

TV loves the cliched characters

From sweet idiot to 'belly black' villain, stereotypes have enduring appeal with Chinese audiences

By SUN JIAHUI
The World of Chinese

Mainstream television relies on stereotypes, and Chinese TV is no exception: Women are always victims, waiting to be rescued by men; intellectuals are usually pedantic, dull or laughable; and *fuerdai*, or the "second-generation rich", are shallow, condescending bullies. Here are some of the most infamous Chinese TV character cliches, as defined by netizens.

Mary Sue (玛丽苏)

The popular Mary Sue (mǎlǐ sū) refers to the idealized female lead: She is beautiful, virtuous and has it all. Men swoon over her, women scheme against or idolize her, and while she herself would never stoop to plotting, it seems that wealth, power and fame simply fall into her lap.

The name comes from the 15-year-old heroine of Paula Smith's 1973 fan fiction *A Trekkie's Tale*, in which Lieutenant Mary Sue becomes the youngest, smartest person to graduate from Starfleet Academy. It was

originally meant to satirize unrealistic characters in *Star Trek* fan fiction.

My God! Emperor Wu Zetian was portrayed as a Mary Sue!

Tiān a! Nǚhuáng wǔzétian jūrán bèi yǎn chéng le mǎlǐ sū!

天啊! 女皇武则天居然被演成了玛丽苏!

Mary Sue has a male counterpart: Jack Sue (杰克苏 Jiékè sū). He is smart, rich, powerful and handsome — women want him, men want to be him, viewers want to hit him.

White lotus (白莲花)

In Chinese culture, the lotus symbolizes purity of the heart and virtue of the soul. The "white lotus" (bái liánhuā) character is morally perfect, kindhearted and harmless. They have no dark side, even if they leave "unintended" casualties behind them. For example, in *Fantasies Behind the Pearly Curtain*, the female lead Ziling claimed she never meant to steal her sister's boyfriend, she just could not hold back her strong feelings. Or maybe they make mistakes just because they are likeable, clumsy fools: There is even a term for this trait, 傻白甜 (shǎ bái tián), meaning "silly, innocent, sweet". Their characteristics are a

childlike nature, optimistic attitude, outspoken nature, and simple but big heart. By itself, 傻白甜 can be regarded as a neutral term, and whether it is complimentary or derogatory depends on the context. Some people find their innocence endearing:

This "silly innocent sweet" heroine is truly adorable.

Zhègè shǎ bái tián nǚ zhǔ zhēn de hěn kě'ài

这个傻白甜女主真的很可爱。

Others dislike a "sweet idiot", because they regard kindness as a form of stupidity.

He is nothing more than a sweet idiot.

Tā zhǐ bùguò shì gè shǎ bái tián éryǐ.

他只不过是 个傻白甜而已。

As the famous Song Dynasty (960-1279) essay *My Love for Lotus* (《爱莲说》) puts it, the white-lotus character is often described as "rising unsullied from mud", making those around them seem like the dirt from which the unique "white lotus" proudly blossoms. As charming as this term seems, it, too, can have an acerbic edge in certain contexts, where it might suggest hypocrisy or pretense.

I have had enough of this heroine, acting like a "white lotus" all the time.

Wǒ zhēnshì shòu bùliǎo zhègè nǚ zhǔjiǎole. Tā yīzhí zài zhuāng bái liánhuā.

我真是受不了这个女主角了。她一直在装白莲花。

Belly black (腹黑)

"One may smile and smile, and still be a villain" as Hamlet noted, and the "belly black" (fù hēi) is just such a character, always scheming, while trying their best to appear harmless or friendly (think Iago from *Othello*, or Littlefinger from *Game of Thrones*). The classic caricature of a "belly black" is a handsome man in a smart suit, wearing wire-rimmed glasses and a polite smile, who is practically omniscient and running his own schemes on the side. Originally, this term was supposed to be negative, but since a belly black is always good-looking and astute, audiences have found that being a little dark and heartless only makes them sexier. If you hear someone refer to a character as 腹黑, chances are they are a fan.

This "belly black" protagonist is so charming!

Zhègè fù hēi de nán zhǔ zhēnshì tài shuài le!

这个腹黑的男主真是太帅了!

Holy mother (圣母)

Our last cliché is the "holy mother", or 圣母 (shèng mǔ). This can refer to either a man or a woman — and it is certainly not endearing. Holy mothers are goody-two-shoes, too virtuous and big-hearted to be believable. They will sacrifice themselves for a complete stranger, forgive any enemy any slight and expect the same moral uprightness from others (the classic holy mother was Princess Ziwei from *Princess Pearl* (《还珠格格》), whose famous line was "The greatest virtue is forgiveness."). So why do audiences dislike the holy mothers? Quite simply, they are boring and predictable, lacking the well-developed complexity of a memorable character.

Even your father's killer can be forgiven? That is so "holy mother".

Shā fù chóurén yě yuánliàng? Zhè yé tài shèngmǔ le ba!

杀父仇人也原谅? 这也太圣母了吧!

Courtesy of The World of Chinese, www.theworldofchinese.com



女主角

大女女

主

角

主

角

nǚ zhǔjiǎo, actress