



## Warmth in Harsh Reality-on Mother Image in *The Village Mother*, a Puzhou Opera

Guo Ziyue <sup>1</sup>, Wang Xueran <sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Student of Film and Television Literature in Film School of Shanxi Communication University, China

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding author of this article, A lecturer in Film School of Shanxi Communication University, China

\* Corresponding Author: **Wang Xueran**

### Article Info

**ISSN (Online):** 2582-7138

**Impact Factor (RSIF):** 7.98

**Volume:** 06

**Issue:** 05

**September - October 2025**

**Received:** 01-07-2025

**Accepted:** 02-08-2025

**Published:** 26-08-2025

**Page No:** 197-201

### Abstract

*The Village Mother* is a well-known Puzhou opera from Southern Shanxi Province. Its live stage performance had been well-received for over ten years, and its film version was awarded the Best Film at the 13<sup>th</sup> Universe Multicultural Film Festival in 2016, Los Angeles, USA. The authors of the present article studied the successful mother image from the social background of the opera story, the literary devices used in the play to depict the mother image, and the performing skills of the leading actress, Ms Jing Xuebian. This mother image under special social background played the role of bridging the huge gap between China's rural and urban areas

**Keywords:** Pu Opera, Village Mother, Mother Image, Harsh Reality

### 1. Introduction

*The Village Mother*, a Puzhou opera, was first put on stage by Yuncheng Youth Experimental Pu Opera Troupe in Shanxi Province in 2004. It soon achieved great success, first popular in Yuncheng where the opera story rooted, then quickly spreading to different areas in Shanxi Province and the neighbouring provinces as Henan and Shaanxi, and was even put on stage by other local operas. And then to Beijing, the capital city of China, finally accepted by the viewers in the world in the 13<sup>th</sup> Universe Multicultural Film Festival. In a period of ten years from 2004-2014, the number of live performances of this play by Yuncheng Youth Experimental Pu Opera Troupe exceeds 1,400 times, creating a live performing record of modern opera in over 30 years after the reform and opening to the outside world in 1978. The audience who watched the play repeatedly said that they gained a new feeling every time during and after watching. The perfect mother image in harsh reality is undoubtedly the most important for its success. It is down-to-earth, real and vivid, touching the souls of the audience, expressing inner feelings that the viewers identify with, and stroking a responsive chord for them.

### 2. The social background

The background for the opera story was the urban-rural gap formed in a long period of several decades after the founding of People's Republic of China. The rural areas contributed a lot to the development of the cities. Luckily, the College Entrance Examination was restored in 1977 after the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976 when only the lucky ones were chosen by ambiguous standards that nearly had nothing to do with academic performance and sent to the higher educational institutions. That was a good opportunity for the rural young people to seek for a better future. Some of them worked very hard and passed the college entrance examination, a route similar to that of the Imperial Examination System lasted for over 1,000 years in Chinese feudal society. Many students from the countryside benefited from the college entrance examination, found stable jobs in the cities. However, in 1994, the State Council issued the Decision on Vocation Education Reform and Development which clearly stated that the country government would not assign college graduates employment. Then, the only way to settle in the cities for the rural background university graduates was nearly blocked. Their backgrounds gave them little chance of achieving in job hunting. Quanbao, the village mother's son, graduated from university, after 1994.

Douhua, the protagonist in the opera, is a widowed mother in a mountain village. She raised up her son all by her own diligence and frugality. Her son, the only one who received higher education in that mountain village, wanted to find a job in the city and settle down. He found a girl friend from the city with a better family background. Her mother helped him to find a job, and agreed to their marriage with the condition that her son-in-law should be an orphan if he had rural background, because the city mother who was aware of the social reality of differences between the cities and the countryside was afraid to be burdened by so many poor rural relatives. To help her son to settle down in the city and realize the dream of several generations of their family, Douhua, the poor widowed village mother, had no other choice but pretended to be a dead mother...

This mother image is portrayed with good intentions by the playwright. She was widowed at very young age, and must take up the responsibility of earning bread for the family and raising her son by herself, especially that her husband trusted her to provide for her son's education when he died, so that in the future their son could find a job and settle down in the city to change the fate of that rural family. This was difficult task for a rural family even if the husband and wife were both full time farm hands. With no other means of making money, the poor mother spent all her spare time cutting twigs of the chest trees, and making baskets to sell, with the hope that her hard work could help her son to have a happy life in the city. She was willing to sacrifice everything for her son. She enjoyed her happiness so long as her son could move a step forward towards the aim of becoming a city dweller. To some audience who have no thorough understanding of China's rural life and the situation of China's dual society, the mother lived a life with no self nor dignity. Unfortunately, this is not just a tragedy for the poor village mother. The audience and the playwright were not sure if they were eulogizing or criticising this mother. This mother image is humble, vivid, lively and complicated. It is thought-provoking and soul-touching, breaking the usual eulogizing pattern of Chinese literary and artistic works for maternal love. Instead of criticising, it set out a kind of helpless sign over life, which catches the Achilles heel of the present time: The repeated life tragedy, family tragedy and marriage tragedy caused by the urban-rural differences and polarization of the rich and the poor. The audience feels powerless in front of the tragedies. The worse thing is that the tragic genes are passed from generation to generation due to the lack of ultimate spiritual concern. Therefore the tragedies of the second or even the third generations of the farmers are repeated. Although with the development of the times, the number of this kind of tragedies is decreasing, it is still the duty of the art workers to focus on disadvantaged groups.

### 3. The depicting of the mother image in the play

#### 1. Successful choice of the protagonist

It is common for literary works to take maternal love as their themes. Since human beings live in society, in order to shape a good character image, it is necessary to consider the general social environment and the specific living surrounding of the character. Otherwise, the character image would be superficial and unreal without environment, like water with no sources, tree with no roots. Traditionally, China had been an agricultural country for many years in history. Therefore the village mother is the most commonly seen mother image. Dou Hua, the protagonist of the play, is a mother who lives

in a small mountain village with her only son and has been a widow for many years. She moved between her own rural family and her-daughter-in-law's city family in this play, which unconsciously plays the role of bridging the huge gap between the Chinese rural and urban areas. As a traditional Chinese mother, her greatest wish is that her son Quanbao can successfully find a job in the city after graduating from college and settle down in the city with a wife who can match him to continue the family blood. However, a mother's simple and common wish cannot be realized in the face of the harsh social reality. This reality means a huge gap between the rural areas and cities in Chinese society at that time caused by the "dual structure", in which the urban and rural people have very different lifestyle, the ideal pursuit and value orientation; The real life of the poor village mother, who tries to make more money by weaving baskets seems to have no connection with her wish for her son to find a job and set up his family in the city. Douhua, the mother image is constructed within this "realistic environment" and the marked traits of her character are molded by the living surroundings. Therefore, the image of "village mother" is down to the earth for the audience.

The poor mother was confined to that piece of arid yellow land, no matter how industrious and intelligent she was, she still couldn't get away from the fate of poverty. Giving birth to a baby boy was the greatest blessing for a young wife in the village, since that firms her family position and means the hope for the new family. However, and soon after the birth of her son, she lost her husband. This woman had experienced countless difficulties to bring up her son and provide him with good education all by herself. When the day the poor woman expected finally came that her son grew up, graduated from college and got a job in the city, it seemed that the sun in her life was rising. But she couldn't have imagined that her son could clutch the life-saving straw he accidentally picked up and shoulder his way to settle down in the city only if she pretended to be a dead mother.

#### 2. The representative internal and external conflicts

Conflicts play a key role in shaping characters in opera. As a comprehensive art form, opera is different from other art forms. To depict a complete picture of life in a specific time and limited space in a fascinating way, the characters should be shaped through strong and expressive contradictions and conflicts.

The conflicts in this play can be divided into two kinds: the external conflict and internal ones. The conflict between village mother, Douhua, and her son's mother-in-law, Ms. Wu Xiangqin, is the external conflict. This conflict between the two women is not only the contradiction between the two mothers, but also reflects the conflicts and changes between the country and the city people in the aspects of thinking ways, material pursuits and spiritual outlooks in the great social changes taking place in the countryside of China. The internal conflict mainly occurs in the heart of Douhua, the heroine, and this kind of conflict can be established as long as there are contradictory factors in the character's mind. In this opera, the external conflict is the basis of character formation, while the internal conflict makes the character more delicate. The combination of the two can present the audience a more vivid and three-dimensional character.

There are five internal conflicts. The first time was when Douhua heard that the pre-condition for Quanbao's marriage with a city girl was that he must be an orphan. She was

shocked and nearly fell down to the ground. However, after calming down, she convinced herself that finding a job and marrying a city girl were more important for her son, "such a good opportunity was hard to come by and he would regret if he misses it." "Parents are willing to risk their lives for their children. Is there any mother who doesn't want to sacrifice for her own children?" "I will lose nothing if I pretend to be a dead mother." These lines reflected that a mother's priority was her only son's long-term benefits, for which she was willing to accept the grievance of being a dead mother.

Secondly, Douhua was put in a difficult situation when she knew that it was difficult to find a good babysitter to look after her grandson. She thought to herself, "I cannot help worrying about my grandson. Nobody can be a better babysitter than his own grandmother. Why don't I answer for this job advertisement?" Although Douhua knew that she should be a dead person to her in-laws and keep away from them, she had hurried to her son's home since she worried about her grandson.

The third conflict arose when Quanbao couldn't bear to see his mother being wrongly treated as a baby-sitter by his mother-in-law, he urged her to go back home. "I don't want you to be a servant in you own son's home, nor can I bear to watch my mother to be ill-treated." She answered him with her firm decision to stay. "If only you don't tell the truth, they won't know the secret. If only I can be with my grandson, I will never leave no matter in what way you try to drive me away." Douhua loved her son and grandson so much that she was willing to be wronged.

Douhua's forth inner conflict was reflected in this verse "Night is late, stars are not bright, the moon overhead is shining." In the face of her husband's portrait, Douhua sang the words, which was a review of the difficult days during the first half of her life, but also helpless airing of the current grievances. At the son's house, Douhua lived an awkward life, "I dare not kiss my grandson, have to treat my son as a stranger and can't admit my identity to my daughter-in-law, and her mother often scolds me." "I force myself to smile in day time, but I often weep at deep night. So long as I can take care of my grandson, another generation to carry on Xu family name, I can bear any pain and swallow any insult." On stage she said the psychological monologue melancholy, the audience nod their heads knowingly to show understanding of the deep love from a mother and a grandmother.

The fifth time happened when Yulian lost her ring, ambivalence was produced when Douhua was wronged and evicted. "A basin of sewage fell from the sky, the scolding words from Yulian's mother sounded like sharp knives to stab into my heart. I had a mind to tell the truth. However, if the cat was out of the bag, how embarrassing my son, Quanbao, would be!" She quickly packed up and prepared to go back to the mountain village. At this time, Quanbao, who had endured the long time suffering of being a two-faced person, shouted out "Mom" loudly. After the truth was exposed, the conflict was completely intensified and the whole drama reached its climax. Quanbao sang: "I can't help crying out in pain, my poor mother!" Yulian: "I am shocked. Now all my misgivings have vanished. My poor mother-in-law, you swallowed so many injustices." Douhua: "At last, this day has arrived. My son can call me "Mom" in front of his wife and mother-in-law, and my daughter-in-law eventually knows who I am!" Wu Xiangqin, Yulian's mother, apologized: "It is all my fault. I'm terribly sorry for what I did to you." and called her Quanbao's mother instead of

"Douhua" directly as a babysitter. After all the misunderstandings and grudges were resolved, the three generations of the big family reunited happily. The series of logical thoughts and conductive codes were built on the basis of an ordinary mother's sincerity and selfless love, with no intention to be repaid. These conflicts reflected the greatness and selflessness of maternal love with revealing the spiritual quality of the characters, creating a noble mother image and producing a strong spiritual shock.

### 3. The suitable plot setting

The setting of drama plot should be subordinate to the characterization of characters. As it is said, plot is born out of character, and character is completed in plot. The plot of this play reflects three features:

#### First, it is true to life.

The setting of drama plot must be based on real life, so as to choose novel content without losing the truth. To help her son start a family and find a job in city, Douhua is willing to pretend to be dead, disguising herself as a nanny, working hard day and night. However, she does not think it bitter, but happy. In real life, such a story may seem unimaginable, but the essence of art is that it comes from life and higher above life. These "seemingly impossible" plots and Douhua's "strange" thoughts and behavior based on the great maternal love appear reasonable. It can happen under particular circumstances.

#### Secondly, it is novel.

This is new in two ways. On the one hand, the plot of Village mother is not overwhelming, only takes common events in life to depict the character and create new plots; On the other hand, the plot arrangement of this play has no logical coherence internally, but maternal love is used as the main line to run through various incoherent plots, like a silver thread running through one pearl after another.

#### Thirdly, true feelings

What makes this drama so moving is that it touches the audience's hearts. Douhua wants to hold a wedding for her son in the city with the money she saved from her hard work. As she took out the money from her handkerchief in coins and other small changes, the audience are moved deeply to tears. The verse of "Late at night" is closely related to the development of the setting and the psychological changes of the characters, focusing on the complex personality and image of the protagonist. This section contains a variety of feelings, which are proud memory of many years of hard working to pass through countless difficulties and hardships, helpless grievance for her present awkward situation and hopes for son and grandson's happy life in the future. How mixed the emotions are in this monologue!

### 4. Superb performances skills

Ms. Jing Xuebian, the leading actress in the play itself and its film version, was highly praised at home and abroad. She got the best leading actress award in the 13<sup>th</sup> Universe Multicultural Festival and the title of Pu Opera Queen in China. She successfully shaped the image of this mountain village mother with her artistic experiences and performing skills accumulated over a period of nearly 40 years. Jing Xuebian's opera tune is the first class among the Chinese actresses, a combination of her inborn talent and the result of



constant polishing and practicing of 40 years on the stage. Although she has an extremely detailed grasp of Chinese pronunciation and a good poetic intuition of Chinese rhythm, she does not deliberately highlight the beautiful melodious of her voice itself, but naturally changes the tone quality and rhythm to give the voice a vivid soul according to the natural needs of plots and thoughts in the process of expressing emotions.

Mr. Guo Hancheng, an opera critic speaks highly of Ms. Jing Xuebian's performance style. "She has a very good grasp of the breath when she sings, not only high, but also delicate, sounds effortless and versatile", "She speaks with rhythm, her speaking skills are very good with proper speed and pitch of voice, very cadenced and rich in feelings", "She has an excellent ability to shape characters, and can flexibly use different opera performance skills, which are both life-based and rhythmic to express modern life." "She is good at using traditional opera techniques in the transformation, for example, the chair work in Pu Opera "Hanging Pictures", and various dance steps and body language in "Running into the city" to perform." "She understands the character deeply from life rather than piling up the performing techniques and showing off skills."...

In the moonlight verse, her inner thoughts were constantly revealed by a section of combination of narrative and lyrical libretto. Her voice was sometimes gurgled gracefully as a brook; sometimes impassioned like a waterfall; sometimes as gentle as spring breeze; sometimes blew like a strong wind. The tune of Pu opera is both bold and graceful. Jing Xuebian further created and promoted it in order to delicately carve the spiritual world of the character and enrich the connotation of the character image effectively.

Among the four major Chinese tune systems, Puzhou Opera is the best at movement acting. As a first-class actress in the Pu opera art circle, Jing Xuebian consciously inherits Pu opera's essence, which is the emphasis and bold application of opera movements. The form of Chinese opera movements is highly stylized, which plays a role in guiding aesthetic judgment, accumulating artistic experiences and framing artistic standards. However, the stylisation keeps open for excellent actors and actresses. They can also find their own ways of acting in the process of inheritance and innovation. Jing Xuebian does not blindly cater to the performance trend of modern opera, but she is committed to the mining of artistic essence in traditional ways, and clearly pursuing the expressive power of movements. In the sections of city-going and glass-cleaning, she reformed and upgraded the movement procedures from the traditional Pu operas "Xu Ce running into the city" and "Hanging Pictures" on the stage, making these two plots, which were not important to the account of the plot, but essential to the expression of the character's inner feelings and shape the character's personality, vivid. The acting greatly enhanced the appreciation and entertainment of the drama, highlighting the power of the performing arts beyond the scripts.

It is worth affirming that other characters in the show also leave a deep impression on the audience. Ms. Fan Boxing, with the title of the national second-class actress, interprets the causticness and unreasonableness of Wu Xiangqin, Yulian's mother, vividly. Although she doesn't have a lot to perform in the play, her character is performed distinctly. Meanwhile, Quanbao's filial piety and the daughter-in-law, Yulian's generosity are depicted remarkably with brief description by the scripwriter. In short, the characters in

"Village mother" have their own unique features. Each actor/actress can grasp the essence of their roles, understanding them with both their minds and hearts, and performing with emotion, making well-tailored contributions to the successful image of "mother".

## 5. Summary

The village mother walks slowly to us along the winding mountain road alone from the hilltop, on which we had stood to look over the cities since we were children. Her hair is perfectly pinned into chignon, wearing a homemade navy blue Chinese-style short jacket with a gray cotton bundle on her arm. She firstly walks a long way on the mountain roads under the hot sun, then hitches a ride in a noisy quadricycle from the neighbouring village for an hour to get out of the mountain. It is impossible for this city to prepare any welcoming gifts or holding a ceremony for a village mother's arrival. She is greeted only by bustling crowds, hard roads, row upon row of tall buildings, criss-cross overpasses, noisy sirens from vehicles coming and going, as well as colorful neon. The village mother must have been tired and faint, but the mother must feel warm in her heart. Children are the suns for Chinese village mothers: when they are young, they are the mother's expectation; and when they grow up, they are their mothers' sky. Mothers are always proud of children's growth. No matter how far away and how difficult the journey is, mothers can come to her children and give them strength.

Mother's love is the source of human emotions. In Chinese literal and artistic works, mother image has always been an important mythological archetype to condense the deep emotions and memories of the nation. According to Carl. Gustav. Jung, the mother archetype, a universal image that has existed since remote past, is preserved as a "racial memory" that gives each individual a set of images and patterns. However, there are too many mothers from all over the world, and every child has his own unique mother image in his heart. And a unique mother image from personal life stories and emotional approaches may lead to a risk for art works, disengaged to audiences with completely different cultural backgrounds.

Although The Village Mother has a happy ending as hoped by the Chinese audience, it is still a tragedy based on real life in essence, reflecting the differences and contradictions between urban and rural areas in the process of urbanization in China.

In China, the college entrance examination system is an important driving force for urbanization. However, from its social and cultural background, the college entrance examination not only brings the opportunity for some village young people to have fundamental changes, but it unexpectedly brings about the emotional emptiness and spiritual fracture in the rural society that defies any description in words. After these young people go to universities and colleges, they hate their own rural background and try hard to cut off their connection with the backwardness and ignorance of the rural culture in their eyes: some people do not want to recognize their village parents in front of their city classmates; some do not want to go home to see their parents after they graduate and set up their own families in the cities; some make money but do not properly support their own elderly in the village; and some do not want to invite their parents to the city for a reunion nor provide for their aged parents with no retirement pension.

Stories of such archetypes are widespread in the countryside of southern Shanxi Province, where Pu opera and its predecessors have been popular for ages. The spread of such kinds of stories shows that in the material prosperity of urban civilization, there is hidden moral and emotional deviation and loss in people's hearts; At the same time, it also shows that in the face of urbanization, the rural Chinese society has deep worries about its own value and destiny. The mother role in Village Mother, precisely in such a harsh reality, constantly releases the tender and power of maternal love.

## 6. Acknowledgements

1. This paper is a phased achievement of the research project of Research on Multimodal Spreading of Shanxi Anti-corruption Opera Culture (2022YY143), sponsored by Shanxi Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning Office.
2. We would like to give our sincere gratitude to Mr. Ma Qiang from Taiyuan Normal University who polished the translation of this article from Chinese to English, and put forward many valuable suggestions.

## 7. References

1. Duan J, Chen M. On the pluralistic development of modern Puzhou Opera, The Village Mother. Grand Stage. 2020.
2. Fan J, Wen S. Maternal love—the utmost human affection beyond words: On the depiction of mother image in Puzhou Opera, The Village Mother. The Chinese Theatre. 2017.
3. Guo H. Why do you like Mother of the Mountain Village. People's Daily. 2010 Dec 9.
4. Li L. Analyses of the communication effects and development strategies of Puzhou Opera films [dissertation]. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Studies University; 2018.
5. Li L. An analysis of the performing arts of Jing Xuebian [master's thesis]. Shanxi: Shanxi Normal University; 2013. p.15.
6. Yang X. The warmth and power in rough reality: Cultural analysis of Village Mother. Culture Monthly. 2012.
7. Yao Y. Mother image analysis in modern Chinese opera. On the Works of Famous Writers. 2018.