

The Modernization of Feminist Consciousness

—Female Narrative of Zhaojun Dramas in Cantonese Opera

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Abstract: Different from all other literary genres, drama about Wang Zhaojun denotes natural feminine color owing to its character setup and performative presentation. Such peculiar phenomenon has made drama become the most appropriate genre as well as intriguing topic to examine the feminist consciousness and female subjectivity behind it. Taking four Zhaojun dramas in Cantonese opera as the objects of study, this article comparatively analyzes detailed alterations of each play by combining with creative subjectivity of playwrights and performers, relating to the socio-cultural structure, and applying the theoretical framework of literature and feminism. The conclusion that progressive transformations of feminist consciousness including the initial grant of choice, manifestation of woman's dignity, expression of individual thoughts, and high level of self-consciousness rendered in four Zhaojun dramas in Cantonese opera is drew, so as to reveal the awakening and variation of feminist consciousness after the establishment of PRC.

1. Introduction

Since time immemorial, the story of Wang Zhaojun, with its fragmented nature, has elicited boundless imagination from playwrights and has been adapted to multitudinous versions of dramas. There are two Zhaojun dramas in Cantonese opera (粵劇, *yueju*), both starring Hung Sin-nui (紅線女, 1924~2013). One titled *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Frontier* (昭君出塞, *Zhaojun chusai*) which has three versions of productions. Another *Zhaojun Princess* (昭君公主, *Zhaojun gongzhu*), adapted from Cao Yu's (曹禺, 1990~1996) *Wang Zhaojun* (王昭君). In order to demonstrate the distinct feminist consciousness in Cantonese opera, these plays will be analyzed comparatively, so as to excavate the much bolder manifestation of female subjectivity.

2. Initial Grant of Woman's Choice

The first edition of *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Frontier* is based on the traditional acting version, and the beginning of the story is identical with the first extant Wang Zhaojun drama—Ma Zhiyuan's (馬致远, 1251~1321) *Sorrow in the Han Palace* (漢宮秋, *Hangongqiu*). However, the following story continues with completely different plots which are highlighted parts of the whole play. Comparing

with *Sorrow in the Han Palace* and all preceding Zhaojun dramas in Cantonese opera, the most striking contrast in this version is that it initially endows woman with the right to choose.

In order to create her own destiny, Wang Zhaojun in this play volunteers herself boldly to the peace-alliance marriage mission. This scenario that has never been seen before in any Zhaojun dramas is to some extent a pioneering undertaking and embodies a modern psychological approach that women take the initiative in their fortune and think highly of their quality of lives other than length.

In this process, two alternatives are given to Wang and she is endowed with the right to choose. Unlike the old stereotypes of women's marriage that have been arranged by men, Wang is able to choose whom she wants to marry. It's a kind of relative freedom of woman volition that most other women haven't been granted at that time.

Among these two options, Wang makes up her mind to go to the border ultimately, so as to avoid eventualities such as bilateral disputes as well as war risks. This arrangement with the playwright's ingenuity can not only preserve intact image of Wang, but subversion and denial of a national psychology or collective unconsciousness embedded in the majority deeply under the patriarchal society that beautiful women bring on disaster. Additionally, the setting of selecting Chanyu also reflects that this version is reviewing the inequality of sexual order to a certain degree between the monogamy in female sexuality and polygamy in male sexuality in patriarchal context from a standpoint of human and feminine self-consciousness. She'd prefer to go to that barbaric territory with sincere Chanyu who is a bachelor rather than stay in a glorious palace where she needs to struggle with other concubines for the emperor's love to survive. Indirectly, her choice reveals a satire and query on male sexual hegemony.

As for the result, Wang's wise choice makes this adaptation ends with a comedy in embryo, in which Chanyu readily agrees to respect Wang's request that she is intensely afraid of seeing the soldiers fight a battle and orders all the soldiers in his entourage to invert their weapons as a symbol of peace. Although this ending is similar to various types of traditional Chinese drama with their often derivative plots, it seems recklessly at odds with the traditional Zhaojun dramas with tragic beauty of her death and it has even got some reproaches.

In spite of this version renders woman options manifesting progressive feminist consciousness, it's practically half-baked and essentially conceal phallogocentric historical culture which we are accustomed to. Neither choice is perfect, even go to the border is a compelling choice that Wang's fate is substantially in the palm of men's hands. She can only change or create her own destiny through a palliative measure—being subordinate to new ownership just like an inanimate object, she still cannot alive for herself exclusively. To be able to live, she still has to agree to serve, honor, obey men and accept the peace-alliance marriage, but what she gets in exchange is at best a shadow life.

3. Distinct Manifestation of Woman's Dignity

In the second version of *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Frontier*, Zhaojun is shaped into a more spitfire character with tremendous dignity which is especially embodied in a remarkably different ending.

A similar peace-alliance situation is presented here, but an ingenious dramatic device—Wang takes the opportunity of ascending a height to bid farewell to her homeland and parents to commit suicide by jumping off the cliff into the Blackriver—creates an exquisitely tragic beauty of her departure across the border.

Just as the artistic convention in most dramatic texts, Wang performs her ritual suicide to show her reluctance of being a sacrificial lamb for bilateral tie. She is portrayed into a woman who totally different from the image in the first version, but more unyielding and not wallow in the mire with the ways of the world.

Instead of reserving the stereotype of narrative pattern in traditional Chinese dramas that almost every drama has a comic ending, Wang's ultimate melodramatic suicide act which creates a sense of tension and urgency for her struggle is much analogous with the convention of ancient Greek tragedy—if we can't against any calamity which fate could bring, whether we can choose mutually assured destruction with the fate. Though Wang is facing coerced marriage with her inability of rebelling deeply ingrained patriarchy, she is endowed with indomitable spirit that using death to fight against fate. From a female discourse, the image of Wang in this play reveals a progressive transformation from “woman is subordinate to fate and man” to “woman in charge of her own fate”.

If we expand to a macroscopic point of view and ask why twist on *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Frontier* appears? Attribute to the favorable geographical location of Guangzhou, the influence of western drama on Cantonese opera has been a time-honoured custom since early 20C. Particularly, during the time when the policy that “let a hundred flowers blossom, and weed through the old to bring forth the new” had been proposed since 1940s, it had provided maximum possibility and inspiration for drama innovations as well as creations. Or we can speak out boldly that it was the best Chinese-foreign cultural integration in the sphere of drama during the seventeen years after the establishment of PRC. This version is a case in point where we can see that a Chinese literatus, especially a playwright of Cantonese opera was making effort to accept the excellent western culture tradition and making attempt to integrate into the narrative of traditional Chinese story, which is certainly a huge improvement.

Moreover, there is a nonnegligible historical context of Chinese mainland in 1950s. It was a special period of time when revolutionary spirit had become the mainstream discourse and modern revolutionary drama which puts emphasis on revolutionary theme had been a preoccupation. Influenced by such red revolutionary spirit, when Wang facing the immutable reality, she chooses to die in a revolutionary approach rather than compromise, her resistant spirit is actually a kind of strong revolutionary spirit derived from the age of discourse.

Since Ma Zhiyuan created his Wang Zhaojun committed suicide in order to protest against the Mongol rulers, later this scenario has been repeated innumerable on the stage. Spontaneously, Wang's incapacity to cross the border has constantly become a dramatic topic favored by scholars. Some scholars assert that “Chinese nationalism and the patriarchal tradition are united to make the border strong enough to kill” [1]P8, and some researchers claim that (the plot) is “an exteriorization of male-centered mentality in the patriarchal society and necessity of strengthened majesty as well as authority of the husband to women's ethical norms” [2]P66. They believe that the scenario of Wang's ritual suicide is a kind of patriarchal hegemony. We cannot exclude all these opinions from the point of feminism. Nonetheless, when we reaffirm this play with a perspective beyond the gender, this alteration is actually a movement showing more respect for women. Wang is not only a female image, but also an independent individual beyond the boundary of gender. Exploring the survival of the situation and spiritual liberation of women, this image focuses individual destiny and mastery as well as struggle over it on a standpoint of humanity and human value.

4. Bold Expressions of Woman's Thoughts

Wang Zhaojun's image in the third version of *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Frontier* bears a slight resemblance to the self-pity woman with servility and compliance that have been commonly seen in traditional women in the first two versions. However, when we excavate deeper in this play, her capacity for thinking and bold expressions of thoughts are unearthed readily.

Her immediate articulation of grievances is cropped up frequently in this edition. For instance, confront incapable courtiers, after ordering indignantly that they do not have to see her off, she shows her articulation of grievances straightway by putting them to torture ironically, “Seeing these civil

and military officials, they even don't feel ashamed of their incompetence." [3]P417 Outwardly, the referential meaning of this sentence is her poignant criticism towards incompetence of all the civil and military officials. Inwardly, the connotative meaning is severe reprimand towards the patriarchal society by a woman. Men are entitled to all the power but none of them assumes corresponding responsibility, so as to take advantage of a woman who does not enjoy the right to decide her own destiny to protect the country. Through this thought-provoking critical discourse, Wang fearlessly articulates her discontent over irresponsible courtiers and hideous crime of patriarchy. Considering her own miserable fate—being forced to accept the peace-alliance marriage mission far away from homeland, and cannot come back as Su Wu once leaves—she confides her resentment against the fatuous emperor straightforward. Whereas, the masses, especially women, had no right to resent or denounce their emperor in feudal society. Hence Wang's potent feminine utterance is a revelation of the playwright's genuine respect for woman.

Differ from those irresponsible courtiers, Wang remains deep love for the country, singing the arias that "my family and country are the most memorable, I am overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and longing," "even though I am here, I still missing my country." [3]P419 Instead of "no one knows I miss my country and hate the king inwardly" [4]P186 in the first version, she conveys her feelings more directly—"who knows I miss my country and resent the king." [3]P420 Compare with *Sorrow in the Han Palace*, these stouthearted librettos are absolutely subtleties for the reason that they fully reveal Wang, as a female, her intense sense of patriotism and her very religious and fiercely patriotic image. Not restricted to individual fate and traditional boudoir, Wang worries about the people and their livelihood, so she admonishes the emperor that "rather than selecting young women from all over the country to fill the imperial harem and delaying sericulture, you should love and care about the people." [3]P420-421 Her outspoken presentation of intrinsic psychology against incompetent emperor and state's corrupt politics is a progressive sprout that woman is no longer an ignorant image who is not allowed to usurp man's power. Woman having elaborative faculty is to small extent integrated into a discourse of national state, criticizing and expressing her insights or suggestions toward the national affairs.

For purpose of empathizing with woman under patriarchy, the playwright also arranges male characters to show mercy from a masculine perspective. For instance, Han Chang, an official who is ennobled as the prince's maternal uncle escorts Wang go to the border. He has the same criticism as Wang toward the state politics, "Officials neglect state affairs and ruin the country, life is hard for the people, the beauty is forced to sacrifice for the country." [3]P416 During the trip before crossing the Yuemen Pass, he laments, "Parting for even a short time is hard, not to speak of bidding farewell to parents. Once crossing the border, who will miss Zhaojun!" [3]418 As a man, he understands Wang's sadness—sentimental attachment to homeland and sense of reluctance to part from parents and relatives—by putting himself into her shoes. These comments about reflections on women's lives and their living conditions in patriarchal society spoken by man are much more convincing and forceful than everything spoken out of Wang's mouth, and they are more likely to evoke audiences' sympathy for woman under patriarchy. Except that, Chanyu's attitude and his behaviors toward Wang likewise manifest a kind of man's respect and protection for woman.

5. High Level of Woman's Self-Consciousness

Based on Cao Yu's *Wang Zhaojun*, *Zhaojun Princess* which creates a more self-conscious Wang Zhaojun's image with high ego is significantly different from *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Frontier*. Whether the ideological ability or psychological state, Wang's personality with highly self-consciousness in this play reaches an entirely new level.

In her debut, she has already established an image that a female who dares to speak out with independent thought. Diametrically oppose corrupted feudal conventions deeply entrenched in most of the traditional women's minds that only men can master their own destinies and make contributions to the country, she argues that "can't women have ambitions and desires to pursue a better life?" [3]P338 Keeping her father's words—"maintain friendly relations between two countries" [3]P338—in mind, she is much more proactive and braver to participate in the public social life and holds great aspiration to volunteer her own services to the society. Similarly, when the first time she meets the emperor and Chanyu in the audience hall, she sings *Together Forever* (长相知, *Changxiangzhi*) to display her awareness of democracy and capability of participating in the administration and discussion of state affairs. Even she knows she shouldn't offer her opinions as a woman, she still makes a brave attempt, and her insights that surpass the limits of her age astonish everybody present. Meanwhile, Wang's image is elevated to new altitude to the greatest extent, and she becomes an exceptional woman with independent consciousness who has the thought as well as ability to take control of her own destiny.

As a matter of fact, such phenomena above could not have happened in the real history, for one thing, they are more likely to be a mirage that reflects the socio-cultural reality in the 1980s when women have been highly valued and equaled to men. This artistic mirage embodies an extension of feminist consciousness from the fields of political and social life to literature and arts, which is a manifestation of progressive tide of feminist consciousness in Chinese mainland. For another, what Wang does and how she behaves in this play imply cultural workers, with superior consciousness and great respect for women, their expectations for the future society.

Since the same self-awareness has extended to the following scenes after Zhaojun crosses the border, the play demonstrates a new demo of modern love story with mutual respect. Instead of husband and wife treating each other with courtesy in ancient China, this kind of mutual respect is based on a connotation in modern sense that the true love comes from not only the unity of body and soul, but the understanding and agreement of souls. Not only Chanyu is extremely considerate toward Wang, but Wang also falls in love with Chanyu and shows her love proactively. With mutual appreciation as well as attraction, they honest to each other, trying to help each other with understanding and empathy, so as to go through the time fraught with difficulties and frustration.

Beyond that, Wang Zhaojun is no longer a subservient woman who can definitely grin and bear it in this play, she exhibits a strong sense of autonomy. For example, as a non-native with tolerant attitude toward cultures, she accepts and observes the customs of the Xiongnu voluntarily, and even asks the Chanyu to teach her how to ride. As a stepmother, when Chanyu's son is framed and drug-poisoned, she gives her blood and offers help without hesitation. As the mother of the nation, she offers that herself should learn from Chanyu's former wife who was virtuous and beloved by the people.

Admittedly, Wang's image in this play is portrayed to be a paragon so as to seem inauthentic, she is to some extent lack of some true humanity, but the playwright indeed manifests absolute female ability and feminist consciousness with enough foresight and extreme respect for women that we cannot ignore.

6. Conclusion

Undoubtedly the gradual variations of feminist consciousness are unearthed by comparatively analyzing four Zhaojun dramas in Cantonese opera above. There is a distinct evolution of gender connotations behind literary and cultural icon of Wang Zhaojun from the grant of option to woman initially, preservation of woman's dignity by an extreme form of protest, and woman's capability of thinking and expression to woman's completely autonomous awareness and competence to steer her

own destiny. These transformations are sites of manifestation where we catch sight of the improvements of feminist consciousness in Cantonese opera. Where Chinese drama and cultural wisdom which are intimately related to social context that women's position has increasingly enhanced step forward. Where feminism is not overlooked, but evolutionary. And Where hope and gender equality overtake sexism step by step.

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