

Struggling between Tradition and Modernity: A Feminist Interpretation of Yu Opera *China Women**

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Abstract—Yu Opera *China Women* (some translated it into *Our Company*, pinyin: Xiāng Hún Nǚ) (2000) has been well received by audiences for its simple folk description, vivid characters, touching story lines, stunning stage backgrounds and exquisite stage performances. The opera describes a story of Xiangxiang and Huanhuan, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, two generations of women in the reform and opening up years in the twentieth century in China. These Chinese women try to break the shackles of fate, with the strength to overcome hardships, work hard to gain wealth, and be brave to pursue true love, so it has a strong sense of feminism. However, rooted in the deep traditional Chinese culture, Xiangxiang and Huanhuan are always struggling between tradition and modernity, and they make difficult choices along with the awakening of women's consciousness.

Index Terms—China Women, feminism, tradition, struggle, modernity

I. INTRODUCTION

Yu opera (simplified Chinese: 豫剧; traditional Chinese: 豫劇; pinyin: Yùjù), or Yuju opera, formerly known as Henan bangzi (Chinese: 河南梆子; pinyin: Hénán Bāngzi), is one of China's famous national opera forms, alongside Peking opera, Shaoxing opera, Huangmei opera and Pingju. [1] Yu Opera originated from central China's Henan Province about 400 years ago, and has extended its popularity to other regions along the Yellow River in northern China. [2] Then it spread across China, including the northwest Xinjiang province and southeast Taiwan. The Yu opera not only deeply rooted in the soil of Chinese national culture psychology, but also closely connected with the national cultural psychology all the time. Meanwhile, its creation is based on the Central Plains people's living style, folk etiquette, folk dance and language style, etc. So it reflects Henan people's essence of life. There is a strong local color in Yu opera's features, penetrating Henan province's local customs and people's simple folk customs in the Central Plains. In a word, it has played an irreplaceable role in the development of folk music in the Central Plains since it was born. In May 2006, Yu opera has been listed as part of China's intangible cultural heritage, approved by the State Council of the People's Republic of China. There are thousands of pieces in the list of Yu opera. Some promote patriotism and national integrity, such as *Su Wu Herds Sheep* and *Wu Shi Qing Ying* (the 100-years-old lady to be commander), etc. Some reflect loyalty and the ancient battle life, such as *Mu Guiying Took Command* and *Hua Mulan*, etc. Some put on shows of folk daily life, love affairs and social ethics, such as *The Beheading of an Ungrateful Husband* and *Qingfeng Pavilion*, etc. Today, Yu Opera writers are no longer satisfied with the reflection of history and the recurrence of major historical events, but concentrate on the common people in the real life, their family, their experiences and thoughts, their emotional changes, moral and ethics, love and personal fate, their value of life and other issues. (Zhang Hua: 2013, p9)

Modern Yu Opera *China Women* (2000) is such kind of story. *China Women* demonstrates a typical image of Xiangxiang, a traditional woman who struggles hard to move forward the modern society. In April 2015, the film of Yu opera *China Women* won the music Remi Award and the best art direction award at the 48th World Fest-Houston International Film and Video Festival, USA. Some critics say that the film is well received by American audience for its unique Chinese local opera elements and its touching themes, some audience couldn't help crying as they watch it. Through two generations of women's fate intertwined and their soul's collision, Yu Opera *China Women* reflects the ups and downs of Chinese women living in the patriarchal society and their desire to pursue love and freedom. This thesis intends to reveal the tragic destiny of the two generations of women in the patriarchal society from three levels of society, family and personal, in the light of feminist theory, and finally reveals their awakening female consciousness.

II. THEORY OF FEMINISM

Western Feminism's basic view is that Western civilization is male-centered and controlled by the male, while women are in a subordinate position both in the society and in the family, being oppressed and prejudiced. That is what

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Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) says “the second sex” or “The Other”. Feminists advocate criticizing the male-centered western society and fight for the equal rights and status between men and women in all fields of society. The term Feminism first appeared in France, and then came to many countries in Europe, America, and Asia and so on. There have been three waves in the history of Feminism development. The first wave of feminism appeared from the late 18th century to the 1920s, mainly fighting for women’s rights to vote, to receive higher education and the right to work. The representative feminists are Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and so on. Then the second wave was the women’s emancipation movement since the 1960s, mainly criticizing sexism, gender discrimination and male power. Although women had the rights to vote, work and receive education, they still couldn’t be equal to men. Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that women were not born as women, but made by the male-centered society. So the feminists advocate eliminating gender differences and realizing the real gender equality. The representative feminists are Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), Betty Friedan (1921-2006), Kate Millett (1934-) and Germaine Greer (1939-) and so on. At last, the third wave appeared in the 1990s, and the feminists of this wave were usually born during the 1960s or 1970s, influenced by the second wave, these feminists held more ideas, so there were different groups and ideas. The representatives include Alice Walker (1944-) and Doris Lessing (1919-2013) and so on.

In ancient traditional China, women were always in a subordinate position, and a good female must obey the will of her father, her husband and then her adult son when getting old. While in modern times, influenced by western feminism, Chinese feminism is also developing. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the main contents of the Chinese women’s movements were: to fight for women’s participation in the political power, to set up women’s industry, to fight for women’s social power, such as: to stop binding women’s feet, to be free to hair cutting, admission to school and freedom of marriage. The story of Yu Opera *China Women* happened in the 1980s, the reform and opening up years in China, and women’s liberation has made some progress. The heroin Xiangxiang could go out to work, but she was still struggling hard to move from tradition to modernity. On one hand, she wants to be a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother and a good mother-in-law following Chinese tradition; on the other hand, she desires to pursue her true love and enjoys freedom in marriage when her husband is irresponsible and gambling, and they don’t love each other at all. This contradiction leads to her tragedy.

III. THE MORAL KIDNAPPING OF PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

It was Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) who first brought the concept of “the Other” to the field of gender study. In her masterpiece *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir explored woman as the sexual “Other” in relation to man in a male-dominated culture. The concept of “the Other” indicates the domination of man over woman, “a man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity”. (Beauvoir: 1989, p 234.)

It is the real description of Xiangxiang and Huanhuan’s status at that time. Xiangxiang was sold to be a child bride in the family of Shen as a property by her parents when she was at seven because her parents were too poor to live. Huanhuan was also sold by her parents for 20,000 Yuan because her parents’ family was in economic trouble. Then the clever and beautiful Huanhuan married a well-known mentally handicapped husband Dunzi, who was Xiangxiang’s son. She was beat by her husband when he had an attack of his old illness. Xiangxiang also suffered her husband’s bully throughout her life. In the Act II, Xiangxiang’s husband Erdong lost all his money in gamble, returned home and asked for more money. When she refused, Erdong was angry and began to beat her again, and sang his lines: As a woman, you shouldn’t be odd; you should be a good house wife and your duty is to help your husband and teach your children well. No matter how capable you are, you are shoes, and I’m feet. I take it for granted that feet step on shoes. This is the group consciousness in the traditional patriarchal society. Women were expected to obey the will of their father, their husband and then their adult son when they were getting old. There is a famous saying in ancient China: Ignorance is a woman’s virtue. That means, when a woman is incapable and without any idea, she always listens to the instruction of male, this is a virtuous woman with feminine traits. So women are expected to be totally surrendered to man’s power and domination, then become the inferior Other. Only men have rights to divorce from his wife, and that will bring shame on her parents’ family name. Sometimes, the divorced wife would die of shame. If a woman dare to say no to the patriarchal society, the public would generally be hostile to her and condemn her. So almost all the women lived in the moral kidnapping of patriarchal society, without their own thinking, without any personality. All they need to do is to satisfy their husbands and the patriarchal society.

However, the feminists are against this kind of discrimination to women, and they fight for women’s rights to work and to be independent. In *China Women*, Xiangxiang was not incapable. As the real boss of Shen family’s Jun Kilns, Xiangxiang should be respected and valued. It’s still very difficult for her to change her inferior status, because she was also kidnapped by the moral of patriarchal society, so do most of women in China. They didn’t dare to say no to the requirement from a powerful tradition. Xiangxiang chose to put up with her hard situation, only to win a reputation of good wife, good mother and good mother-in-law, as she sang in Act II. That’s the expectation of the patriarchal society. Xiangxiang enhanced it consciously or unconsciously. When her daughter-in-law Huanhuan saw Erdong beating her unintentionally, Xiangxiang threatened Huanhuan to beat her, if she could tell others about the family conflict.

Xiangxiang wouldn't dare challenge the traditional public opinions. Although Xiangxiang fell in love with the potter Shizhong, she couldn't dare divorce from her husband and start a new life. Finally, she was caught in her own trap in patriarchal society.

In conclusion, woman's identity is the Other in marriage life and is much lower than her husband's status. In most occasions, she is just one property of the family, without respect from her husband, not to mention love and freedom. Women were kidnapped by the moral of patriarchal society. They couldn't dare to fight against the tradition for fear of being criticized by the patriarchal morality.

IV. THE EVOLUTION OF POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

In the story of *China Women*, the power relations between the husband Erdong and the wife Xiangxiang was going through a period of irreversible change. When Xiangxiang was a child bride in Shen family, she was the totally inferior one. Her duty was to serve the whole family without any complaint, being beat and cursed, never dared to resist. This is a real portrayal of many child bride's life in old China. They are sold to their husband's home when they are children, without any discourse power. In the year 1950, the marriage law of the People's Republic of China has expressly banned the child bride marriage.

In an unfortunate life, Xiangxiang didn't depend on her idle husband or was willing to live a poor life, but worked hard and became strong to change her life. Many years later, grow-up Xiangxiang was capable enough to be the richest woman and labor model in the town, through working hard to make the boom of Shen family's Jun Kilns business in the reform and opening up years in the twentieth century in China. While her husband Erdong was the type to sit around doing nothing but gambling, economically dependent on Xiangxiang, taking money from Xiangxiang for granted. On the surface, Erdong got money from home in the permit of Xiangxiang, while in fact Xiangxiang had no rights to say no and she was still under control of her husband. But the situation was changing and it was not nice for Erdong as time went by. Without her husband's help, Xiangxiang took all the tough burden independently. When she met and saved the life of the younger potter Shizhong, Shizhong owed a big debt of gratitude to her and began to work hard for her. It was natural that love would come in time. Xiangxiang seemed to be mistress of her own destiny. Double bumper harvest of love and career shows a strong feminism color. Erdong knew that Xiangxiang didn't love him; he only wanted to possess and control her. After he was drunk, losing money in gamble, he went home and took his annoyance out on her. He knew the love affairs between his wife and Shizhong, but he pretended not to know, in order to get money from their Jun Kilns. Erdong hated Xiangxiang and Shizhong, but he depended on them. So he is a bully with a coward's heart.

The male feminist John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) talked about the role of women in marriage and how it needed to be changed in his book *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Mill argues that relations between sexes simply amounted to "the legal subordination of one sex to the other - is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality." (Mill: 1869, chapter 1). Mill hates the situation that a man can establish total supremacy over his wife, doing nothing, this is a grievous injustice. Mill also argued that the oppression of women was one of the few remaining relics from ancient times, a set of prejudices that severely impeded the progress of humanity. The ideal gender relations of the modern society should be like this: No one is born with privilege and irrevocable in that position. People should be free and equal to obtain their expected life, by using their talents and taking favorable opportunities.

In the story of Yu Opera *China Women*, the husband Erdong was such a self-centered bummer, useless, but intended to be a tyrant in the family. While the wife Xiangxiang was not a weak woman, she was amazingly competitive and capable enough to be the real boss of Shen family's Jun Kiln. Her success in work and economic independence made her no longer the obedient child bride. She tried to say no to her husband's idleness and greed, even though they had to fight with each other. In that patriarchal society, although it's very difficult for Xiangxiang to improve her living condition, she was brave and working hard to change, finally she really made some progress. Along with the constant struggle and development of feminist movement in China, women have gained some rights and status gradually.

V. THE AWAKENING OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS

The Feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) pointed out that women's feminine obedience was not natural, but man-made in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In other words, the gender differences between men and women are not only determined by the physiology, but also by the patriarchal society. Our traditional culture and literary classics are male-centered, full of discrimination and prejudice against women. (Li Yinhe: 2005, p15) So the feminist movements protest sexual discrimination and fight for equal rights between men and women. With the influence of western feminist campaign, the theme of feminism was revived with great zeal in the late twentieth century in China. More and more women walked out of their families, began to work hard and tried to win their liberation, along with a kind of obvious awakening of female consciousness.

Xiangxiang is a good example. It's obvious that Xiangxiang's family life was very unfortunate: Her husband Erdong was a gambler and sometimes beat her black and blue, her son Dunzi was mentally handicapped and suffering from epilepsy. But Xiangxiang didn't succumb to her tragic fate. Instead, she was brave to face all the difficulties, went out to work and tried to make Shen family's Jun Kiln booming. This is the first step of her awakening of female consciousness

and beyond lots of traditional Chinese women. In the process of making Kiln porcelain, Xiangxiang encountered a skillful potter Shizhong. Act III describes Xiangxiang and Shizhong's love story in detail. The two help and support each other, then fall in love, and then give birth to a daughter named Lingzhi. This is the second step of her awakening of female consciousness. In traditional Chinese ideology, a wife must be completely faithful to her husband, no matter what happened. When Xiangxiang fell in love with Shizhong, she was brave to loosen the bonds of tradition and enjoyed the true love, although they could only love secretly and Lingzhi pretended to be Erdong's daughter.

However, Xiangxiang was still born in old China and sold as a child bride, there was still tradition in her deep heart, so it was very difficult for her to break up with tradition completely. For example, Xiangxiang knew that people admired her because she had a lot of money, then she planned to do what she wanted using money. She loved her son so much that she intended to spend 20,000 Yuan marrying her son a very clever and beautiful girl Huanhuan in traditional Chinese way. This is her hand-made tragedy. Huanhuan originally had a closing and loving relationship with her boyfriend Jinhai. In order to separate the two, Xiangxiang spent money in sending Jinhai to work in city, and let the loan officer ask for money in Huanhuan's family, because they were in debt. Finally, her mentally handicapped son got married with Huanhuan. They couldn't communicate with each other at all. The heartfelt rural ethics in the traditional agricultural civilization era was quietly replaced by the money ethics in the economic society. What dominates people is no longer the traditional family authority and the male power, but the money in the pocket of the capable person. Money is new baton in people's life, and it refreshes the neighborhood relationships, meanwhile it reorganizes the social ethical relations in the new period of economic reform.

But Huanhuan was born in modern times, she made more progress in the awakening of female consciousness. To start with, she had an insight into the problems in Shen family and was very sympathetic to the unfortunate marriage of her mother-in-law Xiangxiang. In Act V, when Xiangxiang was dating with her lover Shizhong at night, her husband Erdong returned home suddenly, Huanhuan was clever enough to cover up for them in an emergency. Xiangxiang was touched by Huanhuan's goodwill and finally realized the tragedy of Huanhuan, just the same as hers.

In Act VI, Erdong was arrested by the police because of gambling, Shizhong left Xiangxiang in order to protect her reputation, her Jun Kiln collapsed, Xiangxiang was in frustration and desperation. Huanhuan came to comfort Xiangxiang and encouraged her to find Shizhong back. Xiangxiang was hopeless to say, their Jun Kiln was lost through Erdong's gambling losses. But Huanhuan told her, the gambling debts were not protected by the law, you still had Jun Kiln. Xiangxiang was deeply moved by Huanhuan's good heart and confessed her sins to Huanhuan, she shouldn't have separated Huanhuan and her boyfriend, using various means. After a strong ideological struggle, Xiangxiang told her son Dunzi to divorce from Huanhuan, but Dunzi didn't agree and insist wanting Huanhuan. Xiangxiang was really caught in a dilemma. Finally Xiangxiang determined to break the cage, gave Huanhuan freedom and gave her chance to restart her life.

Along with the developing of the plot, the story reached a climax at the last Act. Huanhuan couldn't help crying when she left, because she knew Xiangxiang was really getting into trouble. Huanhuan still persuaded Xiangxiang to change her life and find Shizhong back. The audience would be deeply touched by the awakening of female consciousness. The two generations of women finally open their minds to each other and encourage each other to start a new life. The awakening of people, human enlightenment and deep humanitarian concern are put into the social background of the history and reality to display, Yu Opera *China Women* criticizes the old and decadent culture and ideology with a deep sense of crisis, shows the alienation of normal human nature in the new turning period, and reflects on the difficulty and possibility of the awakening of humanity and recovery.

VI. CONCLUSION

Yu Opera *China Women* is very popular among Chinese audience as soon as it was on. Besides its sweet music, stunning stage backgrounds and exquisite stage performances, the touching story and characters really captivate audiences. The role of Xiangxiang is true and heavy. She is shrewd, capable and experienced in Jun Kiln business, selfish and vicious in finding the daughter-in-law, disgusted and hopeless under her husband's oppression, kind and full of love for her children, warm and helpless before her lover. Almost all sorts of women's sides were showed accurately in various scenes, selfish while selfless, self-esteem while self-abased, strong while weak, so this is really a round character. She is strong enough to break away from the unfortunate fate of being a victim of the unhappy marriage at the old age, but makes a new cage to suppress Huanhuan using her money in the new era. This is penetrating criticism of human nature, but the more valuable thing is that Xiangxiang could reflect on herself and correct her wrong behavior, eventually encourage her daughter-in-law to start a new life. Therefore, readers can see the revival of human nature and the culture reflection of humanity enlightenment.

Audiences also can see the struggle and the awakening of female consciousness in the heroines Xiangxiang and Huanhuan, they are eager for self-reliance and self-improvement. It was encouraging that they never succumb to their fate. However, in the strong patriarchal tradition, the Chinese women's liberation is particularly difficult. Xiangxiang and Huanhuan are always struggling between tradition and modernity. They can be brave to break the shackles of fate, but their fight will be a history of blood and tears.

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