

Original Paper

An Analysis of the Fate of the Character Yang Yuhuan in the Film *Legend of the Demon Cat* Based on the “Other” Theory

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Abstract

Legend of the Demon Cat is a pinnacle of ancient oriental magic film by Chen Kaige, presenting audiences with a magnificent scene of Tang Dynasty and the legendary story of Yang Yuhuan. As a film full of fantasy, suspense and romanticism, it has been analyzed by most scholars from the aspects of narrative features, image aesthetics and historical and cultural elements. However, little has been researched from the perspective of the male other about the fate of Yang Yuhuan, a character based on a legendary concubine in Chinese Tang Dynasty. This paper will analyze the portrayal of Yang Yuhuan in the film guided by feminism, especially “The Other” theory. With the historical background of the decline of the Tang Dynasty, we can seek the reasons for the dramatical fate of Yang Yuhuan, and understand the injustice and oppression faced universally by ancient women in male-dominated society.

Keywords

Legend of the Demon Cat, Yang Yuhuan, feminism, the “Other” theory

1. Introduction

Legend of The Demon Cat, a film of oriental fantasy tone, depicts a demon cat guiding young poet Bai Juyi and Japanese monk Konghai to uncover the truth of Tang’s imperial concubine Yang Yuhuan’s death, as well as the ulterior cruelty and darkness hidden behind the elegance and prosperity of Tang Empire. The film uses the words of Abe no nakamaro to comment on Yang Yuhuan: “When the Tang Dynasty was flourishing, she was a symbol of the great empire; but when it was declining, she was no longer needed.” Yang Yuhuan, a female character who was considered to have enjoyed all the glory but wrecked the country, naturally becomes the focus of controversy (Li, 2022).

It is worth noting that the complexity of Yang Yuhuan’s image in the film is mostly reflected through the image of other male characters, in addition to her own external behaviors. As Beauvoir interprets the gender relations in her feminist critical theory, humanity is male and man defines woman not in

herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being (Beauvoir, 1997), which contributes to the appliance of the “Other” vision to view women’s existence in feminist fields. By means of the “Other” theory, we can better analyze the characterization of Yang Yuhuan in the film, and find out the reasons for her transformation from a symbol of a prosperous age to a sinner ruining the state. Thereby, we can further understand the director’s criticism against the authoritarian patriarchal society and his concern for women struggling under the domination of male discourse.

2. “Canary”: Symbol of the Great Tang

In the first scene of Yang Yuhuan’s appearance, Emperor Xuanzong presents her high status and glory to the world by making her swing above the imperial citadel: she is the powerful symbol of the great Tang Dynasty. In the film, Yang Yuhuan’s dignity and charm are accentuated to a large extent by the male “others” around her. At the sumptuous feast in the Calyx House featuring Yang Yuhuan as the center of attraction, it is proclaimed by the emperor that there is no distinction between the superior and inferior, and that everyone can put aside their restraints and enjoy themselves to the fullest. So we see that Gao Lishi, who wants to ask for a poem for Yang, kneels down and takes off boots for the uninhibited Li Bai in exchange for the divine phrase “Her face is seen in flower and her dress in cloud, A beauty by the rails caressed by vernal breeze” (Xu, 2021); Abe no nakamaro dares to step into the imperial garden with the courage for being slightly drunk, and tries to confess his love to Yang Yuhuan without being punished by Emperor Xuanzong; Bai Long and Dan Long, two young and reckless brothers, are also talking animatedly to Yang with their ignorant admiration. The most unscrupulous is the initiator of the banquet, Li Longji, beating drums with hair disheveled to accompany An Lushan, who dances with swords in the wine pool while blatantly coveting Li’s throne and concubine. Everyone is obsessed with Yang Yuhuan, and she has become the veritable symbol of the great Tang empire. All hilarity including the ostentation of Yang’s beauty and supremacy, is actually a means for the emperor to declare and show off his holy sovereignty.

However, such glory is not the true reverence of that era towards her. In *The Second Sex*, in particular, Beauvoir develops a philosophical account of the “Other” that serves as the foundation for her theory of gender. She links these two concepts in her famous claim that woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other (Simone, 1997). And she further states that since woman is destined to be possessed, her body must exhibit the inertia and passivity characteristic of the object ... Once the woman is handed over to others as the property of the man, they demand that she become purely corporeal in itself. Her body is not seen as the radiation of a subjective personality, but as a thing deeply embedded in interiority (Simone, 1998). For the emperor, Yang Yuhuan’s soul and subject are neglected, she is merely his private property, like a pet on a swing, a symbol of power. If a woman is to be the self, the subject, she must, like a man, transcend all those definitions, labels and essences that define her existence. She must strive to become whoever she

wishes to be (Tong, 2002). The tragedy of Yang Yuhuan is that she has no way to remove her label of “the symbol of kingship and prosperity” and has to exist in dependence on the decisions of the emperor and the fate of the dynasty, which foreshadows her tragedy when the mutiny follows.

3. “Scapegoat”: Excuse for the Declining Dynasty

Just as she is on a swing in the air, Yang Yuhuan is caught in a dilemma where she is being admired by a myriad of people but at the same time facing the danger of falling into the abyss. When political turmoil occurs, she is blamed as a culprit for the downfall of the dynasty. Qian Mu once mentioned in his *Outline of National History* that the glory of the Tang Dynasty faded because of the An Lushan-Shi Siming rebellion, and the political situation started to be unstable (Qian, 1996). Yang Yuhuan’s tragic fate also goes to culmination with the decline of the dynasty. Knowing that his own life cannot be saved unless he gives death to Yang Yuhuan, Li Longji, together with the illusionist fabricates a magic operation leading to an indefinite fake death, trying to bury Yang Yuhuan alive under the guise of protecting her. And Yang Yuhuan, who knows that everything is just a scam, still holds the truth about the emperor’s love and imperturbably chooses to die to preserve the dynasty of his lover. In order to preserve his reputation, Li Longji forces Gao Lishi to make a strangulation mark on Yang Yuhuan’s neck so that he would not be accused of trading beauty for his imperial regime. These men are all previously crazy about Yang, but when misfortune befalls, they do not hesitate to push her to hell. Despite being discouraged, Yang Yuhuan has no alternative but to choose not to debunk the ulterior evil lie.

This precipitous shift in Yang’s fortune is fundamentally rooted in the ingrained gender and class inequalities of ancient times. Man and woman in ancient times, each stand in a hierarchical relationship to the other and the “feminine” acts as complement to the masculine, defined in a manner that produces “masculine” identity as a superior one (SRIVASTAVA, 2015). While women, as the “Other” in the eyes of men, are set aside in a position of inferiority at the mercy of men. This is why Yang Yuhuan carries various kinds of desires of the men in Tang Dynasty, but in the end, pathetically becomes the scapegoat for the declining dynasty dominated by men. Under the cover of splendor and magnificence, she is a trophy used to flaunt male power; in the midst of wars and turbulence, she becomes a victim of men’s self-preservation.

4. “Victim”: Sacrifice to the Patriarchal Society

The transformation of Yang Yuhuan’s fate is seemingly a tragedy like the so-called “Helen of Troy”, but radically speaking, it is a microcosm of the tragic fate of women ruled by a patriarchal society throughout the ages. It is not the inferiority of women that caused their historical insignificance: it is rather their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority (Joseph & Jo, 1997). The historical background determines that Yang Yuhuan is destined to submit to her subordinate position under the domination of the king. At the end of the film, Yang Yuhuan wakes up in the coffin,

struggling desperately but failing to break through the coffin—the dark cage of feudal male power. Eventually she becomes a victim of political conflicts and a scapegoat sacrificed by the emperor to escape his responsibility.

Looking back in history, there are many other women with a similar fate to Yang Yuhuan, such as Daji in Shang Dynasty, Bao Si in Western Zhou Dynasty, Zhao Fei Yan in Western Han Dynasty, etc., who could not get rid of the fetters of male domination. It is unjust treatments and assumptions against someone, particularly based on a person's sex that leads to the role that he or she should play in the society. The different role however, leads to the harm and the loss of person's right in life especially for woman who lives in patriarchal culture (Rosida & Rejeki, 2017). In times of peace and prosperity, women could be honored and favored for their beauty; however, as soon as the “apparent peace” is broken, they are habitually pushed to the “guillotine”, just like Queen Mary. Within the bondage of the patriarchal society, women's identity dilemma and the deprivation of free will always exist.

Women in a feudal patriarchal society have no boundaries to their nightmares and no escape, the sporadic torments and sufferings of life are just a nameless waste. Youth, fantasy, and hope have no place to live (Zhang, 2022). In the movie, everyone sees the supreme glory and glamour of Yang Yuhuan, but few people recognize her inward emptiness and numbness, neither understand her inner struggle and pain when bearing unfounded charges. But it is gratifying to see that the director did. Through the role of Bai Juyi, Chen Kaige expresses his compassionate feelings for female characters like Yang Yuhuan. As Bai Juyi says to Konghai in the film, “I am feeling unjust for her. It is not her fault that the Tang Dynasty fell, and Yang Yuhuan should not be buried alone in Mawei Stage.”, which is also the director's heartfelt words and the proof of his care for Yang Yuhuan as one of unfortunate women in that period.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that whether as a symbol of the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty, or a disaster for the downfall of the empire, Yang Yuhuan actually has an inevitable tragic fortune, which stems from her identity that is defined by “others”. In the male-dominated society, this identity is inevitably interpreted in a biased and arbitrary manner, and even distorted. Under feudalism dominated by patriarchy, women are obscured. The ethical, political and cultural suppression of women imposed by men are often replaced by a one-way accusation against women's dignity in a male-centered discourse system. Women are made to bear all the guilt and blame, and their consciousness is forced to be interpreted in terms of the male discourse (Jian, 2019). Through the “Other” theory, Chen Kaige recreates the role of Yang Yuhuan in *Legend of the Demon Cat*, profoundly expressing his indictment of the cruel and hypocritical reality in patriarchal society, as well as his deep concern for the fate of women represented by Yang Yuhuan.

In traditional history and society, men can develop themselves according to their own intentions. While women often have to depend on the man who acts as the core in family and society, and their image and

orientation are also shaped in terms of men's expectation (Wang & Li, 2019). Even though today most women have transcended the limitations of the "Other" and get rid of such "identity dilemma", we have to admit that the gender discrimination against women and the potential superiority of men still exist in many minds and are even explicitly performed in many social sectors like education or employment. Patriarchy has become a thing of the past, and we should learn a lesson to prevent a replay of Yang Yuhuan's tragedy in today's modern and liberal society.

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