

THE TRANSTEXTUAL GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN THE OPERA *MADAME WHITE SNAKE*

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Abstract

The opera *Madame White Snake* (hereafter *Madame*), co-commissioned by Opera Boston and Beijing Music Festival, premiered at Boston Cutler Majestic Theater in February 2010. It was the first commissioned opera by Opera Boston.¹ Based on the story from the famous Chinese ancient myth *Bai She Zhuan*² (in Chinese: 白蛇传), this opera's libretto was created by a Singaporean American librettist, who has shed the story's "traditional skin and taking on modern trappings" (Smith, 2019: 27) on purpose.

When sniffing at male librettists' discourses about female characters' vulnerable and tragic lives in their operas, opera *Madame*'s initiator and librettist Cerise Lim Jacobs argues that women should seize the initiative to make their own decisions in life. The white snake, in her mind, ought to be a whole woman who is powerful and demonic, and yet, is also nurturing and caring, is capable of deep and intense love.

In the first section of this article, I introduce the original legend's background and the story outline in its operatic adaptation; I also trace back the opera's commissioning process. After providing the background information of the story and the operatic version, then, in the second section I analyze the opera in terms of its transtextual figural gender construction in her characterization through comparative studies of the white and green snakes' images from the sources of literary works, traditional *xiqu* scripts and operatic librettos. Referring to Lim's personal growth and migrating history, as well as she and her husband co-founded charitable foundation's missions and its recent IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) opera grant program partnering with Opera America, I aim to examine her gender construction of the "female" roles in the opera from the perspectives of feminism, interracial marriage; and heterosexual, transsexual, and homosexual relationships.

Keywords

Opera, Chinese drama, Legends, Gender construction

MADAME WHITE SNAKE: BACKGROUND

Bai She Zhuan: One of Four Great Han Chinese Folktales

Bai She Zhuan (in English: *Madame White Snake* or *Legend of the White Snake*) is an ancient Chinese myth story about a love romance between an herbalist and a female snake demon.³ It was mostly agreed in the scholarship that the story was first popular among the folk during the

¹ Opera Boston established in 2003 and ceased on January 1, 2012 for the reason of budget deficit.

² The background of the story *Bai She Zhuan* is referring to the intangible cultural heritage project details from the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Website: http://www.ihchina.cn/project_details/12184/, last accessed on April. 20, 2021.

³ The legend has been considered as one of four great Han Chinese folktales. The other three are: *Meng Jiang Nü* (Lady Meng Jiang, in Chinese: 孟姜女), *Liang Shan Bo Yu Zhu Ying Tai* (Butterfly Lovers, in Chinese: 梁山伯与祝英台), and *Niu Lang Zhi Nü* (The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, in Chinese: 牛郎织女).

time of the Song and Ming Dynasties in the Zhen Jiang and Hang Zhou regions⁴ (Gao Yan-fang [高艳芳], 2011: 5; 2014: 3; Zhang Wan-li [张万丽], 2005:3; Zhou Qiao-xiang [周巧香], 2010: 3). The story has been collected and recorded in many treatises and novels, and has also been adapted into many art forms, such as the Chinese *xiqu* and *quyi* since then. It has also been made into film and TV series. The studies of the legend and its artistic adaptations from multiple sources, such as folklore, literature, arts, and drama, have provided the classic legend a contemporary academic prosperity. The countless adaptations have also proven the continuous popularity of the story among the audiences throughout almost one thousand years of history. In 2006, the folktale of *Bai She Zhuan* had been listed as China's national intangible cultural heritage.

The Commission of the Opera

Cerise Lim Jacobs introduced her reason and commissioning history of her project in the interview: “[In 2005] My husband was having a big birthday [in a few years]. He doesn’t want any ‘thing’, and he loves opera, so I thought I commission a song cycle for his birthday. Turns out a year past, nothing happened, we couldn’t come up with a topic. One day I woke up, [the story of] madame white snake was on my mind. Because I grew up in Singapore, that (Bai) was one of the Chinese operas (Cantonese opera) we watched. The story I was so familiar with, and I love the white snake so much and I find her extremely inspiring. Then I just wrote the first draft of the whole libretto.⁵ One morning I showed to Charles (Cerise Lim’s husband) and that was the start of our collaboration to write this incredible Chinese fable into an opera libretto that we could produce in the United States.” (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs, 2019).

In 2007, when Cerise Lim Jacobs, this unknown name among the renowned artists in the big American opera market, dialed the office number of Opera Boston and hoped to talk to Carole Charnow, the former general director of Opera Boston, explaining about her idea of producing a contemporary opera which was inspired by an ancient Chinese legend with the opera company, Charnow quickly called her back and showed her interest to that propose (Fang Bo [方博] and Carole Charnow, 2019). By that time, Opera Boston never had commissioned an original opera before. Moreover, commissioning a “freshman” to rewrite a Chinese story for the American audiences was also full of unexpected challenges. After serious discussions and specific artistic and commercial planning, the “amateur” librettist finally put the propose on the table. Lim and Charnow began to start their artistic team building. “We sent to several American composers, some of them Chinese American, some of them Western-American. That’s how we found Zhou Long⁶, and he said to me at the very beginning: ‘I hear the music’. So, I knew he was the right one.” It was the composer’s idea to expand from that song cycle-based chamber opera to a grand opera. Lim then expanded her one-act-libretto to four acts, with an additional prologue and epilogue. When the Beijing Music Festival heard from Zhou Long that he and Lim were going to create [the operatic version of] Bai, they immediately contacted Lim and expressed their wish to be part of the co-commissioning. Finally, Opera Boston and Beijing Music Festival co-commissioned this opera production (ibid.). The opera premiered in Boston in February 2010 and in Beijing in October 2010.

⁴ Since the story happened during the Song Dynasty, there are also history and folklore scholars arguing that part of the story was generated from legends in Tang Dynasty or even earlier from ancient myth. The specific period of history of the story is still arguable in academia today.

⁵ Writing lyrics of a song cycle was her first choice over an opera libretto since that was her first literary work after her 25 years legal career. Thus, Lim wished to write a song cycle at first.

⁶ Zhou Long (1953-) is a contemporary composer. He composed the music to the opera *Madame White Snake*.

Brief Story Outline of the Opera *Madame White Snake*

Madame White Snake is a transformation myth. Xiao Qing is half-snake and half woman. Many eons ago, she was a man and her mistress Madame White a woman. Xiao Qing loved Madame White and tried to take her by force. He was defeated and forced into exile. When they died, both were reincarnated as snakes (Madame White was reincarnated as a white snake and Xiao Qing as a green snake) in punishment for their evil ways. God took pity on Xiao Qing and made him a female snake so that he could forever be with his love. The white snake demon yearns to be human to experience love. After one thousand years of meditation, god grant her wish. While she is transformed physically into a beautiful woman, her essence remains unchanged – she is still a snake and a demon to boot (although many maintain she becomes truly transformed by love). Madame White falls in love with an herbalist [Xu Xian], marries him and becomes pregnant, thus violating all traditional taboos – racial, ethnic, cultural and religious. But an Abbot [Fa’hai] sees through her human form to the snake and, not surprisingly, disaster strikes. Her husband betrays her, and in the moment of betrayal, she is transformed back into a snake. At last, Madame White has a fight with the Abbot. She raises the waters to drown the Abbot. The world is engulfed by floods; millions die (Lim Jacobs, Cerise. Synopsis and Librettist’s Note. 2019. Program Booklet of the Opera *Madame White Snake*. Hong Kong Arts Festival, 8th March: 16-21).

The four-act opera is structured with the four seasons of life, which enables the composer to make his music both poetic and dramatic, and also makes the librettist’s operatic storytelling to be philosophically cosmopolitan.

THE TRANSTEXTUAL FIGURAL GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN THE LIBRETTO

Previous Studies on Figural Gender Construction in the Story of *Bai She Zhuan*

As mentioned in the previous section, the countless literary and artistic adaptations of *Bai* have been studied from multidisciplinary approaches in the academia. Among all of those researches on the adaptations, one essay entitled “Lun Lei-feng ta de dao diao” (On the collapse of the Lei-feng Pagoda, 1924) by Lu Xun – one of the most influential modern Chinese litterateurs – has been considered as the pioneer literary work which directly discussed the collapse of the Lei-feng Pagoda literally, and sharply connected the social news with the folktale story of *Bai*. As a revolutionist and one of the leaders of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, Lu’s essay was believed to have “revealed the feudalists’ suppression of the people and praised people’s fighting spirit of that time.” (Li, Meng-de [黎孟德], 2014: 100).

Comparing to the study on the historical and social background of the story since the 1920s to 30s, the study on figural images (from the story) started relatively late. In the 1950s, shortly after the People’s Republic of China was founded, “the artistic adaptation and recreation as well as the academic research on figural image was obviously influenced by the [socialist] art policy of ‘literature and art serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers.’” (Gao Yan-fang [高艳芳], 2014). Thus, study on figural images from the story at that time was mostly from the perspective of social hierarchy (A Ying [阿英], 1951). In the 1980s, more studies analyzed the white snake’s figural image in the background of social conflicts of her time, which put the character and her deeds back in her social and historical context in depth. Since that time, scholars whose study mostly focus on the plot development have categorized the whole story into three periods on the white snake’s transformation – a snake demon; half human half demon; and a snake goddess (Chen Cheng-fan [陈正芳]; 2013). From then on, the studies on the relationship between the snakes’ gender and their body and spirit, have widely started.

It was until the 2000s, the scholars who study on figural image in *Bai* have broaden their research scope and no longer limited on the white snake and the abbot Fa’hai, but switched to

Xu Xian and the green snake, which officially started the academic research from gender studies and feminist perspective of figural image analysis on the female as well as the male characters in the story (Zhang, Wan-li [张万丽], 2007; ; Zhou Feng-qin [周逢琴], 2010; ; Zhao, Qian [赵倩], 2011; Gao Yan-fang [高艳芳], 2014; Geng, Chuan-ming and Yao Ping [耿传明, 平瑶], 2015). Among these figural studies of *Bai*, more and more scholars start to dig into the multiple perspectives of gender construction in different art forms. I will discuss in the following subsections.

White Snake: From a Demonized “Outsider” to a “Rebellious Woman”

Although the figural image and gender construction in the story of *Bai* has been recreated throughout the history once and once again, the core frame of the storyline from the legend in its literary and artistic adaptations remains, which is about the transformation of the snake demon and her love story with the herbalist after her being transformed into a woman.

In ancient China, on the one hand, the animal snake has been described as greedy, evil, and harmful animal in many two-part allegorical sayings and idioms; on the other hand, people also worship the snake as their totem for its mysterious power and extraordinary aggressivity. Thus, some Chinese people fear and revere the snake’s power at the same time. Meanwhile, the snake has also been associated with being female and sexuality. The snake has been given multiple meanings. Because of its biological feature of shedding its skin to refresh the body, it has also been connected to “women’s physiological function of fertility and giving birth to new life.” (Zhou Feng-qin [周逢琴], 2010: 9)

Since the early twentieth century, there have always been scholars from different disciplines who consider that the folktale story of *Bai* was the projection of ancient Chinese folk customs and beliefs (Chen Jian-xian [陈建宪], 1987; Luo Yong-lin [罗永麟], 2007) and totemism (Ma Zi-chen [马紫晨], 2002; Zhou Qiao-xiang [周巧香], 2010) toward the relation between snake and the nature. Thus, its multiple literary or artistic adaptations, ancient or modern, could more or less reflect the litterateurs’, artists’, as well as ordinary people’s attitudes toward women’s social status of the time. In the Tang legend *Li Huang* (in Chinese: 李黄, also entitled *Bai She Ji*), which was mostly considered as the first arguably source of the story of *Bai*, a man Li Huang cohabits with a white snake demon incarnated lady. After their three days cohabitation, Li died extremely brutal, with his body decayed into water and only his head left. In the Song script *Xi Hu San Ta Ji* (The three pagodas of West Lake, in Chinese: 西湖三塔记), a man Xi Xuan-zan saves a girl at the Broken Bridge on West Lake and takes her back to her home. The girl’s mother – a white snake demon incarnated white cloth woman forces him to stay and get married with her so that she can secretly eat his heart and livers. Xi’s uncle – a Taoist priest sees through the demons’ incarnated human body and finally prisoned them in the Pagodas (Zhou Qiao-xiang [周巧香]. 2010: 11-12; 15-18). These folktales demonize women through warning readers from different layers of aspects: beautiful woman could be evil and cruel demon; women’s sexual attraction and human’s sexual desire could be dangerous, or even mortal; and female who takes the initiative to pursue their favorite man is abnormal and should not be allowed in the feudal society. The reasons of people’s depiction of women’s demonic image could also be derived from the feudalist etiquette of Song Dynasty when the Neo-Confucianism was popular, according to which women should obey men’s order and not to be socially active.

In the time period of the Ming Dynasty, Feng Meng-long’s fiction *Jing Shi Tong Yan* (Stories to Caution the World, in Chinese: 警世通言), volume twenty-eight *Bai Niang-zi Yong Zhen Lei Feng Ta* (The White Maiden Locked for Eternity in the Leifeng Pagoda, in Chinese: 白娘子永镇雷峰塔), the white snake incarnated female also takes the initiative to pursue Xu Xuan and makes schemes of seduction in order to get married with him. In Feng’s literary adaptation, the role of the white snake incarnated woman was known as “White Maiden”. Her image was recreated as a daring woman who truly loves and loyal to Xu Xuan. Although Xu strictly abides

by the feudal ethics and intentionally keeps his distance from the stranger female at first, he eventually been touched by White Maiden and agrees with her proposal (Zhou Qiao-xiang [周巧香]. 2010:21) The heretical thoughts of Song Dynasty's Neo-Confucianism started to propagate gender equality and free marriage in the Ming Dynasty. These thoughts break the feudal ethics on woman's caged physical and mental freedom and liberate their status in love relationships. However, in Feng's depiction, the White Maiden was not completely transformed into human, the demonic side of her was quite obvious. "In the feudal society, women were restrained under the ethics and morality, male desire was also severely suppressed. On the one hand, they longed to release their repressed desires; on the other hand, they were still very much afraid to be condemned by feudal ethics. Thus, they took advantage of their discourse hegemony and made this half human-half demon female image. As a female, she could meet men's desire; as a demon, it could also express men's fear...the half woman-half demon female image just symbolizes the contradiction between human's natural desire and social morality." (Zhou Qiao-xiang [周巧香]. 2010: 23).

In the later dynasties, the story has been continuously adapted or recreated, and also been presented in many art forms. Li Rui and Jiang Yun's novel *Ren Jian: Chong Shu Bai She Zhuan* (Li Rui and Yun Jiang [李锐, 蒋韵], 2007) is one of the contemporary literary adaptations of the legend *Bai*. In their recreated story, the white snake is a demon who yearns to become a human. Although her snake body has been transformed into a human body, her real identity is still in between a human and a demon. Her life choices in the mortal world are all based on the unconditional identifying herself with the human nature; thus, she lives a difficult human life without using her spells, marries to a man and gives birth for the purposes of eliminating the demonic essence on her and gaining the human essence. However, every good deed she practices on earth is invisible in front of the abbot Fa'hai and the villagers. The "truth logic" people believes that: demons are evil, they kill and eat human and never stop hurting human. "Hence, the white snake undoubtedly will die tragically in the mortal world. What if the human truth logic is wrong? What is the unchallengeable human justice indeed? Why is that and who can define it?" Zhao, Qian [赵倩], 2011: 23), "When persecution is under the name of the sacred justice, when massacre transforms into people's carnival, when selfish and cowardice becomes the raft to escape, when hatred and brutality lights up the torch, in this mortal world, what's the reason to live?" (Li Rui and Yun Jiang [李锐, 蒋韵], 2007: 2) The writers try to "take an in-depth test on humanity, and expose the extreme panic of the contemporary Chinese people when confronting of humanity issues," (Geng Chuan-ming and Yao Ping [耿传明, 平瑶], 2015: 52) and these questions have been left for deeper thinking between the lines in this retold story.

After her intensive study on the reception of the legend *Bai* throughout the history, Cerise Lim Jacobs realizes that the figural image and gender construction (of the white snake) has never stop changing. Thus, she decided to write her own libretto, in which she treated the experiences of the lead role of Madame White as a projection of her own life. In my interview with the librettist, I was told that she fully identified herself with the white snake in the opera. Hence, she didn't adapt the character from the previous literary versions of the story. On the contrary, she created the white snake into a woman in flesh and blood, who does not represent the traditional Chinese female from the past.

Cerise Lim Jacobs was born in a Chinese immigrant family in colonial Singapore. Raised in the multi-cultural Singapore, she acknowledged herself and her family culturally Chinese. During her childhood, she was quite likely to enjoy wayang, one of the street opera performances in Singapore. After television has been brought into her grandparents' house, she visited them on each weekend, and they watched TV together. Lim describes: "In the afternoon there will always be Cantonese Opera. Program was very spotty, so they would play the same thing over and over again in the late 1960s to early 1970s." (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs, 2019). That "same thing" Lim mentioned includes a Huang-mei Opera movie (in Chinese: 黄梅调电影) *Bai She Zhuan*, produced by Shaw Brothers HK Ltd. Lim continues, "I loved the very famous Chinese actress from Hong Kong, Lin Dai [林黛]. When I was a child, I just watched

it over and over again, just loving the whole movie.” (Ibid.) Those early memories about the story and the impression of the lead female character Madame White have been rooted in her heart throughout her growing.

Lim says: “I went to a Chinese school first, and later transferred to an American Methodist missionary school. She explains, “everything we read and studied was in English. But under the law, we had to have two other languages, so I studied Mandarin and Malay. But at home, (it) is a different thing, we watch Cantonese TV instead of the others. I have first watched the *Bai She Zhuan* [Huang-mei Opera] movie and Cantonese opera, then I read it (the novel) in English.” (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019).

When Lim explains her recreation of the story and her different figural images compared to the traditional artistic adaptations, she told me that her husband knew nothing about the story, and he came up with many questions on this ancient Chinese myth: “Charles kept asking ‘Why would she say this?’, ‘Why would he do that?’ to the point that all I could do was flesh out the story in a way he would understand.” (Smith, 2019: 27). Meanwhile, throughout Lim’s own westward travelling history, her outlook on life has been transformed upside down. Fully identified herself with the white snake, she also decided to give her snakes rebellious spirits. “As an immigrant, leaving my country, my heritage and everything, traveling around the world, living all over the world, finally set in America, I really felt like an outsider,” says Jacobs. “I view the white snake as the ultimate outsider, that’s how I feel my whole life has been as an ultimate outsider, fighting to make a place for myself, as a woman, as a minority of color, someone is an immigrant who has no roots in a new society. That’s why I wrote it in a way she is both good and bad, has power and also vulnerability, yearned just to belong. She wants to be human, wants to belong to the human race.” (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019).

In her way of creating the character of white snake, Lim refuses to make her female characters beautiful but helpless. On the contrary, her white snake, as she describes, is “able to hold her own against an authoritarian patriarchy.” (Smith, 2019: 31). Lim says, “[When I started to do research on the story before writing the libretto,] I found the DVD [of the Huang-mei Opera movie *Bai She Zhuan*] to watch it again, [at that moment,] I couldn’t believe why I love it when I was a child. It was terrible. I am not talking about the acting, not talking about the artistic value of movie. I am talking about the ways characters portrayed. Because the white snake and the green snake, they were both so helpless. They were totally romanticized to the point where they became so weak, helpless objects, not in control of their destiny, no attempt to find the destiny, no attempt to fight against the authoritarian forces. You know, they were just like puppets, subjects to the wins of the society, to Xu Xian and the others. I can’t believe why I thought it was the best movie of the world [when I was a child]. The highly romanticized traditional stereotypical view of what Chinese woman is and ought to be... I discovered that her [white snake] early formation and concept of a white snake when she was all demon, it was really looking at this beautiful demon woman in the mythoginistic term which is as a devil or a demon. As the story went along, especially during the Ming dynasty, when it really became very popular, the people of Hang Zhou [where one of the areas the story happened] really adopted it, this demon became more and more romanticized. So now she is not the evil one, she is the victim. So, it’s now, we totally changed our view of her. Traditionally women are perceived in two roles, ‘bitch’ or ‘angel’. So, she went from bitch to angel. She is now a victim, she is helpless, she is demonized by this evil abbot, so on and so forth. So, is essentially sort of angelic victim. I thought that is insane. That was the tradition out of which that Lin Dai movie was made. I want to create a whole woman, someone who has her evil side, demonic side, as we all do. Who is powerful, and yet, is also nurturing and caring, is capable of deep, intense love, and that is what I tried to do.” (Fang Bo [方博], 2019: 54-55; FIGURE 1).



FIGURE 1: Madame White. (Picture by courtesy of Jill Steinberg from Whitesnakeprojects.com).

In her libretto, as she declares in the interview, Lim maintains the sexually attractive image of the white snake and makes her the one who takes the initiative to pursue Xu Xian by serving him her special tea of four seasons. (FIGURE 2) The tea, made by her magic, makes Xu losing his mind immediately and proposing to Madame White. The steps she tries to seduce Xu all work as she plans. (FIGURE 3) However, her request for Xu to allow her to leave with Xiao Qing on one night each month without question or objection becomes a potential cause of the tragic ending of their “unethical” marriage. In fact, Madame White requests her leave so that she and Xiao Qing can go to the river to shed their skin once a month. Not as she wished, later when Xu being asked by the Abbot about how much he really knows who his wife truly is, his pend-up suspicion about that uncommon request suddenly comes to his mind. Since Madame White cannot let him know the truth, she tries to deflect his question by telling him that she is pregnant, which made their relationship worse that Xu even doubts that the child is from her monthly trysts with a lover. Xu flees from his wife, journeys to the Monastery in search of the Abbot for the truth. Fearful of a child produced by a demon and a mortal, the Abbot gives him a potion, advising him to use it cautiously. Madame White feels desperate that her husband has been gone for days; thus, she resolves to tell him the truth when he comes back. Before she can do so, Xu arrives the Broken Bridge where they first met, and tells her that he has been worried about her and the unborn child and has made a potion to help the birth. Madame White knows he has lied, and their love has come to an end. The potion becomes the blasting fuse that makes

Madame White seeing her husband's betrayal and exasperates her brutalization and transforming back into a snake, fighting over the abbot.



FIGURE 2: Xiao Qing serves Xu Xian special tea of four seasons made by Madame White's magic. (Picture by courtesy of Jill Steinberg from Whitesnakeprojects.com).

Lim points out: “[the potion] can either be genuinely magical (cue Wagner’s *Tristan chord*) or merely a placebo (see Donizetti’s *Elixir of Love*). In *Madame White Snake*, you don’t really know whether the truth potion she takes in real. When the scholar (Xu Xian) tells her, ‘I mixed these special herbs to help your childbirth’ – which is not in the original myth, by the way – she can tell he’s lying, and both her trust and love die. With nothing to live for, her transforming back into a snake marks her spiritual death.” (Smith, 2019: 31).

Although disagreeing with the stereotypical view of Chinese women as weak and helpless “chattel” to the authoritarian patriarchy, Lim also sees the rebellious aspect through the transformation and reception history of the story. “[What surprise me is that,] the myth of this powerful demon, who was sexually powerful, with her ability control the elements, the rain and water, could survive. [I think] it survived because even for men, she is a symbol of what should have been a pressed victim rising out of that, breaking free to be herself, to realizing her full potential.” Lim continues, “That’s what I tried to do. I am so glad I was the one who wrote the western version [of the white snake], because I am so tired of western opera when a team of men write about the crazy women or evil women, they always die, either been killed or commit suicide, but never been shown as a woman with power and yet vulnerability and also vindictiveness. Because that’s the whole human psyche is. You can look at it [*Madame White Snake*] as my own psyche journey. In other words, I went from loving the traditional view of the white snake, who surely inspired me on a level beyond what the traditional adaptations were, and then many, many years later, when I created her from reflecting the person that I am now,

as oppose to the person I was in the 1960s. What you are seeing is really what I think now of this character and how she reflects what I value and believe.” (Fang Bo [方博], 2019: 56).



FIGURE 3: Madame White and Xu Xian’s wedding. (Picture by courtesy of Matthew Daniel from Whitesnakeprojects.com).

As mentioned above, Cerise Lim believed herself to be the first librettist who has adapted the legend *Bai She Zhuan* to a western opera. In fact, the Taiwanese composer Hsu Tsang-houei and librettist Da Huang had adapted that story to an operatic version in 1975. They premiered their four-act, seven scenarios opera *Lady Bai* in July 1978 at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. The opera has been considered as “the first large scale grand opera in Chinese of Taiwan’s music history.” (Tsang-Houei Hsu Culture and Art Foundation, 2020). According to the composer, he was reluctant to compose a certain grand opera when he was first invited by the famous Taiwan jingju script writer Yu Da-gang to do so. “Concerning of the vocal and orchestral quality, the stage condition and professional staff (of stage management) of that time (in early 1970s when I was invited to compose that opera), I really dare not to try. More importantly, I think I was still not confident enough to compose a modern Chinese opera with quality. This opera must inherit the legend from Chinese xiqu; thus, I cannot one hundred percent copying the western operatic traditions, neither to change the libretto with a Chinese story and to be sung in Chinese. I have been kept searching for the road of Chinese opera. When someday I find out the way, I will compose it.” (Ibid.). Turns out Hsu finally accomplished the opera *Lady Bai*, and it is the only opera he has composed in his composition career. “Learning from western opera traditions, Hsu absorbed Classical and Romantic opera patterns, and adopted the leitmotiv to organize the whole operatic structure from Wagner and Debussy’s operatic composition experiences. He repeatedly uses two leitmotivs in the opera, one is ‘the motif of doom’ and the other is ‘the motif of joyousness’.” (Liang Mao-chun [梁茂春]. 1993: 10). Although Hsu’s attempt to compose a Chinese opera has met both objective and subjective difficulties at that time, the opera has more or less inspired the later artistic adaptations of the traditional Chinese legends. However, as a Chinese composer, who co-worked with another Chinese librettist, Hsu Tsang-houei’s *Lady Bai* did not go very far in reshaping the figural images and retelling the

whole story. His creativeness was clearly concentrated on how to fuse the Chinese music traditions and ancient Chinese cultural representations with the western operatic music, and still makes the opera culturally Chinese.

Started in very different historical periods, socio-cultural backgrounds, and economic systems, Cerise Lim's opera MWS is more likely to be a microscopic narrative since her aims and purposes were much more personal than Hsu Tsang-houei's. Not forced to carry the national responsibility of inheriting Chinese cultural heritage, of which the adapters must have to consider about the fidelity to the original classic, Lim was easier to recreate a rebellious white snake from her own understanding and interpretation of the gender constructions of the characters. The other obvious reason for her gender construction to be culturally non-traditional is probably because of her interracial marriage with her Jewish husband.

In the interview, Lim admitted that, she needed to flesh out the story of an ancient Chinese myth that her white husband could understand. As a Singaporean American immigrant, her marriage with Charles Jacobs largely changed her world views and her own lifestyle. Lim mentions that her husband has always been encouraging her to do whatever she feels like to do. When she retired from her partnership from law, she wanted something that could really invest her heart and soul and time and resources into. (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019). Before she became a lawyer, she was a writer. Thus, she came up with the idea to write the lyrics of the song cycle as the birthday gift to her husband. When she finished her lyrics and searching for the composer, Zhou Long suggested to make the small vocal piece into a grand opera and Charles Jacobs suggested to contact Opera Boston for cooperation. That explains how she coincidentally became an opera librettist.

In the researches of Asian American interracial marriages in the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, many scholars are more likely to focus on the immigrant population in the new social context. The cultural assimilation among the immigrants and their family status in their marital relationships as well as the changes in their social lives before and after having the interracial marriages in the United States have also been continuously concerned. For instance, in the article "Patterns of Asian American Intermarriage and Marital Assimilation", the authors compare the data of Asian American intermarriages from the perspectives of the Asian Americans' ethnicity, nativity, age and gender, place of residence, education, occupation and income, and index of intermarriage distance. (Lee and Yamanaka, 1990). In another article "Asian American Interracial and Interethnic Marriages: Differences by Education and Nativity" (Qian Zhenchao, Lee Blair, and Ruf, 2001: 579), the authors summarize from their social surveys on interracial marriages in America: "Southeast Asian and Asian Indian Americans have the strongest endogamy of all Asian ethnic groups...Southeast Asian Americans are mostly refugees, poor in educational attainment and job skills, and residentially segregated from mainstream society, which, according to assimilationists, lead to strong ethnic endogamy." Different from the situation mentioned above, Cerise Lim was born in an immigrant family in Singapore, and she herself has also become an immigrant in the United States after finished her study in the Harvard Law School as an international student and get her job in the Judicial Department. "The desalination of the religious, racial, and ethnic differences in the university campus, in turn, promoted the mainstream American society for the transition of their attitudes on the heretic and people from different ethnic groups. Meanwhile, teenagers' self-determination in relationships and marriages also promoted the social respect and tolerance on intermarriage." (Huang Xu-feng [黄虚峰]. 2002: 23). Although her interracial marriage has also been opposed by her family members, she has become more and more independent and self-determined after studying and staying out of her homeland for decades. Despite of their racial background and cultural differences, Cerise Lim was very clear that she didn't care about the objection from the other, but to follow her heart and marry the one she loved. The one who took the initiative to pursue her own happiness with someone from

the different racial/species background, that's truly how Cerise Lim created the character of Madame White as well as how to live her own life in a multicultural society.

Green Snake: From A Male Snake Demon to A Transsexual Servant Girl

The supporting female character in the opera – the green snake Xiao Qing, played another important role in the librettist's storytelling. Same as her recreation on the figural image and gender construction of the white snake, Lim was also determined to have her green snake different from most of the previous adaptations. "(In the other adaptations) She is another victim (of the feudal society)," says Lim: "beautiful but helpless woman." (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019).

The legend, as mentioned above, has been adapted to diverse art forms in the ancient Chinese history, and the story has also been transformed and changed in both folk legends and literature in each of the adaptations. In the literary materials *Xi Hu You Lan Zhi* (Diary of the West Lake Tour) by Tian Ru-cheng from Jia Jing Reign in Ming Dynasty and *Bai Niang Zi Yong Zhen Lei Feng Ta* (White Maiden Locked for Eternity in the Leifeng Pagoda) by Feng Meng-long from Wan Li Reign in Ming Dynasty, there were no green snake but a green fish in the story, whom also played the role as Madame White's servant girl. In the later adaptations of the legend has Xiao Qing been adapted to be a green snake. Same as Madame White, Xiao Qing transformed to be half-demon-half-human after 500 years of meditation. She is a brave and loyal servant girl to Madame White. Meanwhile, she still maintains her demon's evil and cruel essence being in the human world.

The Chinese resources mostly discuss Xiao Qing's demon essence to be sexually evil in the male-dominated society as well as her sustaining of demonized superpower instead of her human right as a woman to fall in love with a man. Her quests to being as human and experience love have been largely neglected in most of the Chinese xiqu and drama adaptations. Both her demon and servant' identities make Xiao Qing lack of power in men's world and hardly being an eyes-catching character. On the one hand, she is "a dowry servant girl who is subordinated to the White Snake. Hence, her beautiful look and loyalty is the reflection of people's anticipation on her role instead of her own happiness." (Zhang, Wan-li [张万丽]. 2007: 1). On the other hand, however, in all the literary and artistic adaptations of *Bai She Zhuan*, although she cannot get away from her demon and servant' identity, "Xiao Qing is never a totally domesticated character. She was born to be aggressive and unruly." (Ibid.). Thus, the complication of her social identity as well as her gender identity in different texts give the librettist the chance to explore Xiao Qing's figural image in a transtextual context and provides her more freedom and possibilities to recreate such a role in her adapted libretto.

In 'modern jingju' [现代京剧] *Bai she zhuan* adapted by playwright Tian Han, the mythological folktale has been largely modified for the purpose of disseminating newly founded PRC's socialist values, such as anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. Under certain socio-historical context when Tian's reformed modern jingju *Bai she zhuan* was created, "Xiao Qing's essence has been 'purified' in order to better reveal her heroine image," (Zhang, Wan-li [张万丽], 2007: 29) and clearer her anti-feudalist fighter's wishes and deeds. "Tian's *Bai she zhuan* was considered to be one of the modern jingju masterpieces which reflects Chinese women's spirit of anti-feudalist oppression and pursuing free marriage" (Huang Jing-feng [黄静枫]. 2018: 6-7). However, Tian didn't develop her character from this free woman's default figural image in his script, and even "totally avoided Xiao Qing's own searching for her life destination and spiritual demands." (Zhang, Wan-li [张万丽]. 2007: 30). The recreation of the "free women's images", thus, was an adapted version of *Bai She Zhuan* from the socialist feminism. Its meanings of liberating women's free wills and lifting their social status were more or less

theoretically hypothetical and not has been fully developed from the practical aspect of concerning women's specific needs and wills.

Lin Hwai-min, the founder and resident choreographer of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, has also choreographed a piece of modern dance drama *The Tale of the White Serpent* (1975). In this dance drama "Lin choreographed two dance scenarios, one for the white snake and the green snake, the other for Xu Xian and Fa'hai. The first one is the opening scenario in which the two snakes intertwined with each other's body; the second one is in the scenario when Fa'hai takes Xu Xian away with his arms enfolded Xu's body. These two dance scenarios reveal the homosexual emotions between the female snakes as well as the male mortal roles" (Chen Cheng-fan [陈正芳]. 2013: 341). Besides, Lin also changes the green snake's figural position in between the white snake and Xu Xian's love relationship from the legend *Bai She Zhuan*. In his adaptation, both the white snake and the green snake love Xu Xian; thus, they compete with each other in order to win Xu's heart. "Lin fulfills the green snake a more comprehensive personality like a normal female would have...On the one hand, the green snake feels gloat over the white snake's defeat in the fight with Fa'hai; on the other hand, she also feels mercy on the white snake's suffering and choose to defend her." (Zhang, Wan-li [张万丽], 2007: 34-35).

Li Pi-hua's novel *Qing She* (1986) subverts the traditional legend's storyline and breaks the illusion of Madame White and Xu Xian's love romance. In this novel, the green snake incarnated beautiful young lady Xiao Qing is no longer a supporting role. On the contrary, she fully experienced human love and all the emotions in the mortal world through her own rethinking on Madame White's and her own deeds. "Li Pi-hua intentionally tells the story from the 'supporting role's' perspective and leads the whole novel's storytelling. It is based on the female consciousness from the original text. It also speaks for both women and the subordinate class." (Chen Cheng-fan [陈正芳]. 2013: 354). Meanwhile, Li's novel also discloses the inconspicuous romance between the green snake and the white snake. "In the text from the novel, Li didn't intentionally bring up the queer topic, only to expose the difficult situation of this unacceptable homosexual relationship as to refer to the unethical love between a demon and a mortal from the original story." (Ibid.). Compared to Lin Hwai-min and Li Pi-hua's half-disguisedly representation of the homosexual love between the characters, another Taiwan playwright Tian Chi-yuan stepped forward on the queer interpretation on the characters' relations in his Avant-guard theater production *Bai she zhuan* (1993). Different from the previous artists who use their underlying artistic language to depict the homosexual emotions, Tian choose an all-male cast to play the roles, include the white and green snakes. In this production, "the green snake hates Xu Xian not only because of her identity, as a servant girl, has her responsibility of protecting Madame White when Xu betrays her, but also for her own love to the white snake." (Zhang, Wan-li [张万丽]. 2007: 36). In the 1980s, Tian confessed to the administrators in college about his queer identity and the fact that he has AIDS. He then has been expelled from the university and has been heavily reported on media. The discrimination on him since then firmed his courage to create drama works that can lead the local audiences together to face the most controversial social issues. He founded Critical Point Theater with Jan Huei-ling in 1988 and he himself served as artistic director. Concerning his queer interpretation, "Tian's gender switch in this drama clearly shows his questioning towards the unreasonable social bias on queers in the real life." (Li Guang-zhu [李光柱]. 2012: 29). Thus, this drama has been considered as the most direct and bold representation to observe the homosexual relationships from the original legend. Since this "Avant-guard" adaptation appeared in front of the public, scholars started to dig deeper into the homosexual relationship of the major characters in the legend *Bai She Zhuan*.

In her characterizing of Xiao Qing, Lim was hoping to adopt the version of the green snake to be born male, and later being forced to transform into a female snake. Lim explains: "Chen Yi

(Zhou Long's wife) told me the story, kind of the prologue of the Si-Chuan opera⁷ about the green snake being a man in the past. The moment she told that to me, I knew that my green snake has to incorporate that. I have been thinking on the Greek mythology about Tiresias, who is the only person who has fully experienced what it was like to be a man and a woman. So, when I heard Chen Yi talked about the Si-Chuan opera story, I immediately said that's (going to be) my story. I adopted the history of the green snake as a man who is now transforming to be a woman, and I modified the story." (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019).

In fact, in many different Chinese regional xiqu traditions, the green snake was male first, and tried to force the white snake to marry him. Beaten by the white, the green was finally willing to be her servant girl. In the Si-Chuan opera tradition, "the green snake is alternatively performed by an actor and an actress in different genders...the female Xiao Qing is considerate and vivacious. She is the matchmaker of Madame White and Xu Xian; The male Xiao Qing is loyalty, brave, and determined, who has always hidden his love to Madame White. He is more of a tragic role." (Zhou Feng-qin [周逢琴]. 2010: 43).

Besides Lim's characterization of the role in her libretto, the casting process on the character of Xiao Qing was also a complicated task. In the interview when I asked her about their concerns about the casting of Xiao Qing, Cerise Lim admits that: at first composer Zhou Long was searching for a *Qian Dan* actor (falsetto cross-dressing actor in Chinese xiqu traditions, in Chinese: 乾旦) to play the role of Xiao Qing. Zhou Long went back to Beijing several times selecting different *Qian Dan* actors to audition and rehearse, however none of them can read five-lines notation, hardly reach the wide range of pitches in Zhou's score for Xiao Qing, neither can they read or sing in English accurately. After many discussions with Zhou, Lim suggested him to consider about having a male soprano casting this transgender role. Finally, Lim introduced a male soprano Michael Maniaci to Zhou Long and convinced him that he could fulfill Zhou's anticipation on the vocality of Xiao Qing. (FIGURE 4).

In the interview, Lim says: "I have heard Michael Maniaci before I fell in love with his voice. Because it's very beautiful, and somewhat otherworldly. You can tell it's not quite soprano, but it's neither a tenor, nor a countertenor." (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019). Turns out casting a male soprano to play the role of Xiao Qing was not only different from the composer's first imagination of the "beautiful and demonized" image, but also recklessly challenged most of the Chinese audiences who has their earlier impression of Xiao Qing as a beautiful servant girl in the legend. Regardless of the change from the composer's idea of casting a falsetto cross-dressing jingju actor to the librettist's propose of casting a male soprano for the role of Xiao Qing, the result seems have reached Cerise Lim's purpose of "injects another tension into the story because of his unrequited love for the white snake. All of a sudden, he sees for the first time in his life, someone else has mysteriously fall in love (with Madame White), the one thing he wanted for his entire life, but wasn't for him. It makes him or her into a truly tragic figure." (Fang Bo [方博] and Cerise Lim Jacobs. 2019). Although not have mentioned much about her comparison on the transgender snake image of Tiresias with her characterization of the transgender green snake in details, she did mention that the emotions between the white and green snakes from heterosexual to homosexual relationship did change from "lovers" to sisterhood, but it did not change much from the inside that the green snake still loves Madame white after been transformed into a female. The "pity" from gods who made him a female snake can either be a way of hiding his love to the white snake and continuously accompanying aside Madame White as a servant girl, or a punishment for him to never get a chance to really be with his beloved one as socially accepted lover. Although not directly explained in her libretto since the green snake's hidden emotions for the white snake is not

⁷ Si-Chuan Opera, also entitled Chuanjü, is one of the traditional Chinese regional xiqu genres which is popular among the Southwestern Chinese regions, such as Si-Chuan province and partial areas of Yun Nan and Gui Zhou provinces.

frequently shown by words in the scenarios, Michael Maniaci's performance is much clearer that she (Xiao Qing) is jealousy and painful in the plot when Madame White and Xu Xian just got married and are suggested to be having sex through Xiao Qing's descriptions (off the scene). With the most complicated emotions happening at the same time, she finally spills out her envy words: "No trace of the ferocious warrior who hungered for supremacy. Where are you now, my queen?" (Lim Jacobs, Cerise. 2019b).



FIGURE 4: The role of Xiao Qing played by male soprano Michael Maniaci. (Picture by courtesy of Matthew Daniel from Whitesnakeprojects.com).

Cerise Lim is now serving as the president of a charitable foundation that her husband Charles Jacobs and her co-founded. She also “endowed the Charles M. Jacobs Fund for Equal Rights and Social Engagement at the University of Chicago Law School and College. She is a founder of White Snake Projects, a company which commissions, develops and produces original opera of the highest production values, combined with social activism.” (Ibid.). Supported by her charitable foundation, OPERA America⁸ has launched an IDEA Opera Grants. “IDEA Opera Grants are OPERA America’s first grant program designed with a racial equity lens... It is committed to promoting equal rights and social justice through education, music and the law. This new program provides support for the promotion and development of new works by artists of color who may not have worked previously in the field.” (Ibid.) According to OPERA America, the definition of “IDEA” stands for:

Inclusion: authentic representation, empowered participation and a true sense of belonging, beyond numerical diversity.

Diversity: breadth of representation; it can mean different cultures and ethnicities, gender identities, ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, geographies, budget sizes or works presented.

Equity: recognizing that not everyone is starting from the same point, but ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

Access: equitable admittance to everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience.

Under the cooperation with OPERA America and their own charitable foundation, which also is supported by *the Charles and Cerise Jacobs Charitable Foundation* (OPERA America Inc., 1995-2021), Cerise Lim’s opera company is able to commission new opera productions which explore “current issues relevant to our times” (Ibid.), especially to concern about the hardly seen humanity corners. Meanwhile, Lim also hopes to provide a platform for the artists from ethnic minorities, whom resemble of herself in the multicultural American society. For instance, the company has launched “a multi-year community-based project, Sing Out Strong (SOS), that commissions composers and writers to create songs based on themes that flow from our operas.” (Ibid.). In 2019, their project was Sing Out Strong: Immigrant Voices, which was based on the theme of newly changed immigration policies under President Donald Trump from their 2019 premiered opera *I am A Dreamer Who No Longer Dreams*. (Whitesnakeproject, 2020). In 2020, the project was Sing Out Strong: DeColonized Voices, which is based on the theme of the future Space colonization from their ongoing 2020 opera *Cosmic Cowboy*. (Ibid.).

FINAL REMARKS

Reading through the historical materials and different adapted artistic forms of the Legend *Bai She Zhuan*, it is evidentially that writers and playwrights from different period of time had their specific perspectives of view on women, and female characters in all kinds of play they created had been portrayed quite differently. The development process of how the creators reshaping the leading female characters, such as the feminine characteristics of Madame White, the gender construction of Xiao Qing, is also an intriguing aspect to examine gender issues in different ages. From an evil snake demon to a beautiful and daring woman, from a subordinate servant girl to a fearless woman warrior, the female image and humanity have been given more positive voices in terms of gender equality in most of the adaptations of the legend. However, when confronted with the authoritarians, the male dominated society, the male dominated family

⁸ OPERA America leads and serves the entire opera community, supporting the creation, presentation and enjoyment of opera. OPERA America Inc. (1995-2021). <https://operaamerica.org/content/about/index.aspx>, last accessed on 10 April, 2021.

relationship, both Madame White and Xiao Qing lost their voices and power indeed.

In her way of recreating the images of the characters and reshaping the gender discourse in the legend, Cerise Lim decided to shed the story's traditional skin and taking on modern trappings. Although it is not a radical departure from the traditional story, in her opera, Madame White's rebellious spirit and anger to revenge, Xiao Qing's transsexual character setting and her quest for Madame White's love, have all been boldly revealed to the male characters in the opera as well as the opera audiences. Speaking for the ethnic minorities as well as the gender minorities in their multicultural society, and yet, embracing the diversity of demographic composition and supporting the equality of human rights, Cerise Lim continuously practicing as a social activist after her law career. If founding a charitable foundation with her attorney husband could be considered as the step to serve the society where she absorbed all the experiences from her profession, then founding an opera company on her own could be seen as her independent move to fulfill her dream that was based on her life-long interest of being a writer. In her creating of the opera *Madame White Snake*, I believe that as an immigrant and a female, Lim's self-identification with the role of white snake she recreated for this opera breaks the stereotypical views of the Chinese female demon in both Western and Chinese audiences' minds; moreover, it is Lim's past working experience in the judicial branch and her current duties in the charitable foundation and the opera company that encouraged her to sing out strong for the "unprotected" or "less concerned" individuals as well as promoted herself and her Chinese legend-based opera within the transnational opera markets.

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