

The Transformation of the Female Lead Image in Qing Dynasty Palace TV Dramas and the Changes in Social Trends

Qicong Chen

*School of Economics and Management, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China
826641670@qq.com*

Abstract. This research examines the evolution of female protagonists in Qing palace dramas, utilizing *My Fair Princess*, *Empresses in the Palace*, and *Story of Yanxi Palace* as case studies, to explore how their transforming archetypes reflect broader societal shifts. Through textual and case analysis, the study identifies a clear trajectory from Xiao Yanzi's archetype of the Innocent Rebel, whose instinctual defiance resonated with the post-reform era's optimism and yearning for individuality, to Zhen Huan's archetype of the Tragic Strategist, whose calculated adaptation and moral compromise mirrored early 21st-century anxieties about hyper-competition and institutional power. Finally, the archetype culminates in Wei Yingluo's Proactive Conqueror, whose efficient, assertive agency and mastery of the system align with the digital age's "shuang" culture and a modern, competence-based model of female empowerment. This progression from challenging rules to mastering and redefining them demonstrates how these popular narratives function as a cultural barometer, chronicling the evolving psyche, gender norms, and social consciousness of Chinese society over two decades.

Keywords: Palace TV drama, Female image, Social thoughts

1. Introduction

In a broad sense, Qing Dynasty palace TV dramas constitute a genre of television series depicting stories set in the imperial court of the Qing Dynasty. These dramas are historically grounded in the Qing Dynasty and primarily feature real or fictionalized court figures and events. The Qing Dynasty was a patriarchal feudal empire, where imperial women were oppressed under the will of male authority [1]. The evolution of female characters within these dramas has emerged as a subject of significant social discourse in recent years. For example, the broadcast of "*Scarlet Heart*" and "*The Legend of Zhen Huan*" has attracted a large number of female viewers and sparked widespread discussions in Taiwan and other regions outside mainland China. The discussions range from workplace rules to feelings about love, largely prompting what audiences have termed "self-confirmation," as the characters' stories resonate with their real-life experiences and emotions [2]. As the main perspective of female characters, the portrayal of the female lead's image gradually changes with the changes in social trends and within the same palace background. For example, the brave and wise image of the female lead Wei Yingluo in "*The Story of Yanxi*" is in line with the

expectations of women at the same time. Therefore, analyzing these on-screen portrayals offers both typological significance and research value [3].

This study seeks to answer the following question: How has the image of the heroine in Qing Dynasty palace TV dramas evolved, and what are the underlying social factors driving this transformation?

This paper employs the method of literature and case analysis, through the reading and analysis of existing literature and the analysis of the actual characters' plots and images in TV dramas.

This paper discusses the reflection of film and television works on social thoughts and the Localization Practice and controversy of simply embodying feminism, and provides a reference for the analysis of film and television productions.

2. The evolution of the female protagonist: from rebel to strategist to conqueror

The Chinese television landscape over the past two decades has been profoundly shaped by a trio of palace dramas that, despite sharing a similar Qing Dynasty setting, present distinctly different visions of femininity and power. The journey from the irrepressible Xiao Yanzi in *My Fair Princess* to the ruthlessly ambitious Wei Yingluo in *Story of Yanxi Palace* charts a clear trajectory in the archetype of the Chinese heroine. This evolution can be understood as a shift from the Innocent Rebel, who challenges the system from a place of naive instinct, to the Tragic Strategist, who masters the system at the cost of her own soul, and finally to the Proactive Conqueror, who bends the system to her will with unapologetic agency.

2.1. Xiao Yanzi (My Fair Princess): the innocent rebel

Xiao Yanzi is the quintessential "outsider." An orphaned street performer, she literally stumbles into the Forbidden City by accident, replacing the true princess. Her power does not stem from intellect, lineage, or strategic acumen, but from her unadulterated, primal vitality. She is a force of nature disrupting the meticulously ordered world of the palace.

Xiao Yanzi's rebellion is not ideological; it is instinctual. She is completely ignorant of and indifferent to the complex web of rituals, hierarchies, and codes of conduct that govern palace life. Her actions are driven by emotion, loyalty, and a childlike sense of fairness. She perceives the Emperor not as a celestial sovereign, but as a paternal figure whom she can cajole, disobey, and love according to her own will.

Exemplary Scene: The "Virginal" Test and the Outburst. In one of the series' most iconic scenes, the Empress Dowager subjects Xiao Yanzi to a humiliating "virginity test" intended to disprove her claim of innocence in a scandal. When the test proves her chaste, Xiao Yanzi does not react with quiet gratitude. Instead, she erupts in a torrent of furious, tearful indignation. She screams at the Empress Dowager and the Empress, accusing them of injustice and callousness. This public, emotional explosion is a profound violation of palace decorum. Nevertheless, her rawness and genuine pain disarm the authority figures, eliciting guilt rather than anger. Her victory is not won through cunning, but through the disarming power of her authentic, unfiltered humanity. She doesn't play the game; she breaks it by refusing to acknowledge its rules.

Xiao Yanzi's character arc is one of remarkable stasis. She does not undergo a significant internal transformation. The world around her changes to accommodate her. Her triumph is the triumph of "authenticity" over artifice, a fantasy where being oneself is enough to overcome any obstacle.

2.2. Zhen Huan (Empresses in the Palace): the tragic strategist

If Xiao Yanzi is the system's accidental disruptor, Zhen Huan is its most brilliant and tragic product. She enters the palace as an educated, refined, and romantic young woman from a good family, hoping to avoid conflict and find a genuine connection. The palace, however, functions as a predatory ecosystem that systematically erodes innocence. Zhen Huan's journey is one of profound metamorphosis from a naive idealist to a ruthless practitioner of power, a transformation that is both her salvation and her damnation.

Zhen Huan's primary tool is her formidable intellect. She learns to read people, navigate alliances, and execute long-term strategies with the precision of a grandmaster. Unlike Xiao Yanzi, she does not break the rules; she learns them, internalizes them, and ultimately wields them more effectively than anyone else. Her power is cerebral, patient, and deeply strategic.

Early in the series, Zhen Huan is targeted by the powerful and vicious Hua Fei. After suffering a miscarriage orchestrated by Hua Fei, Zhen Huan does not respond with immediate, emotional outrage. Instead, she embarks on a protracted, multi-layered campaign to neutralize her enemy. She meticulously gathers evidence, plants seeds of doubt in the Emperor's mind, orchestrates public confrontations, and leverages the ambitions of other concubines. The culmination is not a single event but a gradual, inexorable process whereby Hua Fei's support system crumbles, her crimes are exposed, and she is left utterly isolated and defeated. This arc demonstrates Zhen Huan's methodology: she uses the system's own mechanisms—legal precedent, imperial favor, and factional politics—as her weapons. She triumphs by mastering the game, not by refusing to play.

The most poignant aspect of Zhen Huan's story is the profound cost of her success. The romantic young woman who longed for "one heart to never part" is forced to poison the man she truly loves. She witnesses the death of her best friends and child. By the series' end, she has secured absolute power for her son and herself, yet she remains alone in the vast palace, a hollowed-out figure who has sacrificed everything that once gave her life meaning. Her arc is a tragedy, a stark commentary on how systems of power can consume the individual.

2.3. Wei Yingluo (Story of Yanxi Palace): the proactive conqueror

Wei Yingluo represents the culmination of this trajectory: a rebel who attains supreme power without compromising her core identity. She enters the palace with a clear, personal mission—to investigate her sister's murder—and from her first day, she operates with an unprecedented level of agency, confidence, and tactical prowess. She is neither an ignorant outsider nor a reluctant participant; she is a hunter navigating her chosen hunting ground.

Wei Yingluo's philosophy is both straightforward and strikingly modern: "I, Wei Yingluo, was born to be stubborn and hate evil. I will clear a path for myself wherever I go." She is proactive, not reactive. Rather than waiting to be attacked, she identifies threats and neutralizes them with remarkable speed and efficiency. Although she understands the palace rules, she is not constrained by them, expertly bending, reinterpreting, or even creating new rules to serve her objectives [4].

Exemplary Scene 1: The Slap. Early in the series, a noble-born lady, Uya Qingdai, arrogantly destroys a valuable item intended for the Empress and then physically assaults Wei Yingluo's friend. The expected response from a maid of such lowly status would be silent submission. Wei Yingluo's response is to immediately step forward and slap Uya across the face with unmitigated force. This act is shocking in its directness, constituting not a hidden plot but a public, unequivocal declaration that she will not be bullied. She then astutely justifies her action by framing it as a defense of the Empress's dignity, thereby turning a transgression into an act of loyalty. This scene establishes her

core principle: immediate, public retribution that also outmaneuvers the opponent within the framework of power.

Exemplary Scene 2: The "Heavenly Punishment" of Consort Yu. In her quest for revenge, Wei Yingluo targets Consort Yu, her sister's murderer. Lacking concrete evidence and facing a powerful foe, she engineers a spectacularly terrifying demise. She secretly replaces the silk on Consort Yu's windows with metal wire. During a thunderstorm, she confronts Consort Yu, goading her into swearing a false oath of innocence to the heavens. Moments later, lightning strikes the metal-framed windows, electrocuting Consort Yu in what appears to be divine retribution. This act demonstrates Wei Yingluo's unparalleled ingenuity. She weaponizes science (basic electrical conduction) and superstition to achieve her goal while maintaining plausible deniability. She doesn't just use the system's rules; she manipulates the very cosmos to be her accomplice.

Wei Yingluo's growth is one of refinement, not fundamental transformation. She enters the palace already sharp and leaves even sharper, but her core identity—a loyal friend and a ruthless enemy—remains intact. She secures power, love, and family, experiencing no tragic compromise of her identity. Her story is one of unequivocal triumph.

3. The social and cultural currents reflected in the changing heroine

The metamorphosis from Xiao Yanzi to Zhen Huan to Wei Yingluo is not merely a shift in narrative preference but a powerful barometer of changing social values, gender norms, and the psychological landscape of the Chinese audience, particularly women, over two decades.

3.1. The 1990s: post-reform optimism and the yearning for individuality

My Fair Princess aired in 1998, during a period of rapid economic growth and opening up in China. The society was beginning to shake off the rigid collectivism of the past and embrace individual expression and consumer culture. Xiao Yanzi was the perfect heroine for this era.

Her character resonated with segments of the population, especially the youth, who were eager to challenge traditional authority figures—parents, teachers, and bosses. Her defiance was a fantasy of liberation, a promise that one could succeed through force of personality and a good heart without being crushed by the system.

Her background in the "jianghu" (the world of martial artists and vagabonds) represented a romanticized ideal of freedom, brotherhood, and justice outside the strict confines of state and family. Her popularity reflected a nostalgic yearning for a simpler, more authentic way of life amidst rapid modernization.

Her victories were personal, not political. She never sought to change the imperial system; she merely wanted her friends to be happy and to marry the man she loved. This provided a safe, apolitical form of escapism that aligned with the public's desire for lighthearted entertainment and emotional catharsis after the preceding tumultuous decades.

3.2. The early 2010s: the age of anxiety and the cynicism of the hyper-competitive society

By the time *Empresses in the Palace* became a national phenomenon in 2011-2012, China had undergone a profound transformation. The initial euphoria of reform had yielded to the realities of a hyper-competitive, materialistic society. The "involution" —a state of intense competition for limited resources—was becoming a defining feature of life, from the school system to the corporate world.

Audiences did not see *Empresses in the Palace* as merely a historical drama; they perceived it as a stark allegory for modern life. The harem was the ultimate "danwei" (work unit), the Emperor was the CEO, the concubines were employees vying for promotion, and the schemes were office politics writ large. Zhen Huan's journey—from an idealistic newcomer to a hardened survivor—mirrored the experience of a generation learning that meritocracy was a myth and that success required political savvy, emotional fortitude, and sometimes, moral compromise [5].

Unlike Xiao Yanzi's story, Zhen Huan's is profoundly critical of the power structure. It demonstrates that the system is inherently corrupt and corrupting. Winning the game means becoming a monster, a narrative that reflected a growing public cynicism about institutions and the personal cost of "success." The series was a tragedy that resonated with a populace grappling with soaring housing prices, workplace pressure, and a sense of individual powerlessness within a vast, impersonal system.

Zhen Huan was a character crafted for a more discerning, often female, audience. Her story explored female friendship, betrayal, intellectualism, and the tenuous negotiation between love, power, and survival. It acknowledged the complexity of women's desires and the brutal choices they are often forced to make.

3.3. The late 2010s: the rise of "shuang" culture and assertive feminism

Story of Yanxi Palace is a product of the digital, smartphone-dominated era. Its narrative structure and protagonist are tailor-made for the sensibilities of a generation nurtured by social media, online novels, and a global discourse on female empowerment.

The series is the quintessential example of "shuang" culture—a demand for narratives that are "refreshing," "satisfying," and "unblocked." Audiences, having grown weary of the tragic, drawn-out suffering of Zhen Huan, had no patience for passive heroines. Wei Yingluo delivers immediate gratification; her victories are swift, decisive, and visually spectacular. The "slap" became a viral trope precisely because it provided instant catharsis against injustice.

Wei Yingluo embodies a new, assertive form of feminism that is highly individualistic and predicated on competence. She is not a victim seeking justice; she is a professional executing a mission. Her power comes from her unparalleled skills (embroidery, diplomacy, strategy), her emotional intelligence, and her unwavering self-confidence. She represents the ideal of the modern, professional woman: highly capable, resilient, and unwilling to tolerate mistreatment from anyone. She manages her career (rising through the palace ranks), her relationships, and her personal projects (revenge) with remarkable efficiency [6].

Unlike Zhen Huan, who was ultimately ensnared by the system she mastered, Wei Yingluo subverts the system to serve her needs. She uses the Empress's favor as a shield, the Emperor's affection as a tool, and her own wits as her primary weapon. She attains the power, the title, and the man, but on her own terms, without sacrificing her fundamental principles. This fantasy of having it all—without the tragic cost—is a powerful reflection of the aspirations of young Chinese women today, who are increasingly educated, ambitious, and determined to define success for themselves.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the role images of three TV dramas in different eras, this paper examines the specific manifestations of the changes in the role images in the plot. The growth of relatively oppressed female characters within the identical court setting reflects the gradual enrichment of

character creation in Qing Dynasty palace dramas, and further reveals the evolution of social thought mirrored in these portrayals.

In conclusion, the journey from the Forbidden City's gates to its inner sanctum, as traced by these three iconic women, is far more than a work of historical fiction. It is a veritable archive of China's social psyche. It charts a path from the optimistic, instinctual rebellion of the reform era, through the cynical, strategic adaptation demanded by a period of intense societal competition, to the current era's demand for efficient, satisfying, and self-determined agency. The heroine evolved in tandem with her audience, whose dreams, fears, and very conception of power evolved alongside her.

This study mainly selects phenomenally successful works such as "My Fair Princess", "The Legend of Zhen Huan" and "Story of Yanxi Palace" as case analysis. Although these cases possess high visibility and influence, they are predominantly 'blockbuster' series, which may not fully represent the broader landscape of Qing Dynasty palace dramas. Further more, this study infers changes of social thoughts through the analysis of the text (character image and narrative structure). While this approach is directly effective, it is less robust in establishing the link between the 'text' and the 'context'. For instance, for the intention of producers, screenwriters, platforms and other production subjects, this study mainly relies on second-hand literature, lacking support from first-hand materials (such as interviews with the main creators, producer reports, etc.). which makes the explanation of "why this image appeared in this period" remains more a matter of correlation inference than causal confirmation.

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