps. In terms of rhythm and meter, the opera also borrows from the melodic style of the Hubei folk song „Xiang River Ballad”. For instance, the rhythm in the opera excerpt „Honghu Waters, Surging Waves” combines the free and lively nature of Hubei folk music with the power and passion of revolutionary songs. In shaping musical images, the traits and fates of the characters in the play are vividly portrayed through music. For example, the powerful and stirring melody highlights the heroine Han Ying’s brave and resolute personality, while the gentle melody and delicate rhythm convey the qualities of the female team member Qiu Ju: gentle, virtuous, yet tenacious. Additionally, the aria „Honghu Waters, Surging Waves” adopts the three-part structure typical of Western opera, using the development and variation of the music to vividly depict the emotional fluctuations within the characters.



Example 3: „Honghu Waters, Surging Waves” sung by Han Ying and Qiu Ju



Example 4: „Xiang River Ballad”, a folk song of Hubei Province

### 4.3 Stage presentation and performance style

#### 4.3.1 Stage art design

The stage design of „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” showcases the unique charm of revolutionary-themed operas. First, it captures elements such as the lake surface and reed beds to recreate the scenery of Honghu, skillfully creating a tranquil and fresh atmosphere on stage. Second, dynamic changes like the rising and setting sun, wind, and rain in the background reflect the time and climate characteristics of the story, enhancing the dramatic tension. Third, in terms of detail, the stage sets use props like straw shoes and fishing nets to realistically recreate life scenes from the revolutionary era. Fourth, during battle scenes, smoke and lighting make the audience feel as if they are on the battlefield, thus deeply experiencing the cruelty and hardships of war.

#### 4.3.2 Characteristics of performance style

The performance style of „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” is deeply influenced by folk arts such as Chu Opera and Han Opera of Hubei, showcasing a strong local flavor. The actors use the Hubei dialect in their singing, making the music more authentic and relatable, bridging the gap with Hubei audiences. They employ a variety of performance techniques to successfully portray the characters’ personalities, such as Han Ying’s intelligence and bravery, Liu Chuang’s straightforwardness, and Yu Chengwan’s cunning and deceitfulness, all vividly brought to life. Additionally, the play emphasizes the close integration of music and dance, incorporating numerous elements of Hubei folk dances, like Tea-Picking Dance and Flower Drum Lantern, enhancing its appeal.



## 5. Conclusions

In summary, the conclusions and insights drawn from the development history of Chinese opera in the 20th century are: to develop future operas, it is essential to draw on a wide range of artistic techniques, achieving a synthesis of diverse elements, and to reflect modernity, nationality, and universality in artistic standards. As classic works of Chinese national opera in the 20th century, „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” vividly demonstrate the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional Chinese music culture. They tap into folk music resources, integrating traditional art forms such as folk songs, operas, and storytelling into opera music composition, showcasing distinct national characteristics. Moreover, both „The White-Haired Girl” and „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” were born during the early days of the People’s Republic of China, with themes centered around political revolution, economic revolution, social revolution, and cultural revolution. Through artistic expression, they highlight the necessity and urgency of revolution for the broadest masses of laborers in Chinese society. Due to its geographical advantages, humans living on Chinese soil entered the agricultural age about 12,000 years ago. The long-term agrarian production and lifestyle have cultivated a national character that values land and the fruits of labor and is willing to sacrifice lives to resist foreign invaders. For this reason, in modern Chinese history, imperialist forces could only collude with the feudal landlord class and bureaucratic bourgeoisie to jointly suppress the Chinese revolution. History has provided many opportunities for various classes to unite the Chinese people to overthrow these reactionary forces, but all failed. Only the Chinese Communists, represented by Mao Tse-tung, met this challenge, bringing the possibility and reality of breaking free from shackles, achieving freedom, and rejuvenation to China. From 1949 to the mid-21st century, in the journey from being one of the world’s most backward to becoming one of the most advanced, China embodies modernity and reality. In the process of engaging with people around the world, discussing, building, and sharing a community with a shared future for mankind, China represents a new form of global human civilization. For example, the both classic operas share the theme of liberation, particularly in „The Red Guards on Honghu Lake”, where there is a segment titled „Liberation for All the Oppressed”. This clearly illustrates that these two classic operas are reflections of these two journeys. It can be anticipated that as China advances hand in hand with the rest of the world, Chinese opera, which portrays this great process, will also take on grand characteristics.

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