

The Musical Construction of Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Chinese Opera: A Case Study of *Lanhuahua*

Yuqi Wang

Hangzhou Lingting Art Technology Co., Ltd., Hangzhou, China

Abstract: *As one of the representative works of contemporary Chinese opera, Lanhuahua creatively reconstructs the character of Lanhuahua from traditional folk narratives, building upon the cultural resources of Northern Shaanxi folk songs. Existing research has largely focused on the work's musical composition, stage presentation and vocal performance practices, whilst discussions regarding the construction of female subjectivity and its cultural implications have been relatively scarce. Drawing upon gender studies theory and methods of musical drama analysis, this paper explores how the opera Lanhuahua utilises the synergy between dramatic narrative and musical expression to shape a female character imbued with modern subjectivity, thereby offering a fresh perspective for research into female characters in opera.*

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese opera; *Lanhuahua*; Female characters; Musical characterisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the creation of original Chinese operas has entered a phase of rapid development, with a large number of works combining national characteristics with the spirit of the times being produced in succession. As an original opera produced by the National Centre for the Performing Arts over a period of six years, *Lanhuahua* has attracted widespread attention from both academia and audiences since its premiere in 2017; in February 2026, the opera's third run once again won critical acclaim through the power of musical theatre. Based on the classic folk song '*Lanhuahua*' from northern Shaanxi, the opera reinterprets this widely known love story using modern creative techniques, whilst retaining the original folk narrative and regional cultural characteristics.

Existing research indicates that academic interest in *Lanhuahua* has primarily focused on musical composition, expressions of regional culture, dramatic structure, and vocal performance practices. For instance, Xia Yanzhou analyses how the work constructs its overall musical structure by drawing on Northern Shaanxi folk song materials such as *Lanhuahua*, *Jiaofu Diao** and *Huanghe Chuanfu Qu*, from the perspectives of musical thematic design and the use of folk melodies; Bai Xiaowei, Yu Yunjing and others have examined, from the perspective of character development, *Lanhuahua*'s bold and passionate nature, her loyalty to love, and her tragic fate; whilst You Weizhi has explored the lead actress's interpretation of the role from the standpoint of stage performance. However, there remains a lack of discussion regarding how the opera *Lanhuahua* jointly constructs female subjectivity through dramatic narrative and musical expression, as well as the contemporary cultural value inherent in the shaping of this character. In fact, compared to the *Lan Huahua* of traditional folk songs, the opera's *Lan Huahua* is no longer merely a tragic woman at the mercy of fate, but has been endowed with a more distinct sense of agency and personal strength. The author contends that the value of the opera *Lan Huahua* lies not only in its stage reimagining of a classic folk tale, but also in its rewriting, through the vocabulary of modern opera, of the relationships between women and love, women and society, and women and fate.

Consequently, this paper aims to explore, from the perspective of female subjectivity and through the dual dimensions of dramatic narrative and musical expression, how the opera *Lanhuahua* achieves a modern transformation from its folk song prototype into an operatic character. It analyses the mechanisms underlying the emergence of female subjectivity within the work and its musical representation, whilst further examining the insights and significance of this character for the development of female representation in contemporary Chinese opera.

2. FROM FOLK SONG TO OPERA: THE MODERN RECONSTRUCTION OF *LANHUAHUA*

In recent years, the study of female characters has gradually become a key topic in Chinese opera research. From works such as *Yimeng Mountain* and *The Ballad of the Canal to Li Qingzhao* and *Qingyi*, female roles have progressively shifted from symbolic presences within revolutionary narratives to artistic figures possessing independent personalities and a sense of agency. The opera *Lanhuahua* is also a masterpiece that cannot be overlooked in terms of its portrayal of female characters.

2.1 The Cultural Prototype of the Folk Song *Lanhuahua*

Lanhuahua is one of the most representative folk songs circulating in the Northern Shaanxi region; together with *Sanli Pu* and *Wu Ge Fang Yang*, it constitutes an important cultural memory of Northern Shaanxi's folk love narratives. In simple yet evocative language, the folk song recounts the tragic story of a rural woman who rebels against an arranged marriage and pursues love of her own choosing; its central theme centres on the conflict between love and oppression, and between individual will and feudal moral codes. For a long time, *Lanhuahua* has been regarded as a classic female figure in Chinese folk literature and music, symbolising the pursuit of autonomy in marriage and freedom in love.

However, constrained by the length and narrative style of the folk song genre, the folk song *Lanhuahua* primarily presents the outcome of events and emotional expression; the characters' inner worlds, the development of their emotions, and their sense of self are not fully explored. Consequently, how to endow the characters with richer psychological depth whilst preserving the spiritual essence of the folk song has become a key challenge in the opera adaptation.

2.2 Character Reimagination in the Operatic Adaptation

The opera *Lanhuahua* creatively reconstructs the story structure and character relationships whilst respecting the historical and cultural context. The work takes the tragic love story between *Lanhuahua* and *Luotuzi* as its central narrative thread. Through the introduction of multiple character relationships—including those with Master Zhou, the Goat Herder, and the villagers—it constructs a more comprehensive network of dramatic conflict. This expands the oppressive forces facing *Lanhuahua* from a singular marital tragedy to the multiple constraints of traditional ethics, patriarchal order, and social opinion.

At the same time, the librettist Yu Rongjun and the composer Zhang Qian have further deepened the character of *Lanhuahua*. Compared to traditional folk songs, the *Lanhuahua* of the opera possesses a distinct emotional trajectory and psychological development. From the passionate and unrestrained romance with *Luo Tazi* in the millet fields, to her steadfastness and inner struggle in the face of social pressure, and finally to her defence of the dignity of love with her very life, her character displays a clear arc of dramatic growth. Furthermore, the *Lan Huahua* of the opera is no longer merely a beautiful, kind-hearted woman forced to submit to the dictates of fate, but rather a new female archetype who dares to pursue love, bravely resists oppression, and yearns to take control of her own destiny.

This adaptation not only heightens the dramatic tension but also breaks free from the traditional tragic narrative mode in which women passively endure their fate, thereby providing a space for the expression of modern female consciousness.

2.3 The Emergence of Female Agency

The most significant innovation in the opera *Lanhuahua* lies in the reinforcement of female agency. Agency implies that an individual is capable of participating in the shaping of their own destiny through their own will, and of making autonomous judgements regarding the value of life. The *Lanhuahua* of the opera does not passively accept the dictates of love and fate, but rather achieves self-affirmation through a continuous process of making choices.

Firstly, she actively chooses love. Whether in her mutual understanding and romance with *Luo Tiezhi*, or in her steadfast defence of their relationship in the face of societal pressure, she demonstrates her commitment to emotional autonomy. Secondly, she dares to resist the established order. When Master Zhou attempts to suppress her emotional choices through Confucian ethics and authority, *Lanhuahua* does not compromise, but consistently maintains her personal dignity and spiritual independence. Thirdly, she sacrifices her life to uphold her commitment to free love. The tragedy at the work's conclusion is not merely a case of fate's destruction, but rather

the final struggle of female agency under extreme oppression; its significance extends far beyond the personal tragedy of love itself.

Consequently, the female character portrayed in the opera *Lanhuahua* not only inherits the spiritual essence of the pursuit of free love from the folk song prototype, but also incorporates contemporary social concepts regarding personal dignity, individual value and the autonomy of life. *Lanhuahua* is no longer merely a victim of feudal moral codes and social conventions, but has become a modern female figure possessing an independent personality and a sense of agency. This transformation from a 'narrated-upon' figure to an 'agent of action' not only reflects an update in the work's characterisation philosophy, but also mirrors the developmental trend in contemporary Chinese opera's portrayal of women, shifting from objectified narratives towards subject-centred expression.

3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE CHARACTER IN THE OPERA *LANHUAHUA*

As a form of musical theatre, opera relies not only on textual narrative but also on the contribution of musical expression. The formation of *Lanhuahua*'s sense of agency is not confined to the plot level; rather, it is concretely realised through the development of thematic motifs, the composition of key arias, and the vocal construction within dramatic conflicts.

3.1 The Development of the Thematic Motif and the Expression of Female Emotions

In opera composition, themes not only serve to organise the musical structure but are also a vital means of shaping character portrayals. The most representative musical material in *Lanhuahua* derives from the core melody of the Northern Shaanxi folk song *Lanhuahua*. Composer Zhang Qian did not simply replicate the original folk melody but distilled its characteristic interval relationships and tonal features, developing them into a thematic motif that runs throughout the entire opera. Centred on the fourth interval—a characteristic feature of north-western Chinese music—this thematic motif appears in various transformations across the orchestral and vocal parts, serving as a vital musical force driving the plot forward.

This thematic motif appears 11 times throughout the opera. It first emerges in the overture, where a banhu solo, imbued with the rich regional colour of northern Shaanxi, sketches out the cultural landscape of the Loess Plateau whilst simultaneously establishing *Lanhuahua*'s musical character. As the plot unfolds, the theme recurs repeatedly in various contexts. When Lan Huahua is immersed in the bliss of love, the theme takes on a flowing, expansive melodic form; when she suffers the pressures of fate, it transforms into a musical language that is sombre, oppressive and even tinged with tragedy. It is evident that the thematic motif's evolution across different scenes not only chronicles the shifts in the character's fate but also reveals the progressive layers of Lan Huahua's emotional world.

It is worth noting that this thematic motif consistently retains distinct regional cultural attributes. The high-pitched, expansive and unadorned character unique to Northern Shaanxi folk songs ensures that Lan Huahua's image remains closely linked to the cultural soil of the Loess Plateau. It is precisely through this fusion of folk musical language and dramatic expression that Lan Huahua becomes an artistic figure imbued with vibrant vitality and a strong sense of cultural identity.

3.2 The Manifestation of Subjectivity in Key Arias

If the thematic motifs constitute the overall framework of the character's image, then the key arias directly showcase the development of *Lanhuahua*'s sense of self. Throughout the opera, arias such as 'If We Must Go, Let Us Go Together', 'What Is to Be Done?' and 'Looking Up, Life and Death Are Both Vague and Distant' correspond respectively to different stages in the character's journey through romantic choices, struggles with fate and the fight for life.

The duet 'If We Must Go, Let Us Go Together' in Act I marks the initial establishment of *Lanhuahua*'s sense of agency. When Luozhezi is besieged by villagers, *Lanhuahua* resolutely stands by her lover's side, setting herself in opposition to the crowd. This aria serves as a public declaration of her emotional stance. The music, with its steadily advancing rhythm and continuously ascending melodic lines, reinforces *Lanhuahua*'s resolute and courageous state of mind, elevating love beyond the realm of personal emotion to become an expression of a woman's right to self-determination.

The aria 'What Am I to Do?' in Act II, however, reveals a more complex psychological depth in Lanhuahua. Forced to confront the pressures of marriage and reality, Lanhuahua is plunged into intense inner conflict. The aria employs significant melodic fluctuations and frequent key changes to depict the character's wavering between hope and despair. Unlike the feeble lamentations of female roles in traditional opera, the music here does not dwell on the sorrow itself, but consistently presents the character's spiritual strength as she attempts to break free from her bonds.

The final aria before the curtain falls, 'Lifting My Head, Life and Death Are Both Vague', is sung by Lanhuahua in despair, serving as the ultimate manifestation of her inner world. As the plot reaches its climax, the music continually ascends into the higher registers; intense emotional tension intertwines with dramatic conflict, allowing the character's inner grief, indignation and resolve to be fully released. At this point, Lanhuahua has transcended the realm of personal romantic tragedy; her singing becomes an indictment of an unjust fate and the traditional social order.

It is worth noting that when discussing the composition of 'What Is to Be Done?' and 'Looking Up, Life and Death Are Both Vague', the composer Zhang Qian pointed out that both arias draw upon the 'weeping tone' technique found in the music of Northern Shaanxi, using specific scales and vocal treatments to intensify the characters' tragic emotional expression. In terms of musical style, this 'weeping tone' is intrinsically linked to the mournful melodies found in traditional Chinese opera and the regional music of Northwest China, endowing the arias with a distinctively national character.

3.3 Female Voices in Musical-Dramatic Conflict

As a modern opera, the portrayal of the female characters in Lanhuahua is not achieved through standalone arias, but is gradually established within the context of an evolving musical-dramatic conflict.

The play centres on *Lanhuahua*, forming a tripartite structure of conflict involving love, power and ethics. Luotuzi symbolises free love, Master Zhou represents traditional authority, whilst the Shepherd embodies the survival struggles of ordinary people within the social order. Each character possesses a distinct musical language; these musical personas continually clash within duets, trios and choruses, endowing the dramatic conflict with rich sonic layers. Particularly in the confrontational scenes between Lan Huahua and Master Zhou, the musical tension intensifies markedly, with vocal lines forming a stark contrast to the orchestral texture, symbolising the fierce conflict between individual will and social authority.

At the same time, the use of choral singing holds special significance. The mass choruses that appear repeatedly throughout the opera serve not only as background but also represent the collective voice of traditional rural society. Faced with this powerful social pressure, Lanhuahua's solo and duet performances stand out all the more. The confrontation between the individual voice and the collective voice constitutes one of the most important sources of dramatic tension in the entire opera, further highlighting the arduous growth of female agency within a traditional social environment.

Consequently, the music of *Lanhuahua* not only serves to portray the characters' emotions but, through the development of thematic motifs, the shaping of key arias and the construction of dramatic conflict, endows the female characters with an independent voice and personal strength, becoming a vital artistic vehicle for the emergence and expression of female agency.

4. THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OPERA *LANHUA HUA*

Throughout the development of contemporary Chinese opera, the portrayal of female characters has consistently been a key focus for creators. From outstanding works produced since the reform and opening-up era, such as *The Wilderness* and *Once Upon a River*, to the ongoing explorations in operas of the 21st century—including *Ballad of the Canal*, *Yimeng Mountain*, *Azalea*, *Li Qingzhao* and *The Qingyi*—female characters not only fulfil a narrative function in driving the plot forward, but have also become important vehicles for the spirit of the times and societal values. As an opera based on a folk legend, the value of Lanhuahua lies in its reconstruction of traditional female archetypes through modern dramatic concepts and musical language, thereby imbuing them with new contemporary significance. The female agency, pursuit of individual value and sense of the dignity of life presented in the work reflect the direction of development in the portrayal of women within the cultural context of

the new era.

4.1 New Characteristics of Female Narratives in Contemporary Chinese Opera

Looking back at the development of Chinese opera, the portrayal of female characters has undergone a process of deepening evolution, shifting from revolutionary narratives to individual narratives, and from collective values to individual values. In classic works such as *The White-Haired Girl*, *The Marriage of Xiao Erhei* and *The Red Guards of Honghu*, female characters primarily carried grand historical themes such as national liberation and class struggle, with their artistic value lying chiefly in their symbolic significance of the spirit of the times. Since the turn of the 21st century, with shifts in the socio-cultural environment and aesthetic perspectives, Chinese opera composition has begun to focus more intently on the emotional worlds and life experiences of individual characters. Female characters have gradually moved beyond their role as mere political symbols, presenting more nuanced and complex personality traits.

Lanhuahua exemplifies this shift. Although the work draws on a traditional folk tale, its focus is no longer confined to a critique of the feudal marriage system, but delves deeper into the individual fate and personal worth of women. The Lan Huahua of the opera is neither the chaste and virtuous woman of traditional ethical narratives, nor a mere tragic figure awaiting rescue; rather, she is an independent individual capable of actively choosing love, asserting her own will, and courageously bearing the consequences of her choices. This characterisation demonstrates that female roles in contemporary Chinese opera possess a more distinct sense of agency and spiritual strength.

4.2 The Cultural Value of Expressing Female Agency

From a broader cultural perspective, the image of female agency portrayed in *Lanhuahua* holds significant practical relevance. Agency implies not only that individuals possess the right to make autonomous choices, but also that they are capable of establishing their own value within social relationships and assuming corresponding responsibilities. For a long time, female figures in traditional Chinese literature and drama have often been positioned as objects to be observed, judged and written about, with their fates largely determined by family, society or historical forces. In *Lanhuahua*, however, the development of the characters' fates is consistently grounded in personal choice; *Lanhuahua* is not merely a participant in the story, but the architect of her own destiny.

This expression of agency reflects contemporary Chinese culture's renewed appreciation of individual value and the dignity of life. Through the universal human theme of love, the work elevates women's pursuit of freedom, dignity and happiness to the level of personal integrity, enabling Lan Huahua to transcend the limitations of regional culture and historical context to become an artistic figure of universal human significance.

4.3 Insights from *Lan Huahua* for the Creation of Original Chinese Opera

The successful production of *Lan Huahua* offers significant insights for the creation of contemporary original Chinese opera. Firstly, it demonstrates that the creative transformation of traditional music, such as folk songs, is a vital pathway for the development of Chinese opera. Based on folk songs from northern Shaanxi, the work utilises the modern art form of opera to achieve a contemporary interpretation of traditional cultural resources, thereby not only enhancing the work's cultural distinctiveness but also expanding the scope for the nationalisation of Chinese opera.

Secondly, the creative experience of *Lanhuahua* illustrates that character development remains a central issue in the development of Chinese opera. Whether in the construction of musical language or the design of dramatic structure, the ultimate aim must be to serve the development of the characters. The fundamental reason why *Lanhuahua* resonates with audiences lies in the work's portrayal of a female character endowed with genuine emotions, an independent personality and spiritual strength. For contemporary Chinese opera, only by continually deepening the exploration of characters' inner worlds and strengthening the emotional connection between their fates and real life can the artistic appeal and cultural influence of the works be truly enhanced.

Finally, the portrayal of female agency in *Lanhuahua* offers significant insights for the humanistic expression of Chinese opera in the new era. Within the contemporary socio-cultural context, opera creation must not only focus on grand historical narratives and the expression of national spirit, but also prioritise the presentation of individual

life experiences and personal values. It is only through an in-depth portrayal of the fates of ordinary people, revealing the complexity of human nature and the dignity of life, that original Chinese opera can continually expand new artistic horizons amidst the integrated development of national identity, contemporary relevance and modernity.

In this sense, *Lanhuahua* is not merely a successful original opera, but also a significant case study of the transformation in the portrayal of women in contemporary Chinese opera. The sense of agency, cultural self-awareness and artistic innovation it embodies provide inspiring practical experience and a valuable reference point for the development of Chinese opera in the new era.

5. CONCLUSION

As an original opera drawing on classic folk songs from northern Shaanxi, *Lanhuahua* builds upon folk cultural traditions to achieve a creative reconstruction of the traditional female archetype through the artistic language of modern opera. Compared to the relatively symbolic tragic female figures found in the folk song texts, the Lan Huahua of the opera not only retains the spiritual core of pursuing free love and resisting feudal ethics, but is also endowed with a distinct sense of agency and personal strength.

In this process of transformation, music has played an irreplaceable and vital role. Building upon the melodies of Northern Shaanxi folk songs, the composer employs the development and variation of thematic material, the emotional articulation of key arias, and the vocal architecture within dramatic conflicts to provide a rich and multidimensional musical representation of the character's emotional expression and spiritual growth. Particularly in key arias such as 'What Am I to Do?' and 'Lifting My Head, Life and Death Are Both Vague', the musical language—which incorporates elements of north-western regional music and traditional opera vocal styles—endows the character with a distinct national cultural character.

Viewed from the broader perspective of Chinese opera's development, the value of *Lanhuahua* lies not only in the creation of a successful stage character, but also in its reflection of a significant shift in the portrayal of women in contemporary Chinese opera. As the creation of original Chinese operas continues to evolve, the portrayal of female characters has gradually shifted from symbolic presences within revolutionary and historical narratives to expressions of subjectivity characterised by independent personalities, emotional experiences and a sense of life. *Lanhuahua* is a prime example of this shift.

Consequently, the successful production of *Lanhuahua* demonstrates that the innovative development of Chinese opera requires not only a grounding in national cultural resources and the maintenance of a distinct cultural identity, but also a focus on real-life experiences and the individual spiritual world, thereby enhancing the humanistic depth and contemporary relevance of the works. Only through continuous exploration that unites national character, contemporary relevance and artistic merit can Chinese opera create more artistic figures embodying Chinese style and the spirit of the times, thereby showcasing its unique artistic value.

REFERENCES

- [1] Susan McLaughlin. *Feminine Ending: Feminist Criticism in Musicology**[M]. Translated by Zhang Xintao. Taipei: Shangzhou Publishing House, 2003.
- [2] Solly, ed. *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Research*[M]. Translated by Xie Zhonghao. Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2011.
- [3] Ju Qihong, Zhi Yan. *A History of Chinese Opera* [M]. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2025.
- [4] Zhang Qian. Examining Drama from a Musical Perspective: The Creation and Reflections on the Opera 'Lanhuahua' [J]. *Chinese Music*, 2019(01): 23–29.
- [5] Bai Xiaowei. The Solitary Charm of the Orchid: A Study of the Artistic Characteristics of the Opera 'Lanhuahua' [J]. *People's Music*, 2018(11): 17–23.
- [6] Xia Yanzhou. Modern Musical Vocabulary and the Realisation of Dramatic Effect: A Review of the Opera 'Lanhuahua' [J]. *Chinese Literary and Art Criticism*, 2018(12):94-99.
- [7] Yu Yunjing, Lu Rui. An Analysis of the Duality of Lan Huahua's Character in the Chinese Original Opera 'Lan Huahua' [J]. *Drama Literature*, 2018(03):83-86.