
A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the Female Protagonist “Haitang” in the Red Opera Yimeng Mountain

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Abstract: The national opera Yimeng Mountain, rooted in the historical context of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, vividly portrays the growth trajectory of the female protagonist Haitang from an ordinary village woman to a revolutionary heroine. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this paper employs Freudian theories of id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms to interpret Haitang’s character. It explores how Haitang copes with wartime trauma, inner conflicts, and identity transformations through psychological mechanisms such as sublimation, repression, and reparation. Additionally, it analyzes the interaction between her psychological development and the “Yimeng spirit” in the cultural context of red opera. The research reveals that Haitang’s external acts of sacrifice and dedication are essentially the externalization of internal psychological dynamics, and the opera’s artistic expression further amplifies this psychological depth, providing a new perspective for the interpretation of red opera characters.

Keywords: Yimeng mountain; Haitang; Psychoanalytic interpretation; Defense mechanisms; Red opera; Character analysis

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1. Introduction

The telling of personal sacrifice and collective struggle is powerfully embodied in the Chinese national opera Yimeng Mountain, which portrays the wartime experiences of villagers in the Yimeng region of Shandong province during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the early years of the People’s Republic of China. This opera, while rooted in historical narrative, invites deeper psychological reading, especially in the figure of “Haitang”, an ordinary woman whose extraordinary contributions reflect both individual inner conflicts and cultural ideals. A psychoanalytic lens, informed by the Freudian model of the id, ego, and superego and the concept of defense mechanisms, allows us to explore how Haitang’s psychological journey mirrors broader themes of trauma, identity, self-sacrifice, and sublimation^[1]. This article uses such a lens to interpret the character of Haitang, examining how her inner world resonates with psychoanalytic dynamics and how the opera’s cultural context both enables and constrains that inner world.

2. Theoretical basis

At the level of psychoanalytic theory, the foundational insight is that the unconscious mind uses defense mechanisms to manage internal conflicts and anxieties, often stemming from the clash of instinctual drives (id), moral demands (superego), and the realities of social life (ego) ^[2]. Defense mechanisms are unconscious, automatic strategies that protect the ego from being overwhelmed by unacceptable impulses or by external stressors ^[3]. Contemporary research affirms that these mechanisms, far from being archaic, remain central to personality functioning and mental health ^[4]. In the case of a character such as Haitang, one may trace how her external actions reflect inner psychic processes: repression of grief, sublimation of personal desire into collective purpose, formation of a superego-driven ideal, and perhaps reaction formation or denial when confronted with loss and trauma.

3. The psychological transformation of Haitang

Haitang emerges in the opera as a local woman, initially rooted in a conventional role: wife, daughter, community member. Yet her trajectory quickly transforms. When a female soldier, Xiahe, is killed in action, Haitang takes responsibility for Xiahe's daughter. When her own husband enlists, she supports his leaving by making shoes and clothes for him despite her sorrow ^[5]. She thereby moves from a passive domestic role into one of active revolutionary service. Psychoanalytically, this shift can be seen as a redirection of personal grief and latent desire into socially valorized action, that is, sublimation. Freud argued that sublimation, the channeling of instinctual drives into socially constructive works, is one of the most mature defense mechanisms ^[6]. Haitang's transformation thus may reflect a deeper process: unacknowledged fear, guilt, or grief become converted into dedication and sacrifice for the collective. Her suffering is not eliminated but is transformed into meaning.

Moreover, Haitang's story contains the interplay of repression and suppression. Loss, death, separation, these are potent emotional stimuli likely to activate defensive repression ^[7]. In the context of wartime trauma, Haitang cannot openly grieve or express her private anguish; instead, she re-positions her sorrow into the service of others. The ego, confronted with the anxiety of loss and the fear of impotence, employs repression to keep intolerable feelings at bay, while the superego, aligned with the moral imperative of revolutionary sacrifice, demands self-denial and service. The result is that Haitang's outward composure masks inner conflict: she cannot be both grieving woman and steadfast revolutionary. Psychoanalysis would suggest that her outward composure is maintained by an unconscious dynamic of repression plus the mobilization of a strong superego ideal.

At the same time, the opera's cultural framing emphasizes the "Yimeng spirit", characterized by selflessness, mutual support, and revolutionary zeal. Haitang becomes a symbolic figure of that spirit: an ordinary woman-turned hero whose personal life is absorbed into collective memory and myth. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this absorption can be interpreted as the formation of a collective superego ideal. The superego, which carries moral and cultural imperatives, is here instantiated not only within Haitang's psyche but in the dramatic narrative: the ideal of self-sacrifice becomes the normative demand. Haitang's individual ego thus aligns with the superego's expectation, subordinating her id (personal desire for comfort, grief, self-care) in favor of the social mission. Her latent desires are sublimated into the communal good: the shoes she sews become metaphors for the moral journey she undertakes.

4. Psychological cost and narrative reinforcement

Yet this alignment is not without psychic cost. The gap between the private and public self, the woman who yearns, mourns, fears, yet must present strength and self-sacrifice, can generate internal conflict. Psychoanalysis would posit that such conflict might lead to reactive defence: the ego might hide fear through denial ("I am fine"), or create reaction-formation behaviors (exuberant cheer instead of sorrow). Indeed, the dramatic moment when Haitang takes up the soldier's

daughter's care can be seen as both a conscious act of service and an unconscious attempt to symbolically repair the traumatic loss of the fallen soldier. Repair and reparation are key concepts in psychoanalysis: wounded ego seeks to restore meaning and control. The child becomes a symbolic stand-in for the lost soldier, enabling Haitang to re-invest her grief into a caring function, thereby containing anxiety and guilt.

The staging of the opera reinforces this psychoanalytic reading. The musical score incorporates Shandong folk elements, grounding the narrative in local cultural memory. The artistic decision to highlight Haitang's domestic labor, the making of shoes and clothes, visually externalizes the internal work of the psyche: stitching and mending become metaphors for psychological repair. This metaphorical layer invites the audience to see beyond the literal storyline into the symbolic substrate of sacrifice, mourning, regeneration. Psychoanalytic theory emphasizes symbols and the unconscious; here the stage becomes a canvas for the psyche's labor.

Moreover, the transition of Haitang from private sphere (village wife) to public heroic figure parallels developmental processes described in psychoanalysis. The ego confronts new realities (war, death, responsibility) and must adapt. The process resembles ego-strengthening and integration: the ego negotiates with superego demands and id impulses, and finds a higher order through sublimation. However, because the drive originates in trauma and loss, the sublimation is ambivalent: it both elevates and suppresses, both integrates and splits. The audience's identification with Haitang invites a form of communal catharsis: witnessing her work allows us to project our own repressed grief, guilt or fear into a socially acceptable narrative. The opera becomes collective therapy, in a sense.

It is also instructive to consider how the opera handles temporality and memory. The wartime experiences of Yimeng are historic, remote, yet the opera revives them as living myth. Memory, according to psychoanalysis, is never neutral; it is shaped by repression, disavowal, idealization^[8]. Haitang's character embodies this: her personal past is partially remembered, partially re-pressed; her present devotion serves the future memory of the revolution. The narrative uses selective memory: the traumatic losses are sublimated, the heroic sacrifices emphasized, the ordinary suffering transformed into mythic strength. This is exactly what psychoanalysis describes as the operation of the collective superego: memories are re-written to serve communal ideals^[9].

From a cultural studies perspective, the use of a female protagonist is particularly significant. Women in revolutionary operas often embody dual roles: nurturer and warrior, mother and citizen. Haitang fulfils both: she cares for the child of the dead soldier, she supports her husband's enlistment, she becomes part of the war effort. Psychoanalytically, this may reflect what has been called "maternal superegoisation", the internalization of the maternal ideal as a primary superego function^[10]. Haitang's identity is thus shaped by the maternal, domestic sphere but expanded into a public political domain. Her domestic labor becomes heroic symbolic labor. The psychoanalytic notion of object relations is relevant: Haitang's relationships (daughter of soldier, husband in army, villagers) map onto internal object constellations; she must re-organize her internal world in order to meet external demands.

Another lens is the concept of trauma and mourning. War brings abrupt separation, loss of life, disruption of home. Psychoanalysis emphasizes that mourning involves the withdrawal of libido from the lost object and eventual reinvestment. In the opera, Haitang's mourning is not allowed to follow the classical model, she cannot linger in grief. Instead, her mourning is truncated and channeled into action. This is consistent with the notion of "complicated grief" where mourning is diverted or transformed. The child she cares for becomes a symbolic object of her mourning, enabling renegotiation of loss. Her sewing becomes a symbolic act of mourning-reparation: she stitches not only cloth but also wounded psychic life.

Critically, the psychoanalytic reading does not reduce Haitang to a psychological case study disconnected from context. Rather it shows how her psyche is structured by the cultural field of revolutionary opera: the demands of heroism, the memorialization of sacrifice, the drama of everyday life subsumed into historic myth. The narrative invites the audience not simply to admire Haitang, but to identify with her inner struggle, her sublimation, her grief disguised as service. In this sense, the opera becomes a dual text: the story and the psyche beneath the story.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the figure of Haitang in Yimeng Mountain offers a rich site for psychoanalytic interpretation. Her journey from village woman to revolutionary assistant, her unconscious transformation of grief into labor, her alignment with the collective superego ideal, and her sublimation of personal desire into communal duty all resonate with classic Freudian dynamics of ego, superego and defense mechanisms. The opera's aesthetic and cultural framing reinforce these dynamics by offering symbols (shoes, sewing, child care) and narrative arcs of loss, service and memory. This reading deepens our appreciation of the opera: not only as historical or cultural performance, but as a psychic drama that explores how individuals negotiate inner conflict and identity in the service of higher social ideals.

Ultimately, the psychoanalytic lens suggests that Haitang is not simply heroic because of what she does, but heroic because of what she becomes: a figure whose inner life is transformed into an outward symbol, whose private sorrow is converted into public meaning. In attending to that transformation, we see how the psychic becomes cultural, how individual defence becomes collective memory, and how theatre becomes the staging of the unconscious. The study of characters like Haitang thereby opens up new possibilities for the analysis of red opera, of feminist subjectivity in revolutionary discourse, and of the interplay between psyche and society in modern Chinese performing arts ^[11].

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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