

A Study on the Functional Roles of Female Characters in Chinese Huangmei Opera Film and Television Dramas

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Abstract

This research explores the narrative innovation and character construction in Huangmei Opera film and television dramas, highlighting their significant role in the inheritance and development of this traditional art form in the new era. Faced with the continuous evolution of social values and aesthetic tastes, Huangmei Opera film and television dramas necessitate innovation and transformation. Utilizing qualitative research methods, including case studies, this study investigates the narrative functions of female characters and constructs a narrative structure model. Data collection and analysis aim to elucidate how narrative themes and the roles of functional characters contribute to the narrative structure within Huangmei Opera film and television drama cases, offering theoretical insights for their modern adaptation.

The research results found that the narrative structure of Huangmei Opera film and television dramas can be enhanced by emphasizing the subjectivity of female characters, increasing the number of functional characters, and constructing multiple plot units. Additionally, the portrayal and evolution of female characters mirror the shifts in societal values and indicate the progressive awakening of female consciousness.

Keywords: Huangmei opera, film and television dramas, functional characters, narrative structure

Introduction

Amidst the backdrop of contemporary cultural diversity, Huangmei Opera, a traditional operatic art form, has attracted considerable attention and sparked intense discussions in the Chinese cultural domain through its fusion with modern film and television art, known as Huangmei Opera films and television dramas. However, with the passage of time, this art form confronts the dual challenges of narrative innovation and character development. This paper aims to delve into the narrative functions of female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, and how these characters reflect and shape their own images amidst the changes in social values and aesthetic tastes, thereby providing theoretical support and practical guidance for the modern transformation of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas.

Huangmei Opera, a gem of traditional Chinese theatrical art, combines its unique narrative style and profound cultural heritage with the form of modern film and television art, showcasing the unique charm of cross-art integration. From the mid-20th century to the 1980s, as an innovative attempt, Huangmei Opera films and television dramas not only integrated the charm of Huangmei Opera with the expressiveness of film and television but also sparked a

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cultural craze at the time. Yet, with the continuous evolution of social values and aesthetic tastes, Huangmei Opera films and television dramas show signs of disconnection with the times in narrative structure and character shaping, urgently requiring innovation and transformation.

The central focus of this study arises from profound reflections on the contemporary decline of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas. Comparing the flourishing state of these works from the 1950s to the 1980s with their current marginalization, we have identified an undeniable phenomenon: the close connection between the narrative function of female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas and social values and aesthetic tastes. The shaping and evolution of female characters not only reflect the changes in social values but also demonstrate the gradual awakening of female consciousness. This finding prompts us to further explore how to reshape these characters in modern society to adapt to the changes of the times and social expectations.

Opera serves as a stage for female characters to express themselves and their emotions; this perspective provides us with a new viewpoint that female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas are not only the subjects of the narrative but also a reflection of the unique attention and care that Eastern opera pays to the female community (Li, X.l, 2001). Influenced by social change, cultural tendencies, and innovative consciousness, these female images need to find a new balance between tradition and modernity.

Modern adaptations of Huangmei Opera in film and television, such as "Female Consort Prince," "Pan Zhang Yuliang," and "Life and Death Duel," challenge traditional gender norms by showcasing women who actively pursue their values and ambitions. These adaptations not only reflect the transformation of female character portrayals but also actively engage with broader social issues such as class struggle and gender equality. For instance, "Marriage of The Fairy Princess," through its narrative, fights for love and subtly critiques class disparities and societal transformations.

In this study, we pay special attention to the concept of "functional characters," acting as pivotal agents that drive the plot or action forward (Shen, D, 1998). This perspective offers us an analytical tool to understand the role and significance of female characters in the narrative of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas.

In summary, by deeply analyzing the female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, we explore their central role in the narrative structure and their impact on plot development. We focus on two core issues: the reshaping of female characters in the contemporary context and the effective use of functional characters to drive the narrative structure. This study aims to offer new perspectives and strategies for the modern transformation of this traditional art form, fostering its innovation and development in the new era.

Research Objectives

This study is dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the functional characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, with a particular focus on the central role of female characters within the narrative structure and their impact on plot development. The research objectives are as follows:

1. Functional Study of Female Characters: By analyzing the female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, this study aims to reflect the evolution of female consciousness within the narrative. It will explore how female characters drive the development of the plot through their actions and decisions, and attempt to generalize the common patterns of these characters within the narrative.

2. Construction and Validation of Narrative Models: Based on an understanding of the role of functional characters, this research will construct a narrative structure model for Huangmei Opera films and television dramas. This model will reflect the common narrative patterns in stories of the same type, providing a new perspective for understanding the narrative mechanisms of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas.

Literature Review

The connection between opera and gender has been a subject of scholarly interest. It is posited that in a patriarchal society, both opera and female culture are marginalized, a situation that has led opera to focus on and advocate for women's fates, serving as a tool for expressing female consciousness. In the narratives of traditional Chinese opera, female characters often take center stage (Li, X. L., 2003). Scholars have analyzed the four images of women within traditional Confucian culture and argue that Chinese opera has promoted the development of female cultural awareness during its dissemination (Du, L. P., 2014).

In terms of Huangmei opera film and television studies, it is observed that opera films reflect the modernization process within a national context. These films understand and express the aesthetics of traditional opera through the audio-visual language of cinema, representing a fusion of diverse modernities with tradition (Gong, Y., 2019). The success of "Shao's" Huangmei-tune films is primarily attributed to a successful business model that caters to the market and selects appropriate themes. These research findings provide valuable academic perspectives for understanding the narrative characteristics and socio-cultural significance of Huangmei opera films and television dramas.

Research in structuralist narrative studies posits that characters are integral components of narrative, whose existence and actions serve to propel the story forward. Characters are categorized into "functional characters" within the narrative, and six basic types have been identified: subject and object, sender and receiver, helper and opponent (A.J. Greimas, 2002). The concept of "functional characters" is distinct from that of roles; a "functional character" may consist of one or more roles, and a single role may encompass multiple functionalities. The "functional" perspective emphasizes the role and function of characters within the narrative structure (Shen, D., 2004). This study, based on the theory of "functional characters," constructs a model of functional character relationships centered on the protagonist. By designing interrelationships, corresponding narrative plots are devised,

thereby establishing a model of the relationship between functional characters and the plot. (Figure 1)

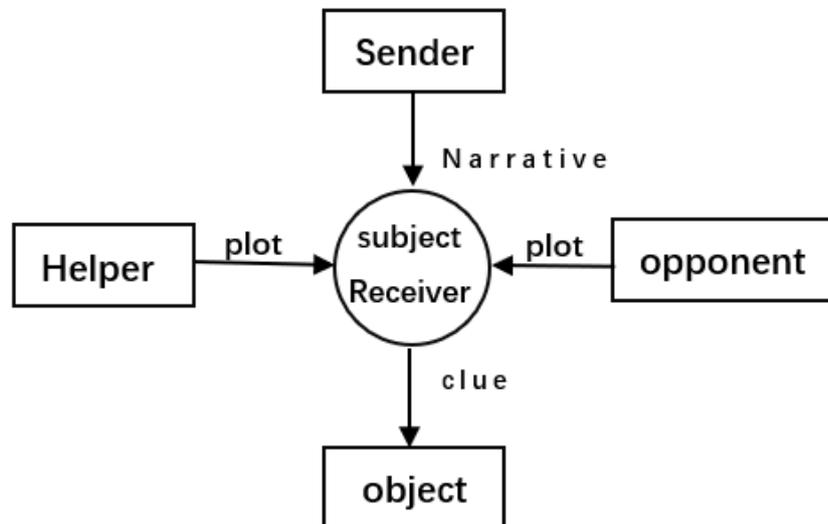


Figure 1 Functional person-relationship model

Source: Author-made

Huangmei opera films and television dramas, as interdisciplinary art forms, are influenced by socio-cultural backgrounds and value systems in their narratives and character development. Female characters within these works not only express their identities and emotions but also reflect the evolution of narrative structures and societal values. However, research on the role of female consciousness in character shaping remains superficial.

Other studies have explored the experience of integrating film and television aesthetics with traditional opera, emphasizing the impact of business models and audience values. Structuralist narrative theory offers a new perspective for analyzing the function of characters and their role in propelling the plot. Yet, there is a dearth of research that integrates this theory with the narratives of Huangmei opera films and television dramas.

Female characters, as the narrative core, deepen the discourse on gender and female consciousness. Enriching the relationships among functional characters can diversify the plot and explore more universal narrative patterns.

Research Methodology

This study employs a multi-stage approach to thoroughly analyze the function of female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas and their impact on narrative, with an emphasis on qualitative analysis. The research is divided into three phases:

Theoretical Foundation Establishment: Initially, a theoretical foundation is established through a comprehensive literature review and case studies.

Qualitative Analysis of Representative Cases: Subsequently, representative cases are selected for analysis, focusing on narrative themes and structures. The study reveals the active role of female characters as functional characters and explores the intrinsic patterns of

the narrative structure in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, proposing hypotheses in the process.

Verification of results: Finally, the hypotheses are tested to deepen the understanding of the narrative structure in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas. The research concludes with a summary and recommendations for improvement.

Population and Sample

When examining the widely disseminated and beloved masterpieces of Huangmei Opera film and television dramas in mainland China, two major strands of narrative themes can be distinctly identified: the traditional narrative themes and the innovative narratives within the genre. The selection of representative works for study was guided by the following criteria:

- The works have achieved extensive circulation with a substantial audience base.
- The narrative themes encompass both traditional and innovative elements.
- The narrative structure is characteristic, featuring either linear or interwoven storytelling.
- Female characters are cast as the central "functional characters," reflecting the evolution of female consciousness and values.

Ultimately, the selections for traditional narrative themes include "Marriage of The Fairy Princess," "Female Consort Prince," "Butterfly Lovers," and "The New Legend of White Snake." For innovative narratives, the chosen works are "Cross-Stitch Female Workers," "Life and Death Duel," and "Pan Zhang Yuliang" (Table 1).

Table 1 Research sample of representative works of Huangmei opera film and television dramas

Name	Narrative structure	Narrative threads		Topic	Remark
Marriage of the Fairy Princess	Linear storytelling	Marriage	Single	Tradition	A classic story of love
Female Consort Prince	Linear storytelling	Marriage	Single	Tradition	A classic story of love
Butterfly Lovers	Linear storytelling	Marriage	Single	Tradition	A classic story of love
Pan Zhang Yuliang	Linear storytelling	Female growth	Single	New theme	Women's self-growth
The New Legend of White Snake	Interweaving narratives	Marriage	Double line	Tradition	A classic story of love
Cross-Stitch Female workers	Interweaving narratives	Women's career	Single	New theme	Love and self-growth
Life and Death Duel	Interweaving narratives	Patriotic	Double line	New theme	Female patriotic themes

Source: Author-made

Embody traditional narrative themes

Traditional Huangmei Opera films and television dramas exhibit a concentration and uniformity in narrative themes, with a significant proportion closely related to women, often revolving around the eternal human emotional themes of love, marriage, and family. The stories of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas are primarily derived from traditional literary works and folktales. Chinese folktales such as "The Story of Dong Yong's Encounter with the Fairy" have been adapted into corresponding Huangmei Opera films and television dramas like "Marriage of The Fairy Princess" and "Female Consort Prince," which have taken on societal consciousness and educational roles assigned by society.

"Marriage of The Fairy Princess" and "Butterfly Lovers" feature women actively pursuing love and advocating for marital freedom. In "Marriage of The Fairy Princess," "Female Consort Prince," and "The New Legend of White Snake," there is a recurring motif of strong female characters with extraordinary abilities, reflecting the evolution of societal concepts and gender relations, and also mirroring society's focus on women's rights.

Embody innovative narrative themes

Contemporary Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, such as "Cross-Stitch Female Workers," "Life and Death Duel," and "Pan Zhang Yuliang," focus on love and family as the main narrative threads, delicately portraying the fate of women. However, the essence of these stories lies in demonstrating the process by which women achieve redemption through self-growth. "Life and Death Duel," reflecting modern current affairs, starts from a female perspective, deeply explores patriotic sentiments amidst the turmoil of war, and showcases women's commitment and sacrifice in the face of national destiny. Set after the founding of the People's Republic of China, "Cross-Stitch Female Workers" illustrates women working independently and pursuing a better life, reflecting the spirit of independence and sense of social responsibility of women in the new era. These narrative themes collectively paint a vibrant picture of women taking control of their own destinies, transcending the limitations of love, and striving for self-growth and social contribution.

Tracing back to their cultural roots, the deep concern for women's groups, the authentic reflection of social life, and the delicate portrayal of human emotions in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas are the sources of their artistic charm. This care for women is, in fact, a continuation of the humanistic spirit in traditional Chinese culture. The feminist tendencies in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas are not only a reflection of the literati's self-reflection and redemption but also a vivid embodiment of the Chinese literati's concern for the country and the people, carrying forward their ideals through literature. They give voice to the struggles of women in the tide of history, resonating with the strong notes of the times.

Data Analysis

The narrative structure of Huangmei Opera film and television dramas

The narrative structure of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas is closely intertwined with the plot, where the narrative structure is essentially the arrangement of the plot. The narrative theme sets the tone of the film, while the narrative structure serves as the framework that organizes all narrative elements. The development of character images and the

advancement of the plot are complementary to the narrative structure. "The narrative structure of a film is the skeleton and backbone of the film's life, an important aspect in establishing the basic style and stylistic characteristics of a film" (Li, X.J., 2000).

We may analyze the narrative structure of the story as an observation point. The story structure consists of a series of the same narrative structures, showing regularity. It designs both helping and hindering actions, which are driven by different characters. This leads to an identical story morphological structure: the narrative clue sender D sends a demand to the protagonist A, who receives help from B and is hindered by C, ultimately achieving a result that allows the narrative receiver E to receive the outcome. (Table 2)

Huangmei Opera films and television dramas such as "Marriage of The Fairy Princess," "Female Consort Prince," "Butterfly Lovers," and "Pan Zhang Yuliang" feature linear narrative structures that unfold in chronological or logical order. This clarity allows the audience to easily follow the development of the plot; however, it may also lead to a monotonous narrative style that lacks variation, potentially causing the audience to feel bored.

In contrast, Huangmei Opera films and television dramas adapted from traditional repertoires like "The New Legend of White Snake," as well as modern Huangmei Opera films and television dramas such as "Cross-Stitch Female Workers" and "Life and Death Duel," employ non-linear interwoven narrative structures. The interplay of two narrative threads creates plot conflicts, enhancing the story's tension and complexity, and enriching the characterization, offering the audience profound thoughts and insights during their appreciation of the work.

Modern Huangmei Opera films and television dramas tend to utilize non-linear narratives, enriching and adding depth to the stories, facilitating a deeper understanding of the characters by the audience, and enhancing the artistry and emotional resonance. In the future, the narrative structures of Huangmei Opera will diversify, with traditional linear narratives coexisting alongside non-linear interwoven narratives, the latter gradually becoming the mainstream.

Table 2 Huangmei opera film and television drama linear narrative structure and functional characters

Name	Narrative threads			Plot push	
	subjecA	sender D	receiver E	helper B	opponent C
Marriage of the Fairy Princess	Seven fairies	Seven fairies	Dong Yong	Six sisters\Locust tree spirit	Jade emperor
Female Consort Prince	Feng Suzhen	parents	Fiance	Princess\emperor\Brother	Stepmother Lord Liu
Butterfly Lovers	Zhu yingtai	parents	Liang shanbo	Maids\scholars	parents
Pan Zhang Yuliang	Pan Yuliang	uncle	Pan Yuliang	Panzanization\Painting friends	Pan Zanhua wife\social etiquette
The New Legend of	Bai Suzhen	Guanyin Bodhisattva	Xu Xian	Xiaoqing\Sister\Li linfu\	Fahai\prime minister\Toad Demon

White Snake Clue 1 The New Legend of White Snake Clue 2	Xu Shilin	Guanyin Bodhisattva	Bai Suzhen\ Xu Xian	Bilian Golconda\ Rabbit essence	King of the Golden Law
Cross-Stitch Female workers Clue 1	XiaoYan	XiaoYan	XiaoYa n	Mother\ Female co- workers\ Technician	Fiance\ Future mother-in-law
Cross-Stitch Female workers Clue 2	XiaoYan	Mother	Fiance	Father	XiaoYan
Life and Death Duel Clue 1	Su Yueyin	Zhao Dajiang \ Zheng Jinsheng	Su Yueyin	Zhao Xiaomei \ Zheng Jingsheng Su Yueyin\ Zhao Xiaomei	Not
Life and Death Duel Clue 2	Zhao Dajiang	British businessma n\ Zheng Jingsheng	Wuhu rice market		British businessman\ Luo Da Drum

Source: Author-made

The above story, there are two narrative elements: the constant functional characters and the changing character roles. Functional characters drive the development of the plot, and these characters may exhibit repetitive traits. Regardless of the changes in the characters within the story, the functions they serve at the abstract structural level remain the same. We can regard "functional characters" as one of the fundamental narrative elements of a story, categorize the acting roles based on the significance of their actions, and then classify some of the basic structural forms of the story.

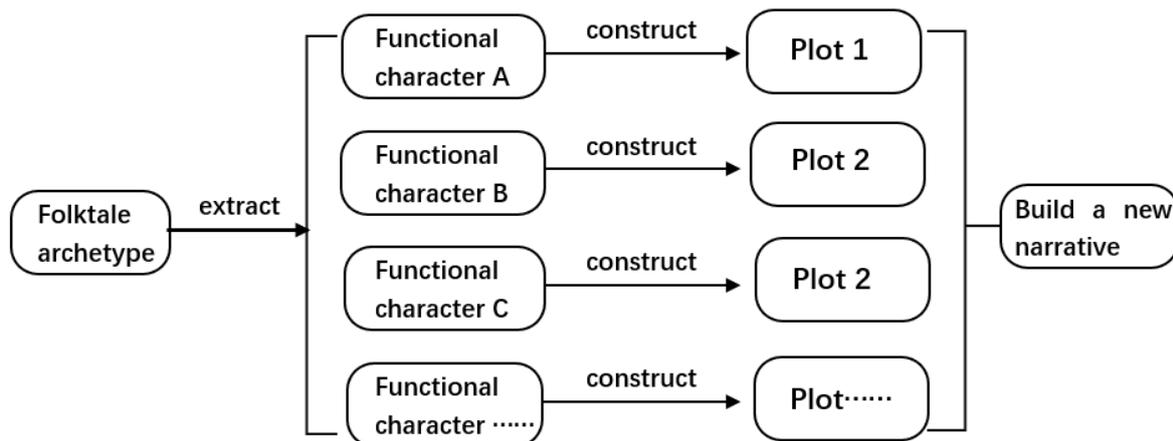
Discussion of the research results as follows

Research results: A model for the construction of narrative structure of "functional characters" in Huangmei opera film and television dramas

Aristotle was among the first to articulate that the narrative structure of literature, specifically the arrangement of the plot, should be complete and possess a temporal process of continuity. Within each plot unit, there is change and motion; the interweaving combination of multiple units forms a complex narrative, propelling the rich forms of narrative in film and television dramas (Aristotle, 1996). A story itself can be broken down into a sequence composed of a series of functional acts. Stories of the same type share a common narrative sequence, that is, a narrative formula. In stories of the same type, the "functional characters" can be played by multiple roles, ultimately ensuring that the narrative sequence of the story remains unchanged (Shen, D., 1998).

From a narrative perspective, Chinese folktales have variable and colorful plots with happy and satisfactory endings. Structurally, however, the plots of folk legends are uniform and stereotyped, all belonging to the same type, with the "functional characters" that dominate the development of the story plot being of a fixed type. The relationships between "functional characters" evolve into the storyline, and the narrative structure is composed of multiple plots

organically combined. Therefore, studying the characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas through the concept of "functional characters" allows for an understanding of the narrative structure's patterns, guiding the creation of modern Huangmei Opera films and television dramas by grasping the rules of the narrative structure.



Huangmei Opera films and television dramas construct a new narrative based on traditional folktales, and by employing structuralist narrative methods, one can identify universal principles. These methods highlight the protagonist, typically a female character, and increase the number of "functional characters." Multiple plot sections are designed according to the types of "functional characters," with each character constructing a plot section as a unit. These units together form the narrative of a new Huangmei Opera film or television drama. The production process of this narrative structure model is characterized by its commercial and formulaic nature (Figure 2).

Reflection

By examining the adaptation of the traditional play "The Legend of the White Snake" into "The New Legend of White Snake," the case study illustrates that increasing the number of "functional characters" can construct a more complex and engaging narrative. The folk tale "The Three Pagodas of West Lake," dating from the Song Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Xiaozong, tells of a white snake that transforms into a female demon meeting a man, conveying the educational caution that a man's lust inevitably harms himself. Later adapted and developed, it became the traditional Huangmei Opera "The Legend of the White Snake," which tells the story of a white snake transformed into a beautiful woman who falls in love with Xu Xian, enacting a tragic love story. The narrative structure is linear, with few character roles and a singular narrative method (Figure 3).

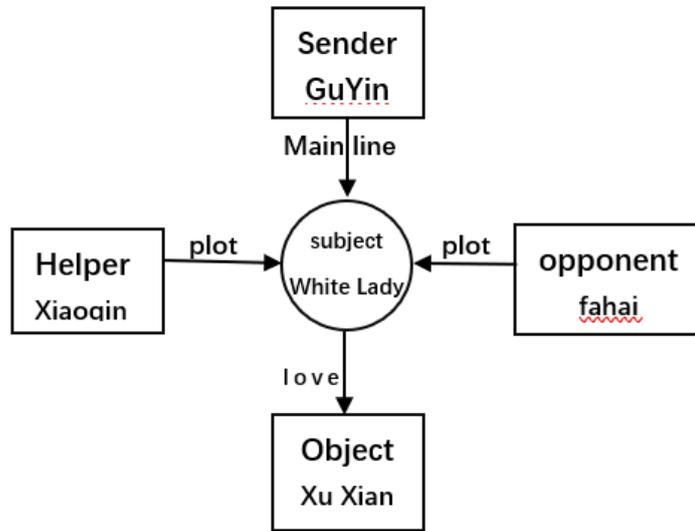


Figure 3: The narrative diagram of "The Legend of the White Snake"
Source: Author-made

In the 1990s, the story was adapted for television into "The New Legend of White Snake," where the white snake is portrayed as a beautiful, kind, and helpful woman. Employing a non-linear interwoven narrative structure and introducing multiple "functional characters," the adaptation enriched the plot conflicts and the complexity of the narrative (Figure 4).

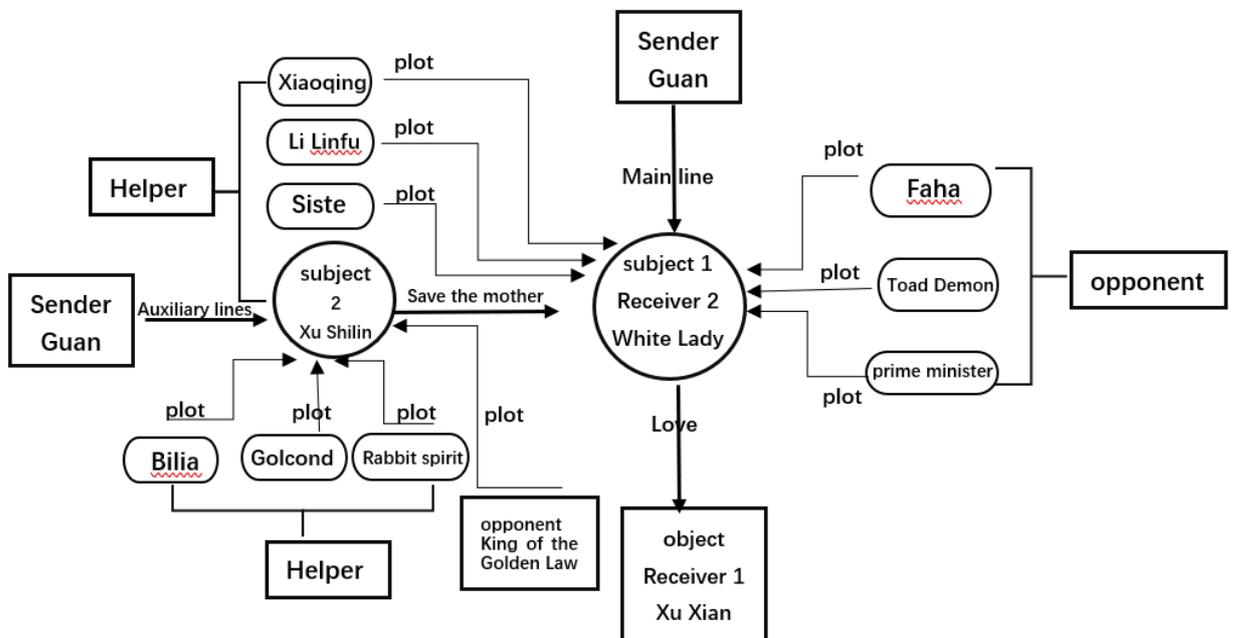


Figure 4: The narrative diagram of "The New Legend of the White Lady".
Source: Author-made

Upon an in-depth analysis and comparative study of the narrative structure between the classic Huangmei Opera "The Legend of the White Snake" and the modern Huangmei Opera film and television drama "The New Legend of White Snake," it is evident that while the main character "White Lady" and the narrative thread maintain continuity, the ingenious addition of "functional characters" not only adds new dimensions to the plot but also enriches and enlivens the narrative structure. The narrative structure transitions from linear to intersecting narratives, with the introduction of many new characters and plot conflicts. This narrative technique not only deepens and refines the portrayal of the main character "White Lady" but also greatly satisfies contemporary audiences' expectations for the depth of the plot and the diversity of character personalities. Through such innovation, traditional art is revitalized in the modern context, fostering a deeper emotional resonance with the audience.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore the narrative functions of female characters in Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, and how these characters reflect and shape their own images amidst the changes in social values and aesthetic tastes. The research employs a multi-stage methodology, including qualitative analysis, case study analysis, and the construction of narrative structure models.

Initially, a literature review is conducted to organize relevant theories on opera and gender, Huangmei Opera film and television works, and structuralist narratology, providing a theoretical foundation for this study. Subsequently, representative cases of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas are selected, and case study analysis is applied to comparatively analyze the narrative themes and the role of functional characters in the construction of narrative structures across different types of Huangmei Opera film and television drama cases. Based on this, a narrative structure model for Huangmei Opera films and television dramas is constructed and validated with case studies.

Through this research, we have discovered that the portrayal and evolution of female characters not only reflect the changes in societal values but also signify the gradual awakening of female consciousness. The findings indicate that the narrative structure of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas can be optimized by emphasizing the agency of female characters, increasing the number of functional characters, and constructing multiple plot units.

The results of the study provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the modern transformation of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas. They reveal the innovative potential of the narrative structure in these works, offering a new perspective for the modern development of this traditional art form. Additionally, the study provides new theoretical tools for understanding the narrative mechanisms of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas, contributing to the advancement of academic research in this field.

Limitations and assumptions of the study

While this study has achieved certain results, there are still some limitations and shortcomings. Firstly, the selection of research samples may have a degree of subjectivity; future studies could consider a broader range of samples to enhance the universality and representativeness of the research. Secondly, this study primarily focused on the theoretical analysis of narrative structure and functional characters, with relatively less empirical research

on audience reception and market feedback; future studies could integrate empirical investigations to more comprehensively assess the impact of narrative innovation on audiences.

Furthermore, with the development of digitalization and new media technologies, the modes of dissemination and reception of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas are also continuously evolving. Future research could focus on narrative innovation and audience interaction of Huangmei Opera films and television dramas in the context of digitalization, exploring the pathways of inheritance and development of traditional arts in the new media environment.

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