

# Struggling Between Tradition and Modernity: A Feminist Interpretation of Yu Opera *China Women*\*

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Yu Opera *China Women* (some translated it into *Our Company*) (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 20th 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.

*Keywords:* China Women, feminism, tradition, struggle, modernity

## 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 with Peking Opera, Shaoxing Opera, Huangmei Opera, and Pingju.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Then, it spread across China, including the northwest Xinjiang Province and southeast Taiwan. Yu Opera was listed as part of China's intangible cultural heritage in May 2006, 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-year-old lady to be commander), etc. Some reflect loyalty and the ancient battle life, such as *Mu Guiying Took Command*, *Hua Mulan*, etc. Some put on shows of folk daily life, love affairs, and social ethics, such as *The Beheading of an Ungrateful Husband*, *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, 2013, p. 9).

Modern Yu Opera *China Women* (2000) is such a kind of story. *China Women* demonstrates a typical

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<sup>1</sup> [EB/OL]. [2017-02-15], [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yu\\_opera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yu_opera).

<sup>2</sup> [EB/OL]. [2017-02-15], <http://english.cri.cn/8706/2010/12/01/1141s608032.htm>.

image of Xiangxiang, a traditional woman who struggles hard to move forward in 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. 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 person, in the light of feminist theory and finally reveals their awakening female consciousness.

### **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 Simone de Beauvoir (1989) said "the second sex" or "the other". Feminists advocate criticizing the male-centered Western society and fighting 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, 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 and receive higher education and the right to work. The representative feminists are Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), 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 could not 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- ), 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- ), 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: (1) to fight for women's participation in the political power; (2) to set up women's industry; and (3) 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 time of reform and opening up in China, and women's liberation has made some progress. The heroine Xiangxiang could go out to work, but she was still struggling hard to move from tradition to modernity. On the 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 do not love each other at all. This contradiction leads to her tragedy.

### **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 was 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 from 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, began to beat her again, and sang his lines: As a woman, you should not 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 am feet. The author takes 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 without any ideas, she always listens to the instruction of male and 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”. While 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 is still very difficult for her to change her inferior status, because she was kidnapped by the moral of patriarchal society and all the women were kidnapped by the moral of patriarchal society. They did not 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 Xiangxiang unintentionally, Xiangxiang threatened Huanhuan to beat her if she could tell others about the family conflict. Although Xiangxiang fell in love with the potter, Shizhong, she could not dare to 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 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. They were kidnapped by the moral of patriarchal society.

### **The Evolution of Power Relations Between Husband and Wife**

The power relation between the husband Erdong and the wife Xiangxiang was going through a period of irreversible change in the story. 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, and never dared to resist.

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 20th century in China. While her husband Erdong was the type to sit around doing nothing but gambling and economically depended on Xiangxiang. 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. Erdong knew that Xiangxiang did not 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 argued 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 hated the situation that a man can establish total supremacy over his wife, doing nothing, and 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 (Mill, 2005, pp. 17-26). 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 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 is very difficult for Xiangxiang to improve her living condition, she was brave and working hard to change, finally she really made some progress.

### **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* (Wollstonecraft, 1992). In other words, the gender differences between men and women are determined not only 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, 2005, p. 15). 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 is obvious that Xiangxiang's family life was very unfortunate: Her husband Erdong was a gambler and sometimes beat her black and blue and her son Dunzi was mentally handicapped and suffering from epilepsy. But Xiangxiang did not 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 and there was still tradition in her deep heart, so it was very difficult for her to break up with tradition completely. For example, Xiangxiang loved her son so much that she spent 20,000 yuan marrying her son a very clever and beautiful girl Huanhuan in a traditional Chinese way. This is her hand-made tragedy. But Huanhuan was born in modern time and she made more progress in the awakening of female consciousness. To start with, she had an insight into the problems in Shen's family and was very sympathetic to the unfortunate marriage of her mother-in-law. In Act V, when Xiangxiang was dating with her lover Shizhong at night, her husband Erdong returned home and Huanhuan was clever to cover up for them. Xiangxiang was touched by Huanhuan's goodwill and finally realized the tragedy of Huanhuan, just the same as hers. At the end of the story, Erdong was arrested by the police because of gambling, Shizhong left Xiangxiang in order to protect her reputation, and her Jun Kiln collapsed. After a strong ideological struggle, Xiangxiang finally determined to break the cage, gave Huanhuan freedom, and gave her chance to restart her life. Along with the developments of the plot, the story reached a climax at the last Act VIII. Huanhuan also persuaded Xiangxiang to change her life and find Shizhong. 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.

### **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. Audiences can see the struggle and the awakening of female consciousness in the heroines Xiangxiang and Huanhuan and they are eager for self-reliance and self-improvement. In an unfortunate life, Xiangxiang did not depend on her idle husband or was willing to live a poor life, but worked hard and became spiritually stronger to change her life. It was encouraging that they never succumbed to their fate. However, in the strong patriarchal tradition, the Chinese women 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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