

The Female Tragedy in the TV Version "Empresses in the Palace"

Anqi Li^{1,a,†}, Yu Xie^{2,b,*†}, and Xiaoyun Zhang^{3,c,†}

¹Chinese language and literature, Suzhou City University, Suzhou, China

²Life Science, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, China

³Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, Shanghai Second Polytechnic University, Shanghai, China

a. 2488246060@qq.com, b. s1251127@live.hkmu.edu.hk, c. 2646501539@qq.com

*corresponding author

†These authors contributed equally.

Abstract: The television drama 'Empresses in the Palace', which is adapted from the novel of the same name, has been popular since it was broadcast in 2012 and is the peak of the television drama about the struggle in ancient China's harem. Therefore, this essay makes a deep study of the tragedy embodied in this TV drama based on the text analysis. Starting with the main character Zhen Huan, this essay analyzes the story of the process that Zhen Huan gradually loses her friendship, love and kinship, and the tragedy caused by the failure of the struggle from a female perspective, after that, analyzing the imbalanced value caused by the differences in political and emotional power between 'Zhen Huan' and the Emperor and the feudal ideology led to a tragic impact on women from a social perspective. As a result, through research and analysis, this essay has a deeper understanding of the tragic literature characteristics that the tragedy in this TV drama mainly comes from the character defects, the differences in power and status, and the oppression of feudal ideology. Feeling the reasons for the hatred and things women need or lose is helpful to avoid being assimilated by the distorted values of struggle.

Keywords: television drama 'Empresses in the Palace', 'Zhen Huan', analysis of tragedy

1. Introduction

The TV series "Empresses in the Palace" is based on the novel of the same name by Wu Xuelan, and is based on the history of the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, in which the historical character of Zhen Huan is based on Empress Xiaoshengxian. The story is about the growth of Zhen Huan from an uninitiated young girl to a power-hungry empress. As a popular film and television production, a certain amount of relative research exists on the drama "Empresses in the Palace". Overall, the current mainstream research is on female portrayal and feminism, which involves corresponding female tragedies and female resistance. For example, Shi Chunhui's "The Brokenness of Women's Resistance" reflects women's resistance in a patriarchal society through several typical characters in the drama [1]; Ma Ying's "A Feminist Study of 'Zhen Huan's Biography'" fully demonstrates her view that the sense of female autonomy and spiritual independence in the "Empresses in the Palace" is relevant in contemporary society while implying the tragic fate and life encounters of women under

feudal patriarchy [2]; Wang Xia's "Analysis of Modern Feminist Consciousness in the TV Drama 'Empresses in the Palace' from the Perspective of Feminism" conducts research from the development of feminism, the embodiment of feminist consciousness in the play and the realization of self-worth, and more, reflecting the modern feminist thought in "The Empresses in the Palace" with the times [3]. However, there is no unified view of the tragedy. The research theme of this paper is the tragedy of the drama version of "The Empresses in the Palace", and through textual analysis and research on the content of the TV series, the main object of discussion is Zhen Huan. This research is conducted in terms of her character, life experience and the reflected social phenomena from two aspects of the female and social tragedy in order to achieve the purpose of a tragic study of the drama version of Zhen Huan.

2. Female Tragedy

2.1. A Tragedy Caused by the Disposition

Shakespeare's tragedy is often called character tragedy. Character tragedy is a form opposite to the tragedy of fate. It means that the tragedy of the characters in the play is often caused by the behavior of the characters. However, the behavior is not affected by external forces but by the embodiment of the actor's character. As Aristotle described the tragedy in *Poetics* as "expressed by the actions of the characters" [4], the center of character tragedy is the character that leads to the action or the action generated by the character's character. Such a tragedy of character also exists in the character Zhen Huan in "The Empresses in the Palace", which is the focus of this article.

As the protagonist of the drama version of *Empresses in the Palace*, Zhen Huan's character is mainly positive. She has strong self-consciousness, smartness and carefulness, a stable mood, understatement and forbearance, can weigh the pros and cons, and understands the general situation, so she has survived many times. Zhen Huan's beauty, talent, ability, and optimistic character make her appear to be a unique favorite of the Emperor and make her make connections in her interpersonal relationships. Her mature mind, superior to her peers, enables her to guess people's minds and control the overall situation deeply. The rewards brought by these excellent abilities are projected on her personality, forming her narcissistic, conceited and strong camouflage characteristics. Its main performance is that it has an exaggerated sense of self-importance and self-achievement. They have high illusions about personal success, power and love. They think they are unique and can only be understood by some special people or people with certain statuses. In interpersonal communication, he likes to use others as a tool to achieve his own goals [5]. In addition, strong self-esteem in the early stage also brought her disadvantages.

In fact, from the analysis of Zhen Huan's life's wishes and the relationship between the characters, it can be seen that this character has great tragedy - most of the people she cares about eventually leave her, in her own words, "I never get what I want." The loss of friendship, love and kinship is inseparable from her personality defects. From the tragic plot caused by Zhen Huan's loss of the persons she cares about, it can be roughly divided into three categories: Mei Zhuang represents friendship, Emperor and Prince Guo represents love, and Long Yue represents family affection.

Mei Zhuang's death is inseparable from a key figure, An Lingrong. Mei Zhuang was a close friend of Zhen Huan, who grew up together, and An Lingrong was a friend of Zhen Huan, who met during the talent show. They three went to the palace to be concubines at the same time. At that time, Zhen Huan was facing a crisis, and An Lingrong sent someone secretly to tell Mei Zhuang that "Zhen Huan and Imperial Physician Wen were falsely accused of having an affair and were in crisis", which made her give birth prematurely and die in childbirth. An Lingrong's move stems from her secret hatred of Zhen Huan, and the two people have long had a difficult gap between reconciling. Zhen Huan has a camouflage character and is good at posing in front of different people. She is unreserved and heart-

to-heart with Mei Zhuang. When confronted with An Lingrong, although she also thought about her sisterly feelings, she was wary and could not tell it all. However, on the surface, she still showed the same close and intimate relationship with Mei Zhuang. An Lingrong, who is sensitive and has an inferiority complex, longs for her to treat herself sincerely as Mei Zhuang [6]. Although Zhen Huan noticed An Lingrong's sensitive and caring character, her conceit can balance the friendship between sisters, so it is not easy to achieve perfection.

This can be seen in the plot of three people getting along early. When one of the concubines, Yu, was ordered to die, Zhen Huan talked with Mei Zhuang about this matter. An Lingrong was dissatisfied with Zhen Huan's intention to hide it from her but was dissatisfied with Mei Zhuang's disclosure. Zhen Huan replied, "It is better not to know this kind of thing because it hurts and scares you." It can be seen that Zhen Huan only considered An Lingrong's timidity and should not tell her about killing to protect her. However, it is ignored that An Lingrong's deep desire is to be tied up with Zhen Huan and Mei Zhuang and to integrate into their small group. Although Zhen Huan takes An Lingrong with her every day, she does not really regard her as a sister as close as Mei Zhuang, so she often ignores An Lingrong's true appeal. However, she was so conceited that she handled the relationship between the three people properly that she did not notice the jealousy in An Lingrong's heart, which gave An Lingrong countless opportunities to harm in secret. The death of Mei Zhuang has brought an indelible blow to Zhen Huan, till middle age, she still cannot let it go.

Prince Guo, the younger brother of the Emperor, has always loved Zhen Huan. In the early love, Zhen Huan enjoyed the feeling of being liked and boasted that her personality charm was worthy of being loved. Therefore, not only did she get caught up in it with half an effort, but also she believed that the Emperor treated her differently and had unrealistic imperial love fantasies. This tragedy also led to his constant sadness and disappointment in the Emperor in the later period, and his wife, Princess Guo, was forced to be poisoned to death.

In terms of kinship, Zhen Huan was told that Liu Zhu was pregnant after her death, but the Emperor was indifferent to her. Later, she also learned that her father was exiled and that she was a surrogate of Chunyuan, which led to the premature birth of princess Long Yue. The Emperor joyfully tried to reconcile, but Zhen Huan's self-esteem was frustrated, and she was disheartened and abandoned herself. She rejected the Emperor and invited herself out of the palace. After returning to the palace many years later, Long Yue has grown up with Concubine Jing. She did not want to recognize her biological mother, nor was she on intimate terms with her, which brought some sorrow to Zhen Huan, born a mother.

Returned to what had been mentioned before, because of Zhen Huan's smart and arrogant character, she set high expectations for her future from the beginning. At the beginning of the drama, Zhen Huan made two vows. One was before the talent show; she prayed in the temple that she could find a lover and lose the draft. The other one was the three wishes of New Year's Eve in Yimei Garden - wishing her parents, sisters and herself a safe, calm life and wishing that she could find the true love of her life who would never leave until the end of life.

However, even the seemingly simple wishes were not realized in the end. As the daughter of an important subject of the imperial court, she clearly knew that she could not escape the fate of the draft and that if she entered the harem, she had to serve the Emperor with a number of concubines. Her intelligence and self-contained did not want her to enter such an endless abyss, so she was different from other young women who were looking forward to entering the harem, and she made a wish not to be selected in the draft. She failed; however, she caught the fancy of the Emperor and was recruited into the harem. After that, Zhen Huan took advantage of an imperial physician, Wen Shichu's position to avoid serving Emperor in bed by pretending to be unwell for a long time; meanwhile, she still made a wish for one lover in a lifetime. It could be seen that Zhen Huan, who just entered the harem for a short time, have the quality of purity and sincerity like a teenager. The time she was playing a vertical

bamboo flute, she met a person who was the Emperor whom she did not recognize. The 17-year-old girl fell in love. Even after learning that he was the Emperor, she still thought his love for her was special. However, later, she realized that she was loved only because she was similar to the deceased Chunyuan Queen in appearance and talent; her true feeling eventually brought only one sentence, 'Zhen Huan looked really like you (the Chunyuan Queen)' written in the letter to this former queen by the Emperor. The gap between her ideal lover and reality is so large that she never called "Silang" (a nickname for the Emperor) after that day. After her young love turned to ashes, her expectations were lowered again and again. However, her father was framed, the whole family was exiled to Ningguta, and her close sisters died one after another; she was disappointed every time. Finally, even Prince Guo, who really loved her, treated her, saved her, and gave her hope in life after she lost her heart to the Emperor, also died in front of her. What she expected in her whole life became everything she lost in the end.

Zhen Huan is not the only one in the drama who experiences the process of expectation coming to nothing. Every female character felt disappointed in the deep harem. To take some examples, Mei Zhuang wanted to be famous in the harem at first. Although she did not expect the Emperor to trust her or pity her, she still wanted to rely on the Emperor to keep a peaceful life in the harem. However, the fact that other concubines repeatedly framed her and the Emperor's suspicion broke her heart. An Lingrong hopes to change her humble origin by gaining the favor of the Emperor, but finally became a prisoner bird who was rejected after being taken advantage of. Concubine Hua deeply loved the Emperor from beginning to end, but ultimately, she learned that the one who hurt her most and the one who did not want her to have her own babies were both the Emperor. After that, she was so desperate and committed suicide.

In psychological research, this gap between expectation and reality is called psychological gap. A large psychological gap will cause psychological and physical unhealthy, such as anxiety and depression [7]. Every process of turning expectation into disappointment was full of powerlessness, and every bloody reality crushed women again and again. What they brought to women was not only indifference and heartlessness after losing innocence but also indelible fear and unforgettable pain for a lifetime.

2.2. Failed Resistance

Although "Empresses in the Palace" is a fictional story based on the history of the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, it is a complete microcosm of the harem. The women in the harem have different personalities and different families, but they are all forced to follow the same rule: to please the Emperor. For the sake of status and family, they had to fight; all of them in the harem were women who were physically and mentally exhausted by the struggle, as An Lingrong said. In the feudal imperial system, they were fighting their own struggle, but in the end, they lost.

Zhen Huan is a typical representative of resistance in the drama. As a young girl, Zhen Huan fought for her freedom and love. When she knew that she was going to participate in the talent show, she chose to wear simple and inconspicuous clothes when other girls were dressed up; when Shen Mei Zhuang was practicing her etiquette, she chose to go to the temple to pray that she would not be selected; when Wen Shichu proposed for marriage, she chose to refuse in order to insist on her exclusive love expectations. From pretending to be ill to avoid sleeping with the Emperor to falling in love with the Emperor, after entering the palace, Zhen Huan still longed for beautiful and sincere love. When getting along with the Emperor in private, she called him Si Lang and regarded them as an ordinary couple. Nevertheless, after all, she was in the harem and was suppressed by the imperial power. When expressing dissatisfaction and blaming the Emperor during the first miscarriage, she lost the Emperor's favor and became the object of everyone's bullying in the harem, and finally refreshed herself with Shen Mei Zhuang's advice. "I used to hate to serve others with my sex, but now

I can only use my appearance to attract him", Zhen Huan said in front of the mirror, representing her first surrender, and the love between her and the Emperor also cracked. The subsequent "substitution incident" and the exile of her relatives made her fall into despair and break with the Emperor and choose to leave the palace. The love with King Guo Jun at Ganlu Temple was perhaps the best time in Zhen Huan's life, as she felt equal and pure love during those three years. However, things backfired when Zhen Huan knew of her pregnancy, her father's serious illness and the death of King Guo Jun; she had to choose to bow down to the Emperor once again for the sake of herself, her family and her love, and return to the palace where she was so disheartened. After returning to the palace, Zhen Huan took revenge on those who hurt her in turn, but finally, under the suspicion of the Emperor, she personally poisoned and killed King Guo Jun for the sake of her children and herself. After the death of King Guo Jun, Zhen Huan started her plan to commit regicide and finally joined forces with concubine Ning to kill the Emperor and became the Empress Dowager. Compared to other concubines, Zhen Huan could be said to have fought successfully, but at that time, she lost her love and friendship and lost her once simple and kind self. Her words at the Emperor's bedside, "The former Zhen Huan is dead. You killed her with your own hands," expressed her hatred for the Emperor for destroying her peaceful life. However, the empress dowager's life was also difficult; the new Emperor, after ascending to the throne, implied that the sixth brother was a threat to himself, and for the sake of her child's safety, Zhen Huan proposed to protect the sixth brother by putting him in the line of succession to King Guo Jun to completely cut off the possibility of his ascension to the throne.

"In a social system dominated by patriarchy, women's social status is lower than that of men, and women are dependent on men, which has become a social stereotype" [8]. Under the feudal imperial system, the finale of every woman's struggle is beautiful brokenness, they all had longed for freedom and love, but in the end, they all perished in the life of the deep palace. Everyone in the harem is fighting, but in the end, they all bow to male power step by step, compromise, and eventually get either death or a lonely old age; no matter how to fight, they are the victims of imperial power.

3. Social Tragedy

3.1. The Tragedy of Power Difference

The intimate relationship in "Empresses in the Palace" has always been tied to power, primarily political and emotional power. In the series, the Emperor is the supreme dominant person of political power, and all concubines and ministers depend on that power. The relationship between the concubines and the Emperor is that of ruler and subject before husband and wife, and the concubines depend on the Emperor's reward of status and title for their survival. Everyone is trapped in such a hierarchical system with different ranks; they are more like the appendages of the Emperor. People in the harem were scornful but yearning for the political rights of the Emperor because the political involvement of the former dynasty and the harem was inevitable; one's loss of favor would lead to a demotion, but it was more likely to involve the family while gaining favor would also ensure the family's solid position in the court. However, from a couple's perspective, the Emperor is not necessarily the dominant player in emotional power.

The newly enthroned Emperor was bitter in the face of the demand to select and extend his heir, and his choice to keep Xia Dongchun at the time of the selection of the temple reflected the Emperor's perfunctory and reluctant actions. The Emperor's throne brings supreme power and loneliness. As the Emperor, he was subjected to more constraints, and in order to stabilize the dynasty, he was forced to select the daughters of meritorious officials for the palace, and even the closest relationships were tied to political power. The Emperor called himself King Guo Jun when he first met with Zhen Huan, and after they had established their feelings, he sincerely explained, "I just do not want you to be afraid of me because of my status, to obey me, to pander to me". At this time, the Emperor cherished

the pure love between him and Zhen Huan without political interests because Zhen Huan loved him because of him and not because of his status as the Emperor, and he was pleased with what Zhen Huan called "Si Lang" in private. As Emperor, he enjoyed such an evenly matched love; they cared for each other, needed each other, and respected each other.

However, as the relationship stabilizes and time passes, love also becomes intertwined with political power. Zhen Huan worries that the Emperor is only doting on her rather than loving her, while the Emperor believes that doting is love. A generous reward, a higher status, and material and power rewards are signs of the Emperor's doting, but not the love that Zhen Huan desires. "Men often depend on receiving warmth and intimacy from women, and in turn, women are less dependent on men. The less dependent partner had more power in the intimate relationship" [9,10]. From a psychological point of view, in love between Zhen Huan and the Emperor, Zhen Huan occupies a higher level of emotional power. In the book "The Psychology of Love", Horney mentions that "in an intimate relationship, the degree of dependence is equivalent to a currency of power" [11]. The "butterfly competition" in the Yimei Garden was the first time that Zhen Huan exchanged her emotional power for political power. She used the Emperor's affection for her to regain favor, but for three or four days in a row, she did not see the Emperor on the grounds that she was "unwell and unfit to serve him", using the method of reducing her dependence on the Emperor to increase her emotional power. The first confrontation between political power and emotional power was on the night of Zhen Huan's delivery. Emperor offered that Zhen Huan would remain a favored concubine as long as she was willing. At that time, Emperor attempted to use his political power to oppress the couple's feelings for each other but was rejected by Zhen Huan. When she left the palace, she thought the relationship was over for good, but Emperor did not forget and would become furious when someone accidentally mentioned Zhen Huan. Because Zhen Huan affected his emotions, the Emperor's political power was lost completely in front of Zhen Huan's emotional power. Compared with the Emperor, Zhen Huan's greatest advantage is that she occupies higher emotional power. Returning to the palace means giving up the initiative, but in order to save her father, who is seriously ill, the unexplained death of Guojun King, and the baby in her belly, she can only use her emotional power in exchange for the Emperor's political power, and only by attaching herself to the Emperor can she achieve her goal. The love between Zhen Huan and Emperor is no longer love, but the need for power, the need for more power to protect the family, and the simple love are eventually reduced to a tool to exchange for power. Under the power system at that time, both the Emperor and the concubines were involuntary, and all kinds of emotions would eventually be defeated by the difference in power.

3.2. The Influence of Feudal Ideology on Women

As a television series, 'Empresses in the Palace' is a microcosm of the feudal society centered on the imperial harem built by referring to the real society in the history of the Qing Dynasty. The marks left by the feudal ideology and the impact on the change of fate can be seen in the characters in the drama. This section will explore the tragedy of the female characters due to the feudal ideology.

According to "Liezi" of the pre-Qin Dynasty, the idea of men being superior to women had already appeared [12]. Due to the factors of production and labor and political rights of the patriarchal society in ancient times, people held the idea that men were born with higher status than women. It not only caused a series of persecutions on women's physical and mental freedom but also caused many tragedies for women for a long time because of the deep-rooted dross. For 'Empresses in the Palace', the most obvious dramatic conflict is about marriage. In China's traditional feudal marriage concept, husband and wife were originally unequal. Men were always in the dominant position, while women were always in the subordinate position. This was also because of the difference between the economy and labor division of traditional society: men were often the main labor force and power center of society, while women were only responsible for household chores and children. Women acquiesced

to this kind of inequality ideologically. Under the feudal ideological education, they had a profound idea of not living for themselves but for men. As a result, women lost their own opinions and became dependent on men, which often eventually became the source of tragedy. The women represented by Mei Zhuang in the drama were taught by their mothers to cover up their talents and learning before participating in the draft, following the concept of 'women without knowledge are virtuous'. However, this sentence negates all the talents and efforts of women in self-development, curbs the diversity of women's growth, and forces women to grow up into pathetic machines who have no sense of self and only know how to please men according to the 'model of a marriageable woman' in feudal ethics. In the view of feudal ideology, women did not need to enter schools like men. If it was said that these women whose fathers were officials might have had a chance to be exposed to poetry and books, to learn reading and calligraphy from an early age, those who were born in ordinary families who had implemented the same feudal ideology were deprived of the right to learn and had no access to a broader world. They could only deal with housework during their lives and passed on the feudal dregs to the next generation with a closed mind.

In addition, all the people acquiesced that giving birth to a prince was an unwritten rule to gain a foothold in the harem. Things such as having a child can improve the position, pregnancy can lead to other concubines' envy and vengeance, and still thinking about how to get pregnant again as soon as possible, even with a seriously injured body after miscarriage. All these behaviors actually meant that women were just fertility machines in men's view. However, women acquiesced in these behaviors because of the indoctrination and education of the feudal concept from childhood, and even abided by the concept at all costs. That was the destruction of women in feudal society and the tragedy caused by women's ignorance and even rushing for it.

Karl Marx once said that "the progress of society can be measured by the status of women", so the backwardness of feudal society can also be shown from the perspective of women [13]. 'Empresses in the Palace' shows the tragedy brought by such a long and profound thought in everything, which seems to be just a battle between concubines and the lines of every character through the group portrait of women in the harem. It can be seen that they are shackled in a male-dominated cage and can only be used as appendages of males without status and power or try to please men in order to obtain the care and benefits which can be regarded as men's handouts. This revealed the bloody truth that all women could not escape brought by the feudal society at that time.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the adaptation of the original novel, the TV version of "Empresses in the Palace" added an era background based on the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty. At such a historical stage when the feudal monarchy reached its peak, women, as the vassals of the feudal patriarchy, had a profound tragedy, and the harem was the epitome of the oppression of women by power and the system at that time. The "Empresses in the Palace", in the form of a palace duel, shows the process of women's struggle against feudal ethics, the monarchy system and social ideology at that time. Taking "Zhen Huan" as an example, the defects of her character will bring her a more painful tragedy under such an era background. Even if she finally has supreme power, she will lose her most precious emotion and become a victim of imperial power. As the highest owner of political power, the Emperor has strong inequality in his relationship with Zhen Huan. Even though Zhen Huan controlled emotional power in the later stage, which could provide extremely strong emotional and physiological value, she could not compete with political power and was at a disadvantage in the intimate relationship for a long time. In addition, the feudal ideology and social ethics also brought a heavy moral shackle to women at that time, seriously curbed the value and development of women, and made them fall victim to the feudal society unconsciously, which was extremely tragic.

The *Empresses in the Palace* became popular as soon as it was broadcast. For the past ten years, it has been surrounded by a wide range of positive and negative social reactions. The audience's recognition of this film and television drama comes not only from its exquisite and rigorous screen display, exquisite character performance and contradictory plot but also from its profound tragic experience. Exploring the tragedy of *Empresses in the Palace*, analyzing the characters' character, the pain caused by the failure of the struggle, the subordinate status of power, and the living environment contained by feudal ideology, is conducive to feeling the deep reasons for the strong hatred factors in the characters, so as to avoid being assimilated by the shallow, distorted values of struggle. Understanding the inner needs of women in the harem and the loss they are seeking is conducive to understanding the oppressive nature and self-value distortion of women in the feudal dynasty, which has certain historical significance.

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