

# Wagner's Leitmotif Technique in 20th Century Chinese Opera: A Case Study of "The White-Haired Girl"

Shuling Liu \*

School of Performing Arts, Wuhan Conservatory of Music, Wuhan, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: ls1227868@outlook.com

**Abstract.** "The White-Haired Girl" stands as a classic in Chinese opera, garnering widespread attention for its profound themes, unique national style, and distinctive era-specific backdrop. Academic research on "The White-Haired Girl" often focuses on its cultural significance, artistic features, and its status in the history of Chinese opera development. However, there is a scarcity of studies examining the work from the perspective of the application of Wagner's leitmotif technique. Wagner's operatic ideas and his leitmotif technique set new standards for the integration of opera music and drama, significantly influencing the development of later operas. How "The White-Haired Girl" employs similar techniques, and the effects thereof is a question worth exploring. An in-depth analysis of the musical composition of "The White-Haired Girl" reveals Wagnerian influences in the combination of music and drama and the use of leading motifs. The development of its musical themes and symphonic concepts aligns with Wagner's artistic vision, particularly in the use of leitmotifs, which not only reflect the psychological states of the characters and the dramatic emotional shifts but also drive the plot forward. As an important means of integrating music and drama, the application of leitmotif technique in "The White-Haired Girl" demonstrates how Chinese opera creators have combined Western operatic techniques with Chinese cultural elements to create an opera art form with distinctive Chinese characteristics.

**Keywords:** Chinese opera, "The White-Haired Girl", Wagnerian leitmotif technique.

## 1. Introduction

"The White-Haired Girl," as one of the representative works of 20th-century Chinese opera, has been the subject of research by many scholars. Wang Yu conducted research on the composition techniques of "The White-Haired Girl"; Wang Chang studied its historical value; Yu Huicheng researched its singing techniques. On the other hand, Wagner's leitmotif technique is also a focal point of academic research. For instance, Ma Zheng provided a detailed overview of the application of Wagner's leitmotif technique in opera. However, it has been found that few have analyzed "The White-Haired Girl" from the perspective of Wagner's leitmotif compositional technique. This paper will employ various methods, including comprehensive literature review, music analysis, and dramatic theory criticism, aiming to fill the gaps in existing research. It seeks to interpret the artistic value and significance of "The White-Haired Girl" in the history of Chinese opera from a fresh perspective and further argue the importance of the innovative adaptation of Wagner's leitmotif in Chinese opera creation for enhancing the artistic level and depth of the work [1-3].

## 2. The Integration of Wagner's Leitmotif Technique in Early Chinese Opera

Before discussing the application of Wagner's leitmotif in "The White-Haired Girl," it is necessary to explore the emergence and evolution of this technique in early Chinese opera. There are different methods of classifying the stages of early Chinese opera within the academic community, with the most common division being into five stages: The first stage is represented by the dance-drama "The Sparrow and The Child" created by Li Jin-hui in the 1920s; the second stage is represented by the song-drama "Storm on the Yangtze River" created by Nie Er in the 1930s; the third stage is represented by the grand opera "Qiuze" created by Huang Yuanlu in the 1940s; the fourth stage is represented by the national opera "The White-Haired Girl" created by Ma Ke, Li Huanzhi, and others; the fifth stage is represented by the avant-garde operas such as Guo Wenjing's "Wolf Club Village"

and Wen Deqing's "The Wager" from the early period of the reform and opening up. With the introduction of Western music theory and practice, Wagner's leitmotif compositional technique also inspired the Chinese composers. While retaining traditional Chinese music elements, Chinese composers actively absorbed Wagner's leitmotif concept and began to experiment with integrating them into the creation of national operas. Examples of these approaches can be found in operas such as "Xiao Erhei's Marriage", "Sister Jiang", and "The Red Guards of Lake Honghu" [4, 5].

### 3. The Leitmotifs in "The White-Haired Girl"

#### 3.1. A Brief Introduction to "The White-Haired Girl"

"The White-Haired Girl" is an opera with lyrics and libretto written by He Jingzhi and Ding Yi, and music composed by Ma Ke, Zhang Lu, Li Huanzhi, Qu Wei, and others. It premiered in Yan'an in April 1945 and was deeply loved by the masses. "The White-Haired Girl" is based on real social events, telling the tragic story of Xi'er's family in the Shaanxi northern region. Against the backdrop of the Anti-Japanese War, Yang Bailao's family was driven into debt and forced into prostitution by the landlord Huang Shiren. Yang Bailao's daughter, Xi'er, was compelled to flee far from home and ultimately regained a new life with the help of the Chinese Communist Party, reflecting the harsh realities of rural life at the time. When composing this opera, the musicians not only absorbed the melodies of folk songs as the tonal basis for each character's leading themes but also consciously began to draw extensively from the tunes of narrative singing and traditional Chinese opera. Therefore, the opera "The White-Haired Girl" is also acclaimed as a representative work of the "first climax" in the development of Chinese opera.

#### 3.2. The Leitmotif of "Xi'er"

Xi'er, the only daughter of the tenant farmer Yang Bailao, is optimistic and cheerful despite living in poverty. However, due to the persecution by Huang Shiren, she is forced to flee and becomes the "White-Haired Girl." In the drama, the composer uses Hebei folk songs such as "Little White Cabbage" and "The Legend of Qingyang" (see Fig. 1 and 2), as well as Hebei Bangzi, as the basis for creating Xi'er's leading theme. According to the plot, it is adapted into several singing segments such as "The North Wind Blows", "The Red Head Rope", "Crying for Father", "Several Months in His Home", "Knife to Kill Me, Axe to Chop Me", and "They Want to Kill Me", which profoundly depict the character of Xi'er.



Figure 1. "Little White Cabbage" [4]



**Figure 2.** "The Legend of Qingyang" [4]

In the first scene of Act One, the song "The North Wind Blows" (see Fig. 3) sung by Xi'er, who is naively looking forward to her father's return, is a variation based on the melody of "Little White Cabbage." In these four lines of melody, although the pitch and final notes are the same, ending on the notes of Shang, Gong, Yu, and Zhi respectively, the rhythm has changed. It shifts from the four-five beat of "Little White Cabbage" to a more compact four-three beat. The final note of each line turns into an ascending melodic development, altering the sorrowful atmosphere created by the descending final notes in "Little White Cabbage". The music thus becomes more fitting for Xi'er's innocent and lively young girl image at that moment.



**Figure 3.** "The North Wind Blows" [6]

In the fourth song of Act One, "Wind Rolls the Snowflakes Outside the Door" (see Fig. 4), sung by Xi'er, the melody combines elements of "The North Wind Blows" with "The Legend of Qingyang". The first two lines use a fragment of the melody from "The North Wind Blows," and when the lyrics reach "I hope father comes home soon", it transitions to the melody of "The Legend of Qingyang". This combination vividly portrays Xi'er's feelings of anticipation and concern for her father.



**Figure 4.** "Wind Rolls the Snowflakes Outside the Door" [6]

In the fourth scene of Act One, Yang Bailao commits suicide out of guilt towards his daughter. On the morning of the first day of the new year, when Xi'er sees her father, who she has depended on since childhood, suddenly pass away, her heart breaks. The song she sings, "Crying for Father" (Fig. 5), is also adapted from "Little White Cabbage". However, unlike the previous scenes, this piece employs many descending melodies and ornamentations to express Xi'er's grief at that moment.



Figure 5. "Crying for Father" [6]

In the third scene of Act Two, because Mother Huang does not regard Xi'er as a human being and beats and scolds her at the slightest displeasure, the composer created "Days and Months with Bitterness in Mouth" (Fig. 6). Although it is also adapted from the melody of "Little White Cabbage", the orchestration features instruments like the erhu and pipa. The melody employs descending minor seconds in a sighing motif to depict Xi'er's frustration with her current life and the injustice of her fate.



Figure 6. "Days and Months with Bitterness in Mouth" [6]

From the third scene of Act Three, when Xi'er has endured humiliation and seeks to rebel and take revenge, the song she sings, "I Want to Live" (Fig. 7), shows the composer breaking away from the original dominant theme of "Little White Cabbage" and introducing a more strident and indignant leading theme, that of the Hebei Bangzi tune. Compared to the previous musical sections, the rhythm here is denser, with extensive use of accents in the melody. The orchestration also includes instruments such as the large gong, pitched drums, and clapper drums to express Xi'er's anger and her determination for revenge.



Figure 7. "I Want to Live" [6]

In the first scene of Act Four, when Xi'er encounters Huang Shiren again and is mistaken for a "ghost," her anger reaches its peak as she sings "Hatred is the Mountain, Revenge is the Sea" (Fig. 8). The leading motif is more intense and aggressive, starting with tremolos and triplet figures among other patterns. The dynamics range from *ff* to *mf* and then to *f*, creating a sense of tension. The accompaniment features continuous triplets, with the pitch rising and the rhythm accelerating. The use of scattered beats in the tempo accentuates Xi'er's inner hatred [3].

The musical score is arranged in a system with six staves. From top to bottom, the staves are: 竖琴 (Piano), 板胡 (Erhu), 唱腔 (Vocal), 第一小提琴 (First Violin), 第二小提琴 (Second Violin), and 低音提琴 (Double Bass). The piano part features a complex texture with triplets and a dynamic marking of *ff*. The erhu and vocal parts have a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f*. The vocal line includes the lyrics "恨是高山". The string section consists of five staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violin III, and Double Bass) playing a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and a dynamic marking of *ff*. A tempo marking "节奏自由地 散板" (Ad libitum) is placed above the string section.

Figure 8. "Hatred is the Mountain, Revenge is the Sea" [6]

The composer, following the development of the plot, uses two distinctly different leading motifs to portray Xi'er's character, making it more richly dimensional and providing the audience with a more vivid and direct experience.

### 3.3. The Leitmotifs of "Yang Bailao"

Yang Bailao is a tenant farmer who suffers under the oppression of the landlord class; he is poor, simple, yet has a timid personality. The leading theme used to depict the character of Yang Bailao is based on the Shanxi folk song "Picking Up Wheat Roots" (Fig. 9). After his entrance, the music for the song "Yang Bailao" begins, which has four singing sections, using the development of four parts of the plot to narrate the inner emotional changes of Yang Bailao when facing different situations.

The musical notation is presented in two staves of a single system. The first staff shows the first five measures of the melody in 2/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second staff shows the next five measures, starting with a measure rest (marked '6') and continuing the melody. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes, rests, and a final double bar line.

Figure 9. "Picking up Wheat Roots" [4]

The first singing section corresponds to the first scene of Act One, where the farmer Yang Bailao goes out under the pretext of selling tofu to avoid his debts. It is not until seven days later, on a night of heavy snowfall, that he staggers towards his home, singing "Ten Miles of Wind and Snow" (Fig.

10). The key is in the Dorian mode on A-flat, and the melody develops initially with leaps and stepwise ascents, followed by a scalar descent. This portrays the helplessness of Yang Bailao during the snowstorm and shapes an image of an old and frail man.



Figure 10. "Ten Miles of Wind and Snow" [6]

The second singing section occurs in the second scene of Act One, where Yang Bailao is forced to sign and affix his thumbprint on the contract selling his daughter Xi'er into servitude. Despite his repeated pleas and resistance, the unfortunate event still unfolds, and he is forced to accept it helplessly as he sings "Suddenly Ordered to Make Xi'er Pay the Rent" (Fig. 11). The key remains in the Dorian mode on A-flat, and the melody employs triplets and sixteenth notes, which quickens the pace. The leaping melodic lines combined with the dense lyrics vividly portray Yang Bailao's shock, panic, and pleading under the unreasonable demands of Huang Shiren.



Figure 11. "Suddenly Ordered to Make Xi'er Pay the Rent" [6]

The third singing section is in the third scene of Act One, where Yang Bailao watches his daughter sleeping soundly at home, feeling immense regret and pain, and feeling powerless about his own weakness as he sings "Your Father is to Blame and Cannot Be Forgiven" (Fig. 12). The key shifts to Lydian mode on C. In the lyrics "Your father is to blame, cannot be forgiven", the composer uses a continuous ascending stepwise motion and an octave leap followed by a descending stepwise motion, ending with a crescendo on a sustained note. This portrays Yang Bailao's character as a farmer who cannot bear to sell his daughter yet feels powerless and blames himself.

The image displays a musical score for a vocal piece. It consists of three systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is C major (one sharp, F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in Chinese. The first system (measures 1-4) has the lyrics: 喜儿 喜儿 你睡着了 爹爹 叫 你 不 知 道. The second system (measures 5-8) has the lyrics: 你 做 梦 也 没 想 到 你 爹 我 有. The third system (measures 9-12) has the lyrics: 罪, 不 能 饶. The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line and a treble line with chords and moving lines.

**Figure 12.** "Your Father is to Blame and Cannot Be Forgiven" [6]

The fourth singing section is in the third scene of Act One, where Yang Bailao expresses his deep hatred for the landlord class and his own anger and helplessness at being exploited without the power to resist, as he sings "The Magistrate, the Wealthy, Wolves, Insects, Tigers, and Leopards" (Fig. 13). The key shifts to the Lydian mode on E-flat, with the appearance of large gongs and wooden drums in the orchestration. The accompaniment texture follows the main voice closely with octave accompaniment, followed by an accompaniment texture of octave triplets, driving the emotion to a climax. The subsequent melody descends stepwise. This melody depicts Yang Bailao's inner hatred and his fear to resist, the reality of having no way out, and the plot where he is driven to a dead end and chooses to take his own life.

Although Yang Bailao's singing sections are mainly concentrated in the first act, they play an important role in advancing the entire plot of the opera. Composed of four different storylines, each segment is independent yet interconnected, together forming the character of Yang Bailao in the opera "The White-Haired Girl." In terms of content, the contrast between Yang Bailao's simplicity and Huang Shiren's baseness, the contrast between Yang Bailao's love for his daughter Xi'er and the act of selling her to pay off debts, the contrast between the fact that selling his daughter has become a reality and the pretense of enduring in silence, and the contrast between the feudal landlord class and

the peasant class, all highlight the core idea of "what is the issue that the Chinese Revolution needs to solve" [7].

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "说白地" (Saying White Land). It consists of three systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 1-3) has the lyrics: "县长财主豺狼虎豹 我欠租欠帐 是你们逼着我写的卖身的". The second system (measures 4-6) has the lyrics: "文书 北风 刮大雪 飘 哪里走哪里". The third system (measures 7-8) has the lyrics: "逃 哪里有 我的路 一条。". The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, a key signature of two flats, and dynamic markings like *f*, *mp*, *ff*, *rit.*, *mf*, and *ad lib*. There are also performance instructions like "8<sup>va</sup>" and "8<sup>vb</sup>" for the piano part.

Figure 13. "The Magistrate, the Wealthy, Wolves, Insects, Tigers, and Leopards" [6]

#### 4. The "White-Haired Girl" Related to Wagner

The core of the Wagner's leitmotif lies in the of different musical themes which associated with characters and plot developments in the drama, creating a flexible and internally logical musical structure [2]. In "Tristan und Isolde", the leitmotif technique was fully utilized and reached an artistic pinnacle. This technique not only brought a new dimension to opera narration through the close integration of musical themes with dramatic contexts but also served as a reference for later works with its strong dramatic tension and emotional expressiveness. Wagner elaborated the main content of his theory in his book "Opera and Drama" and systematically discussed the functional relationship between music and drama. This theory provided a new direction for the development of Chinese opera, allowing it to maintain national characteristics while absorbing mature Western performance techniques and artistic concepts. Wagner's opera reform has had a guiding effect on the artistic practice of Chinese opera, especially "The White-Haired Girl" [8, 9]. An in-depth analysis was conducted on the relationship between the leitmotif, dramatic plot, and character emotional expression in "The White-Haired Girl." The musical creation of "The White-Haired Girl" was not only deeply influenced by Wagner's leitmotif but also underwent delicate and meticulous localization adaptations, combining the melodic characteristics of Chinese national music with Wagner's motif technique, forming a unique artistic style.

## 5. Conclusion

Research indicates that the seamless integration of music with drama plays a decisive role in the communicative power and appeal of operatic art. "The White-Haired Girl" introduces the technique of Wagnerian leitmotifs, constructing an intricate and meaningful musical language system throughout the structure of the opera. The use of leitmotifs is consistent, as variations and developments of thematic material, possessing strong recognizability and coherence, enabling audiences to quickly grasp the corresponding musical cues amidst changes in scenes and plot, thereby deepening the understanding of the characters' emotions and dramatic conflicts. A meticulous examination of the leading motifs in "The White-Haired Girl" reveals that whether in describing the familial relationship between Xi'er and Yang Bailao or portraying the conflict and resistance under the weight of suffering, the opera showcases highly characteristic musical theme variations and developments, constantly echoing the dramatic episodes, and jointly advancing the plot. Through an in-depth analysis of the integration of Wagnerian leitmotif techniques in contemporary Chinese opera, we gain not only a more comprehensive understanding and evaluation of the development of Chinese opera but also new ideas and insights for future operatic creation.

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