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The Musical and Dramatic Portrayal and Aesthetic Value of the Character Mingfeng in the Opera "Mingfeng"

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Abstract: Mingfeng, a servant girl in Ba Jin's novel "Family," is one of the most tragically touching female characters in the history of modern Chinese literature. In the opera of the same name, which premiered in 2013, she rose from a marginal supporting role to the absolute protagonist. This article analyzes the artistic portrayal of Mingfeng's character in the opera "Mingfeng" from four dimensions: dramatic positioning, musical portrayal, stage presentation, and aesthetic value. Based on faithfulness to the spiritual core of the original work, through centralized reconstruction, multi-layered arias, ethnic musical language, and symbolic stage presentation, Mingfeng is portrayed as a three-dimensional image combining tragic beauty and awakening female consciousness. This achieves an artistic sublimation from a literary archetype to an operatic archetype, providing valuable inspiration for the creation of Chinese national operas by combining classic adaptation with local originality.

Keywords: Opera "Mingfeng"; Mingfeng; Character portrayal; Musical portrayal

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1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1931, Ba Jin's novel "Family" has become an enduring monument in modern Chinese literature. Within the grand narrative centered on the decline of a feudal extended family, the servant girl Mingfeng, though not a central character, leaves an unforgettable impression on readers with her innocent character, tragic love, and courageous struggle [1]. Ba Jin once emotionally stated, "It has been my long-cherished wish to see Mingfeng brought to the opera stage." He believed that the emotional turmoil expressed in Mingfeng's final words could not be fully conveyed through writing, and that music (aria) should be used to release the emotions of a young girl. This viewpoint highlights the distinction between opera and other forms of art: music is not a supplement to literature, but rather the most direct form of expression for the spirit of characters.

On November 25, 2013, on the occasion of the 109th anniversary of Ba Jin's birth, the three-act modern national opera "Mingfeng", jointly produced by the Sichuan Symphony Orchestra and Chengdu Media Group, premiered in Chengdu, fulfilling Ba Jin's last wish [2]. The opera, directed by Li Yuanhua, composed by Liu Zhenqiu, and written by Liu Shuzhang, featured Wang Qian, a young soprano from the Sichuan Symphony Orchestra, as Mingfeng. It has won the Sichuan Cultural Award and the Sichuan Provincial Wenhua Award, and was selected as a performance for the 2nd China Opera Festival, becoming an important representative work of Sichuan's original operas.

This article intends to conduct an in-depth analysis of the character Mingfeng in the opera "Mingfeng" from the perspectives of the character's dramatic positioning, musical shaping techniques, stage presentation methods, and aesthetic value, in order to explore its artistic achievements and contemporary significance.

2. Dramatic positioning of Mingfeng's image: From a marginal supporting role to an absolute protagonist

2.1. The marginal existence in the original work and its artistic value

In the narrative structure of Ba Jin's "Family", Mingfeng, though not heavily portrayed, stands out as one of the most compelling supporting roles due to her innocence and fortitude. As a servant girl in the Gao residence, she occupies the lowest rung of the feudal hierarchy, with her love and destiny subject to the control of others. The original novel, through Juehui's perspective, indirectly reveals Mingfeng's inner world, preserving the character's mystique and building emotional tension for her tragic outcome through indirect narration. Ba Jin's preference for Mingfeng's character sets the stage for her later elevation to the lead role in the opera.

2.2. Centralization reconstruction and narrative strategy in opera

The opera "Mingfeng" structurally rewrites the original work, elevating Mingfeng, who was originally a marginal character, to the narrative center, making her the core protagonist of the entire play. This adaptation is not merely a visual transformation, but a deep exploration and interpretation of the spiritual core of the original work. Screenwriter Liu Shuzhang selects narrative elements related to Mingfeng from "Family", and constructs a dramatic network centered around Mingfeng, with eight characters: Mingfeng, Juehui, Juexin, Cousin Mei, Feng Leshan, Old Master Gao, Aunt Chen, and Wang.

In this network, Juehui represents Mingfeng's love and hope, Feng Leshan symbolizes the oppression of the weak by feudal forces, Old Master Gao embodies the decaying authority of the family, and Aunt Chen and Wang are the accomplices within the family. Their indifference and snobbishness contrast with Mingfeng's innocence and kindness [3]. Therefore, Mingfeng's image is not only defined by her own circumstances but also gradually constructed and highlighted within this network of relationships.

2.3. Enhancement of dramatic function and enrichment of character personality

Mingfeng in the opera serves multiple dramatic functions: as a direct victim of the feudal hierarchy, her experiences expose the "cannibalistic" nature of feudal ethics; as a persistent pursuer of pure love, her emotional entanglement with Juehui embodies the work's praise for the beautiful yet fragile aspects of human nature; as a resolute woman who fights with death, her decisive gesture before throwing herself into the lake demonstrates the dignity and courage of the lower-class people who refuse to accept

humiliation.

Compared to the original novel, Mingfeng's character in the opera is more fully developed. She is no longer just a weak woman passively enduring fate, but is reshaped into a life subject with emotions, thoughts, and a sense of resistance. She dares to express her love, to question the injustices of fate, and to defend her dignity even at the cost of her life. This reshaping of her character expands the modern interpretation space of Mingfeng's image and makes it more likely to evoke emotional identification and resonance from contemporary audiences.

3. Musical portrayal of Mingfeng's character: The soulful cry in the aria

3.1. Music as the core means of character portrayal

The fundamental difference between opera and other art forms such as drama and novels lies in the fact that music is not only an auxiliary means to enhance the atmosphere, but also a core carrier for shaping characters, driving the plot, and expressing emotions. American musicologist Joseph Coleman pointed out: "The essence of opera lies in the penetration and transformation of music into drama." This point is particularly evident in the opera "Ming Feng". Composer Liu Zhenqiu fully leveraged this characteristic, designing a series of highly expressive arias for Ming Feng, directly presenting the inner world of this young girl to the audience [4].

3.2. Emotional layers and structural layout of core aria

According to Ba Jin's wishes before his death, if Mingfeng were to simply deliver a long monologue before throwing herself into the lake, it would not truly express her inner feelings. Instead, she must express herself through intense arias. The opera "Mingfeng" faithfully adheres to this principle, designing a core aria for Mingfeng that is layered and emotionally intense, forming a clear emotional development thread throughout the entire play.

The first level is the innocence and joy when love is budding. When interacting with Juehui, Mingfeng's singing melodies are beautiful and smooth, with a lively and fast rhythm, full of the sweetness and shyness of a young girl's first love. These songs often adopt ethnic modes and incorporate local Sichuan musical elements, such as the melodic material of Sichuan river work songs and the rhythmic characteristics of Sichuan Qingyin. Representative songs such as "Moonlight Sentiment" express Mingfeng's longing for love with a gentle melody and delicate emotions.

The second level involves the fear and struggle faced when confronted with forced marriage. When Mingfeng learned that she was to be given to Feng Leshan as a concubine, the melody of the aria became rapid and uneasy, the harmony turned darker, and the instability of the rhythm aptly conveyed her inner panic and helplessness. Representative arias such as "The Shackles of Fate" gradually reveal Mingfeng's inner contradictions and pain through the repeated wandering of the melody and the use of semitones [5].

The third level represents the despair and accusation before the suicide into the lake. This is the climax of the entire play's emotions and the part that Ba Jin valued most. Mingfeng's aria reaches its dramatic peak here, with the melody gradually shifting from a low and mournful tone to a high and impassioned one. The range expands significantly, and the intensity contrasts sharply, pouring out Mingfeng's despair towards love, her accusation towards fate, and her resentment towards the feudal system. This aria is not only Mingfeng's personal expression but also a common cry of countless women who have been

devastated by feudal ethics. Representative arias such as "The Last Aria" push the emotions of the entire play to the peak with highly tensioned musical language.

3.3. Image creation in ensemble and chorus

In addition to solo arias, the opera also enriches its portrayal through duets between Mingfeng and Juehui, confrontations with other characters, and scene choruses. The duet between Mingfeng and Juehui serves as a significant means of expressing their love. The echo and interweaving of melodies symbolize the harmony of their hearts and the barriers of reality. For instance, in the duet "Hard to Love, Hard to Keep", the two voices sometimes parallel and sometimes interlace, ultimately ending with a clash of dissonant intervals, foreshadowing the tragic outcome of their love.

In the scene of choral singing, Mingfeng's voice often stands out from the chorus, forming a stark contrast between the individual and the group, the weak and the powerful. For example, in the chorus "Dusk at Gao Mansion" at the end of the first act, the chorus team expresses the indifference of the feudal family with a heavy and oppressive voice, while Mingfeng's solo voice is sobbing and pleading, struggling to survive in the gaps of the chorus. This approach further intensifies the tragic color of her lonely struggle.

3.4. Regional characteristics and ethnic styles of musical language

As an original Sichuan opera, "Mingfeng" boasts a musical language that exhibits distinct regional characteristics and ethnic style. Composer Liu Zhenqiu has incorporated a wealth of Sichuan folk music elements into his creation, such as the backing technique of Sichuan Opera's high-pitched tunes, the melodic tones of Sichuan folk songs, and the unique rhythmic patterns of the Bashu region. Additionally, the musical composition of the opera draws inspiration from the vocal artistry of traditional Chinese opera, utilizing techniques like intonation, prolongation, and declamation, ensuring that Mingfeng's vocal passages not only embody the dramatic quality of Western opera arias but also retain the charm of Chinese folk music.

4. Stage presentation of Mingfeng's image: artistic expression through vision and action

4.1. Challenges and breakthroughs in performing arts

Mingfeng demands that actors possess both solid vocal skills, capable of mastering challenging arias, and profound dramatic acting abilities, accurately capturing the emotional transformation of the character from innocence to despair and determination. Wang Qian, a young soprano playing Mingfeng, faced a huge challenge. She successfully integrated vocal techniques with dramatic acting in the play, making Mingfeng's image both authentic and believable, while also being artistically captivating.

In terms of performance, Wang Qian focuses on portraying Mingfeng's inner world through delicate means such as eye expressions, gestures, and body movements. For instance, in the scene where Mingfeng seeks help from Juehui in Act 2, her hesitant mouth shape, trembling hands, and wandering gaze are all employed to depict Mingfeng's complex psychology of both longing for help and being unwilling to burden her lover. This performance method of "expressing emotions through voice, and combining voice and emotion" embodies the aesthetic pursuit of a high degree of unity between vocal music and drama in opera performance art [6].

4.2. Symbolic meaning and spatial construction of stage art

The stage art design of the opera "Mingfeng" carries profound symbolic significance. The scene design of the Gao residence is oppressive and enclosed, with tall gate walls and dim lighting creating a suffocating atmosphere of a feudal family, symbolizing the cage of fate that Mingfeng cannot escape. The stage space is also designed with multiple layers, such as the contrast between the foreground and background, and the staggered arrangement of high and low positions, which not only showcases the deep courtyard of the Gao residence but also hints at the hierarchical relationships and power structure among the characters.

The imagery of lake water permeates the entire play. Initially serving as a witness to love, it ultimately becomes the destination of death, thus symbolizing both beauty and destruction. The stage treatment of the scene where Mingfeng jumps into the lake is particularly striking. Through the perfect combination of lighting, sound effects, and performance, the end of Mingfeng's life is presented as a poignant and solemn ceremony. The blue lighting, the sound effects of waves, and Mingfeng's white figure together form a visually striking image.

4.3. The era characteristics of clothing styling and character personality

Mingfeng's costume design accurately reflects the identity characteristics of a servant girl in Sichuan during the early years of the Republic of China. The clothing is simple in material, concise in style, and elegant in color, which not only aligns with the character's social status but also accentuates her youthful and refined temperament. As the plot progresses, there are subtle changes in the color and texture of Mingfeng's clothing. The first act mainly features light colors, reflecting her youthful vitality; the second act gradually darkens, hinting at the deterioration of her fate; in the third act, Mingfeng wears a white long dress, symbolizing her inner despair and foreshadowing her ultimate destiny.

4.4. Overall grasp of directing art

Chief director Li Yuanhua once portrayed the role of "Second-Generation White- Haired Lady," boasting profound skills in national opera performance and extensive directorial experience. In terms of grasping the overall artistic style, Li Yuanhua emphasizes the fluidity and symbolism of dramatic conflicts, focuses on actors' performances being driven by inner emotions, and also values the mutual penetration of music and drama, resulting in a harmonious and unified artistic style throughout the entire play.

5. The aesthetic value and contemporary significance of Mingfeng's image

5.1. A paradigm of tragic beauty: The unity of social tragedy and character tragedy

The compelling aspect of Mingfeng's destruction lies in the fact that she is not a weakling who passively accepts adversity, but a fighter who maintains her dignity even in despair. Her drowning herself in a lake is not a sign of weakness, but rather an ultimate indictment of the feudal order through her life. This kind of tragedy, where "the valuable things in life are destroyed for others to see," produces a strong aesthetic impact, allowing the audience to experience emotional purification and intellectual sublimation amidst sympathy and grief [7].

5.2. The awakening of female consciousness: The spiritual journey from obedience to resistance

From a feminist perspective, Mingfeng's image embodies the initial awakening of female consciousness.

Despite being at the lowest rung of society, she dares to pursue love, dares to refuse the fate of being treated as a commodity for sale, and dares to defend her dignity by dying. Although her way of resistance is limited by the times, its spiritual core — the pursuit of personal independence and freedom in love — has a value that transcends the era.

Mingfeng's awakening of female consciousness underwent a process from spontaneity to self-awareness. Initially, her love for Juehui was more of an instinctive emotional stirring; when faced with the fate of being given to Feng Leshan, she began to realize her inhuman status under the feudal system; ultimately, she expressed her resolute resistance to this system by drowning herself in a lake. This spiritual journey demonstrates the difficulty and solemnity of the awakening of modern Chinese female consciousness. In contemporary society, the image of Mingfeng can still trigger deep reflection among audiences on the fate and rights of women. Although the feudal system has long since disappeared, issues such as women's status in society and their autonomy in love and marriage remain pressing contemporary issues worthy of attention. The image of Mingfeng reminds us that the liberation and realization of women's dignity is a long process that requires continuous effort.

5.3. Inheritance of regional culture: Opera expression of Bashu culture

As an original Sichuan opera, "Mingfeng" incorporates rich elements of Sichuan regional culture in its music and stage presentation. The vocal pieces of Mingfeng reflect the influence of Sichuan folk songs, and her language, movements, and demeanor also bear the characteristics of Ba-Shu culture. The integration of this regional culture endows Mingfeng's image with both universal humanistic brilliance and distinct ethnic and regional flavors.

The Sichuan region boasts a long-standing tradition of folk music, such as Chuanjiang Haozi, Sichuan Qingyin, and Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang, all of which constitute treasures in the Chinese national music treasure trove. The creative utilization of these folk music elements in the opera "Mingfeng" not only enriches the musical language of the work but also opens up new avenues for the inheritance and development of Sichuan regional culture. Through the elegant art form of opera, Bashu culture can reach a broader stage and be understood and appreciated by more audiences [8].

5.4. Inspiration for contemporary opera creation: Combination of classic adaptations and local original creations

The portrayal of Mingfeng in the opera "Mingfeng" provides valuable insights for contemporary Chinese opera creation. It demonstrates that adaptations of classic literary works do not necessarily have to adhere to the original narrative structure, but can be creatively reconstructed based on the characteristics of opera art. Elevating marginal characters from the original work to the leading roles in the opera not only expands the artistic space of the original work but also opens up new possibilities for opera character portrayal.

Meanwhile, the production model of the opera, which is rooted in the local culture and cultivates local actors, has also explored a feasible path for the development of local opera. During the creation process, the Sichuan Symphony Orchestra insisted on selecting key actors and vocalists from within Sichuan Province, discovering and nurturing local opera talents. This "localization" creative strategy not only reduces production costs but also enhances the regional identity of the work, providing experience for the sustainable development of local opera.

Moreover, the success of the opera "Mingfeng" also demonstrates that the creation of Chinese national opera must adhere to the unity of "nationality" and "modernity". On the one hand, it is necessary to deeply explore the rich resources of traditional Chinese music and opera, maintaining the cultural roots of national opera; on the other hand, it is necessary to learn from the creative techniques and stage technology of Western opera, enhancing the artistic level of national opera. Only through this bidirectional integration can Chinese national opera embark on a development path with its own characteristics.

6. Conclusion

The opera "Mingfeng" successfully transformed the literary characters created by Ba Jin into typical opera characters on stage, allowing the silent victim of the feudal family to speak with a voice that resonates deeply.

Just as Ba Jin had expected, Mingfeng finally sang on the opera stage. Her voice, spanning nearly a century, still touches the hearts of contemporary audiences. The opera "Mingfeng" is not only a tribute to Ba Jin's literary classics, but also a valuable exploration of the path of Chinese national opera creation. It tells us that adapting classic literary works requires courage and wisdom, respect for the spiritual core of the original, and creative transformation based on new artistic forms. Only in this way can classics gain new life in the new era, and art continue to develop through inheritance.

The image of Mingfeng will forever stand on the stage of Chinese national opera. Her tragedy will forever serve as a warning to people to cherish freedom and dignity, and her singing voice will forever echo in the hearts of those who pursue beauty and justice.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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