

An Analysis of The Cultural Connotation of The Invisible Female Characters in Chinese Costume TV Dramas

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Abstract. Chinese costume TV series is a kind of film and television work that carries historical imagination, there is a type of female characters who have never appeared positively but run through the whole play, which not only promotes the development of the storyline as clue characters but also carry the unique meaning closely related to Chinese history and culture. This paper takes the three Chinese phenomenal costume film and television works *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, *Princess Pearl*, and *Nirvana in Fire* as examples and explores the strategies of invisible female characters from multiple perspectives by analyzing the role characteristics of invisible women and excavating the common methods used by creators in creating invisible female characters. Through the study of this paper, it is concluded that the invisible female characters in Chinese court dramas are the epitome of women who were oppressed, disciplined, and demonized by patriarchy under the feudal imperial system. Chinese costume TV dramas reflect the multiple plights of Chinese women in the feudal era to a certain extent.

Keywords: Chinese costume TV series; female characters; character building; cultural metaphors.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of feminism, in the field of film and television culture, female characters carry the expectation that women are seen, which has gradually become a major theme in academic research. In Chinese costume TV dramas, a genre of film and television works that carry traditional Chinese culture, more and more scholars focus on the study of female characters, but by reviewing the literature, this paper finds that the current research in this field mainly revolves around a series of classic female images born with the changing aesthetic tendencies of contemporary audiences, such as great heroine and black lotus, and lack less attention to the more marginalized female role-related issues. Therefore, this paper hopes to take the invisible female characters who have never appeared in Chinese costume TV dramas as the research object and explore the cultural meaning behind the female invisible image from a micro perspective by exploring the characterization strategies of such characters.

2. Analysis of the Characteristics of Invisible Female Characters in Film and Television

2.1. Flat Characters' Appearance Designing

In Chinese costume TV dramas, the creator's external image of invisible female characters is relatively flat, and the roles often have beautiful faces, but limited to the absence of such characters, the characters don't impress the viewer at the visual level, so the beauty of the characters is essentially just empty symbols. Taking the Qing Palace-themed TV series *The Legend of Zhen Huan* as an example, the creators pieced together the image of the late Empress Chunyuan for the audience through the memories and descriptions of other characters. In terms of the external image of the characters, Empress Chunyuan was set by the creator as a stunning beauty. The TV series does not directly display this peculiarity, but uses the heroine Zhen Huan as the mirror character, showing the style of Empress Chunyuan on the side [1]. In film and television dramas, the creators have repeatedly shown Zhen Huan's recognized beauty from the perspective of characters from different positions,

genders, and classes. However, an important reason why Zhen Huan was favored by the emperor is that her countenance is similar to that of Empress Chunyuan, which shows the demeanor of The empress who has been deceased for many years. In Princess Pearl, Yuhe Xia, the daughter of a Jinan scholar, also has extraordinary beauty, so that the emperor who has numerous gaudy concubines can never forget her. However, not all TV series with the same theme follow this character creation strategy, and in Nirvana in Fire, the creators don't mention the appearance of the invisible female character Princess Xuanji, which provides more room for the viewers' imagination.

2.2. Extreme Character Personalities Building

In the process of creating invisible female characters in costume TV dramas, the creators tend to extreme their personalities, compared to the multi-faceted tendencies presented in the main characters of the TV series, such female characters take a certain personality trait to the extreme.

For example, Empress Chunyuan and Yuhe Xia tend to be the embodiment of love and kindness in the play. Most of the female characters in The Legend of Zhen Huan are alienated by power in the harem, thus showing cold, jealous, and greedy sides, while Empress Chunyuan has never shown this mentation in everyone's evaluation. In the play, from the concubines to the palace maids, everyone thinks that Empress Chunyuan is kind and humble. Moreover, in royal life where the status can't be encroached upon, many characters in the play are reduced to tools in the palace struggle and die unexpectedly, in stark contrast, the oppression of the lower-class people by the nobles of the feudal dynasty has never been reflected in Empress Chunyuan. At the same time, Empress Chunyuan's virtues are also reflected in her obedience to traditional female virtues, in the evaluation of others, this empress takes care of the emperor's other concubines, and the creator never shows Chunyuan's possessiveness as a wife to her husband, this role from beginning to end carries out the wife mission in the feudal society of monogamy and polygonal concubinary [1].

Similarly, Yuhe Xia is the mother of Ziwei, the heroine of the TV series Princess Pearl, she fell in love with Emperor Qianlong on the shore of Daming Lake, but due to the constraints of identity and status, the two could not stay together, In the end, Yuhe Xia died in the longing for her lover. In the character-building strategy of film and television dramas, the choices made by the characters under pressure will restore the role of the characters' true personalities: Yuhe Xia has a clear mind and strong self-esteem, she understands the insurmountable class gap between herself and the emperor, so she endures the disdain of her clansmen for her pregnancy out of wedlock and raises her daughter independently. At the same time, the character shows an almost exaggerated loyalty to love, she never shows resentment and disgust for the lover who abandoned her, Yuhe Xia is the image of the ideal lover image of "all-good" created by the creator.

In stark contrast, Princess Xuanji in Nirvana in Fire is portrayed as the embodiment of hatred and conspiracy. First of all, Princess Xuanji, as the national leader of the ethnic Hua, carries out a secret and crazy revenge on the Liang State represented by the protagonist, and from the perspective of the protagonist, Princess Xuanji is a dangerous conspirator. Secondly, Princess Xuanji, as a woman, does not have a clear moral bottom line. In the TV series, Xuanji, who was captured as a slave, is rescued by the head of the reconnaissance agency, Xia Jiang's wife, Han, but Princess Xuanji seduces Xia Jiang, force away her benefactor, and uses Xia Jiang's power to stir up trouble in Liang State and kill loyal ministers. Hatred, paranoia, and unfettered morality make Princess Xuanji appear as an evil image similar to a femme fatale on the surface.

2.3. Legendary Character Ability Display

In Chinese costume films and television dramas, invisible female characters have shown extraordinary talents to a certain extent, and in addition, the talents of these characters are mystifying and legendary compared to the skills of the bright-line characters. The creators highlight the unusual talent of Empress Chunyuan, and the characterization strategy in this regard is to highlight Chunyuan's talent in this field through the abilities of other characters. In the work, when other concubines show their talents in singing, dancing, female celebrity, etc., there will be characters who

provide supplementary information through lines—Empress Chunyuan has extremely high talents in this field. This mode of character construction sends a signal to the viewer that Empress Chunyuan is more of an omnipotent legend than a harem woman who is proficient in specific skills.

In creating the female figure of Princess Xuanji, the creators gave her almost exaggerated political talents. During the princess's capture by the Liang Kingdom, she secretly founded the intelligence department Hongxiuzhao and planted many eyeliners in Liang State in an attempt to complete national revenge. The creators conceal the specific methods by which Princess Xuanji created the intelligence department, as well as the reason why the spies are loyal to her, which deprives the viewer of the opportunity to disenchant Princess Xuanji's status as a politician and probe the boundaries of her power.

3. Analysis of Character Creation Strategy

3.1. Use a Restrictive Perspective to Outline the Character Image

In the three works studied in this paper, the creators all use a restricted perspective to represent invisible female figures. In a TV series, a specific character acts as a narrator or a spectator, and through their limited perspective, the audience can indirectly obtain fragmented information about the invisible female character. As a character hidden in the dark line narrative, the personality, and experience of the character are based on the individualized and subjective narration of the witnesses, which strengthens the mystery of the invisible female character. Moreover, with the personal growth of the storyteller, the strong influence of the invisible female character on them is revealed. Taking *The Legend of Zhen Huan* as an example, when the girls first entered the palace, Zhen Huan, who didn't know that her appearance was similar to that of Empress Chunyuan, was full of longing for love, and when Zhen Huan learned that she was a substitute, she had deep doubts about her lover—the emperor. The film gradually shows the image of a pure Yuan Empress who is objectified from Zhen Huan's main perspective, but through the profound influence of Chunyuan as an object on the fate of Zhen Huan as the subject, it indirectly shows the strong influence of the late Empress in the court. Quoting Lacan's mirror theory, the formation of the self must come from the misidentification of the image of others who are different from oneself, when Zhen Huan tried to separate from the image of Empress Chunyuan, the image of Empress Chunyuan in the mirror was displayed in front of the audiences' eyes.

3.2. Use the Foil Method to Strengthen the Individualities of the Character

When creating the two female characters, Xia Yuhe and Princess Xuanji, different creators used a similar creative strategy, that is, using a female successor to set off the spiritual outlook and quality of the invisible female characters. Xia Ziwei, one of the heroines of the TV series *Princess Pearl*, is the inheritor of Xia Yuhe's spiritual will. This tenacious girl perfectly inherited his mother's literary talent and tenacious character. Princess Xuanji's apprentice, Qin Panruo, plays the same role in character building. This strategist is as smart and ambitious as Xuanji [2].

At the same time, the creators also use contrasting techniques to highlight the characteristics of the characters. Taking the TV series *The Legend of Zhen Huan* as an example, the invisible female character Empress Chunyuan, as the perfect existence in the harem, is in stark contrast to Zhen Huan, who is her substitute and has a complex personality. Empress Chunyuan is an idealized existence above the gloomy court struggle, while Zhen Huan is a true portrayal of a woman who is gradually becoming numb to the feudal royal system. Empress Chunyuan continued her kindness and compassion until the last moment of her life, while Zhen Huan lost her trust in human nature after experiencing a series of injuries and betrayals, and finally became an indifferent nobility. On the one hand, the aging of Zhen Huan's face and the decay of her heart reflect the beauty and kindness of Empress Chunyuan's life. On the other hand, Zhen Huan's ups and downs in life experience also objectively contrast with the pure and almost pale life state of Empress Chunyuan who exists in the harem.

3.3. Use Metaphors to Reveal the Essence of the Character

In Chinese costume films and television dramas, the creator uses metaphor to reveal the deep meaning of the invisible female image. The creator uses invisible imagery to show the viewer the alienated nature of the character. In a specific cultural context, women as the other lose the right to interpret the self, and thus become a flat existence with only the superego or id. From the perspective of plot design, the early death of Empress Chunyuan made it impossible for her to experience the process of aging as a woman, so she became the embodiment of abstract beauty. When Empress Chunyuan became a symbol of beauty in the emperor's mind, other women lost the qualification to compare with this abstract beauty. In addition, the state of the character never appeared also gave the audience more room for imagination of the image of Empress Chunyuan, this strategy of mystifying the character gave the audience a chance to project the ideal female image in their minds onto Empress Chunyuan, and since then, in the TV series, an art form dominated by visual symbols, the beauty of Empress Chunyuan has become a myth that is not limited to the appearance of the actor. However, the mythical beauty of Empress Chunyuan cannot coexist with her life, and the ending where she is framed to death by her sister also implies that a completely benevolent soul without a dark side cannot exist in the harem of a feudal dynasty, nor can it exist in the real world. The early death of Empress Chunyuan is a metaphor for the inevitable disillusionment of the characters and viewers in the play about the perfect female image.

In *Nirvana in Fire*, Princess Xuanji has become a female symbol that is not recognized by secular moral standards and carries the dark desires of human nature, and the state of the characters hiding in the shadows is the film and television embodiment of this abstract symbol, which is a metaphor for Princess Xuanji's state of existence that is not tolerated by the mainstream values of society. In addition, Princess Xuanji and the intelligence department she set up are metaphors for the destructive power of the female group in the patriarchal society. Princess Xuanji used men to carry out national revenge during her lifetime, and such a character portrayal imposed an unspeakable erotic meaning on the political path of this female national leader, and the Hongxiuzhao of stealing the enemy's intelligence by lurking and erotic means became the externalized embodiment of the princess's inner hatred and desire, which was like the women of ethnic Hua lurking in various parts of the Liang country, which could not be discovered and difficult to eradicate [3]. In contrast to the male-dominated Liang political bloc, this highly secretive and cohesive organization of the defeated country composed of women is the embodiment of demonized female power. The identity of intelligence spy gives the women who are the object of staring the opportunity to observe others, while the nobles and officials of the Liang State who are the embodiment of patriarchy are in the position of being observed, and the low and high positions of power have been secretly reversed under the influence of the invisible woman.

4. The Cultural Connotation of the Role of Invisible Women

4.1. The Discipline of Women by the Feudal Imperial Power

Foucault argues that discipline and punishment are essentially a form of micro-power over people by the state. It realizes the socialization and standardization of people through forms of power such as punishment, restraint, jurisdiction, closure, and discipline [4]. The historical background of the TV series *The Legend of Zhen Huan* is the Qing Dynasty when the absolute monarchy and centralized power were unprecedentedly strengthened. And Empress Chunyuan is the abstract tool of feudal imperial power to discipline women. Empress Chunyuan seems to be the emperor's favorite woman, but she is the emperor's tool as the embodiment of patriarchy to disintegrate other women's subjectivity. The emperor treated the other concubines as substitutes for Empress Chunyuan, essentially the objectification of women by men as rulers. The discipline of the patriarchal society makes the women in the palace gradually give up their pursuit of self-consciousness and independent personality in front of an ideal female image with only a superego.

At the same time, female characters will also use Empress Chunyuan to domesticate other women. In the play, when other women showed their talents, Empress Yixiu would tell everyone that Empress Chunyuan's talent in this field far surpassed that of other concubines during her lifetime. This practice is essentially to discipline and control other women by shaping Empress Chunyuan into an unsurpassable female model. Empress Yixiu, as a woman, also plays the embodiment of patriarchy in front of the concubines, and she objectifies other women as fertility machines that hold her sister's talents—when the concubines sincerely believe that they cannot be compared to Empress Chunyuan, they surrender to the micro-power relations constructed by Yixiu.

When the disciplined accept the existence of the harem power system, they will be alienated into subordinates who take advantage of this rule, in which case, Empress Chunyuan will become an instrumentalized symbol for them to curry favor with the superior. When harem women become vassals of this secret system of power, they completely lose their subjectivity [5].

This rule of domesticating women from top to bottom is the real reason for Empress Chunyuan's invisibility: the characters' repeated mentions of Empress Chunyuan in the play eliminate the proof that Empress Chunyuan was an independent individual who once existed [6]. Different characters satisfy their interests by imposing different values on the concept of Empress Chunyuan, and when these characters become narrators, Empress Chunyuan becomes their referent, an inhuman being with only a superego. Through the textual analysis of the lines of the characters in the play, this paper found that Empress Chunyuan is not a model above other women, but an individual with shortcomings. For example, Chunyuan, as a nobleman, pities the hard work of the palace maids in winter laundry, but cannot understand the exploitation of servants by the imperial power. This lack of cognition objectively makes Empress Chunyuan more like a living individual, and the almost perfect evaluation of Chunyuan by the characters in the film makes her an abstract symbol alienated by imperial power, and Empress Chunyuan, who exists as a person, disappears into the story.

4.2. Oppressed Women in Multiple Predicaments

In the Qing court-themed costume drama, Yuhe Xia is the epitome of a woman who were oppressed by multiple difficulties in the feudal era [7]. The love relationship between Emperor Kangxi and Yuhe Xia has been unequal from beginning to end. Kangxi, as the leader of the feudal dynasty, was the beneficiary of the centralized system of absolute monarchy, while Yuhe Xia was only a subject constrained by a strict hierarchy. Feudal etiquette is a tool for rulers to govern the country, and for those who are disciplined, it is an iron law that needs to be observed throughout their lives. Moreover, the idea of "loyalty to the monarch" made it difficult for ordinary people to criticize the mistakes of the rulers, and the heavy constraints on women in feudal society made the disciplined always carry the risk of being judged morally. In the TV series, Yuhe Xia's parents acquiesced to the love between the two, and behind this acquiescence was the unconsciousness of the subjects moving closer to the imperial power. Faced with oppression from the imperial power, the subjects could only choose to attack themselves inward, rather than confront the ruler who caused the tragedy. The asymmetry of power exempts the upper class from any responsibility in the relationship, while the lower class faces extremely strong social pressures and pays a heavy price for it [8].

At the same time, Yuhe Xia is also a representative of the victims of the unequal concept of love in feudal society. In the Qing Dynasty, which pursued monogamy and multiple concubines, women's unilateral loyalty could not prevent them from being in a position of emotional disadvantage, Kangxi was the only love of Yuhe Xia's life, and Yuhe Xia was only one of Kangxi's many lovers. Yuhe Xia's talent and integrity, under the alienation of power, have become a deformed love conjecture in a patriarchal society that proves the charm of men at the expense of women's dignity.

In addition, in the plot setting of this play, there is a tendency to dissolve the complex life dilemmas of the characters into the broken love of an infatuated woman. However, the ending of the character is not only a love tragedy but also a social tragedy and a tragedy of the times. In the face of this structural inequality, men's recognition of women at the emotional level not only cannot change

women's weak social status but may also cover up the bullying and oppression of women in areas other than emotion.

Therefore, the romanticized expression of Yuhe Xia in the TV series is itself proof of the absence of this female character. As a victim of feudalism, the woman is replaced by the landscape imagination of a beautiful woman, and all the suffering of this female character becomes invisible in the face of the vast system of science and religion. The invisible Yuhe Xia is the epitome of the silent oppressed under the centralized system of absolute monarchy.

4.3. The Externalized Embodiment of Men's Fear of Losing Power

In traditional Chinese culture, the Hongyanhuoshui generally refers to the woman who causes the disaster, like Helen of Troy. The scholar Yanli Wang once pointed out that the Huoshui is a rumor consciously created by men based on their ambivalence towards women [9]. In the TV series *Nirvana in Fire*, the invisible Princess Xuanji is the externalized embodiment of this image in film and television works, and the character's evaluation of Princess Xuanji in the play itself reflects the complex emotions of men and the male-dominated Liang State power group on dangerous beauty. First of all, the creator set Princess Xuanji as a dead person, and her nation could not confront the Liang State, which made Princess Xuanji unable to directly retain the right to interpret her character and national choices [10]. Princess Xuanji's disregard for morality and obsession with revenge makes her a villain who threatens male power. On the other hand, an important means for Princess Xuanji to form a community of interests with men is seduction, which makes Princess Xuanji not only carry the fear of men losing power but also become a carrier of female attraction. The existence of Princess Xuanji conforms to men's negative imagination of the femme fatale and reflects the destructive effect of women who are regarded as sexual resources on men's political power. On this basis, the character's excellent management ability and patriotic feelings make the destructive power of the image of Hongyanhuoshui rise from the emotional field to the political level, so Princess Xuanji has become the representative of the evil woman in the play.

In stark contrast, Princess Xuanji is not the only leader and planner hidden behind the scenes, and the protagonist of the TV series, Changsu Mei, also chooses to hide his noble character under a complicated appearance to redress the past unjust cases and save the decline of the Liang Kingdom. The creator did not portray Changsu Mei as an all-good character, but the endings of Changsu Mei and Princess Xuanji are very different, the former not only completed the plan to rehabilitate the unjust cases of the past, but brought political clarity to the Liang State, but but also took off the mask of a strategist who is both good and evil. The latter not only failed but her plan to restore the country was defined as a conspiracy by the protagonist Changsu Mei. Changsu Mei's evaluation is naturally influenced by the character's position, but the derogatory attribute of conspiracy makes the patriotic feelings and wisdom in Princess Xuanji's plan dissipate to a certain extent. Since then, the men who hold the right to speak and moral standards have completed the definition of Princess Xuanji's values, and with the collapse of the ethnic Hua and Hongxiuzhao, Princess Xuanji's political life has completely ended with her fear of losing power.

To sum up, Princess Xuanji's invisibility not only symbolizes the fear of losing power when men face women but also reflects the deprivation of women's right to speak by the patriarchal cultural system.

5. Conclusions

In Chinese costume TV dramas, the creators have created female characters hidden in the dark lines of the story by using artistic techniques such as restricting perspectives, foiling, and metaphors. These invisible female characters have relatively flat, extreme, and legendary personal traits, playing a role similar to that of flat characters, but in fact, they carry a very cultural connotation of the times. Through these female characters, who have never appeared on the front stage, the audience can see through the life plight of women in the feudal era in Chinese costume films and television dramas.

The invisibility of female characters is essentially the disappearance of individual feelings and the loss of female subjectivity under the rule of feudal kingship. As a microscopic window reflecting the culture of the times, film and television dramas show to a certain extent the multiple reasons why women are objectified, as well as the dilemma of women's aphasia in feudal dynasties.

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