

Evaluate Chinese Ethnic Minorities Through the Eyes of Han People: Representations of Ethnicity in Empresses in the Palace

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Abstract: Culture, identities, and positions...Many studies have anthropologically discussed ethnic minorities since they are deeply and especially influenced in the progress of globalization. However, fewer of them focus on representations of the same groups. In order to fill the research gap and better understand the politics beyond the representations of Chinese ethnic minorities in popular culture, this study examines the representations of relationships among Chinese ethnic majorities and minorities in one of the most popular Chinese historical palace dramas, *Empress in the Palace*. By applying the model of multiple triangulation, I found that the Han people are the main reference point in the representation, evaluating the other ethnic minorities even in the TV series telling stories in Qing Dynasty, which is ruled by Manchu, one of the ethnic minorities in China. However, in this palace drama, Manchus are in some way completely absent, underrepresented, simplistically represented, or negatively represented. At the same time, their representations are valued more and used to measure other ethnic minorities such as Mongolian people. This study also reveals the relations of ethnicity representations in Chinese palace drama and proves that the multiple triangulation is also suitable for analyzing such issues.

Keywords: Chinese, Ethnic minorities, Manchu

1. Introduction

The processes of globalization today have created a cultural space that is independent of traditional geographical or ethnic identifications [1]. At the same time, individual lives increased [2] and traditional models of self-categorization are even more frequently approached [3]. In the Chinese contexts, the phenomenon above is specifically presented that the notion of “tradition” is more emphasized to offset Chinese people’s cultural crisis [4].

Cultural crisis makes people miss their tradition [5]. For one thing, tradition is not an objective existence but actually invented and enhanced by human society [6]. For another, modern society has changed the way people imagine traditions [7]. Therefore, their local tradition has been represented and reshaped through mass media [8] especially television [9].

In Mainland China, the TV series portraying different periods of Chinese history grew rapidly [10], which is also a signal reflecting people’s desires of approaching their tradition. This research focuses

on one of the most famous one, *Empresses in the Palace* (後宮甄嬛傳 in Chinese). This palace drama tells a story in the royal palace of Emperor Yongzheng, one of the emperors in Chinese Qing Dynasty (about 1616AD - 1912AD), which was ruled by Manchu, one of the ethnic minorities in China.[11]

However, as Neil Postman pointed out in his famous book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, mass media, especially TV, makes people only content with living in the present and rather than caring about the historical events beyond the entertainment [12]. In other words, living in the era of the proliferation of simulacra [13], audience tend to only believe in representations on media [14], which as television scholars pointed out, is just a “fantasy” [15]. This research discussed a lot about the representations of history, traditional esthetics and gender roles [16] in such TV series like *Empresses in the Palace*, ignoring Chinese ethnic minorities as another essential factor when representing Qing Dynasty.

On the one hand, as mentioned before, the current research about representations of Chinese TV series mainly focuses on their approaching to different realities, including history, wars, gender roles, etc. [17], ignoring to examine how they represent Chinese ethnic minorities. On the other hand, scholars studying Chinese ethnic minorities mainly did their research in an anthropological way [18] while rarely focusing on representations of Chinese ethnic minorities on popular media.

Therefore, this research asks: as a TV series that represents Manchu royal palace lives in Qing Dynasty, how are Chinese minorities represented in *Empresses in the Palace*?

This research seeks to answer the key question and better understand the politics beyond the representations of Chinese ethnic minorities in popular culture. The structure of this article is as follows. First, I will provide a brief literature review to show the relations among globalization, Chinese ethnic minorities, and its representations. Three findings will present after applying one of the core methods examining the post-colonial subjectivities and identities in the background of global complexities.

2. Literature Review

To continue discussing issues of ethnic minorities, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the concepts of “race” and “ethnicity” since they are often used intermixed in academia. One of the earliest statements is that race is a biological concept while ethnicity is a more cultural one [19]. However, Banton argues that the idea that “race” is a social construct has been progressively deepened and empirically elaborated a few decades before the 1950s [20]. As pointing out that “race” has no scientific validity [21], other scholars asserted that we should avoid distinguishing ethnic groups according to their physical appearance [22]. Here, the distance between “race” and “ethnicity” is narrowed. In Tariq Modood’s book *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, the concepts of the two also seem to be indistinguishable [23]. As a response to Smith, some scholars raised another notion of “racialized ethnicity,” [24] implying that with more cultural affiliations, measures of ethnic identities can be used to describe people in a more sensitive and detailed level based on race. This model has won praise from academics and is valued that issues relative to race and ethnicity can be adapted to this model [25].

Then, when examining the American racial power structures, Claire Kim raised a method to triangulate the formation of its racial positions [26]. She concluded that whites value Asian-Americans more than blacks on cultural/racial grounds, while they also construct Asian-Americans as “unassimilable” [27]. Here, whites are positioned as the fixed/main reference point, evaluating and constructing Asian-American and blacks relative to each other and to whiteness [28]. Following Kim's model, some scholars note that American racial triangulation has historically operated to enhance white dominance [29]. Roberto Castillo expanded the method to be more potential for multiple configurations. First, he argues that the model can analyze not only the relations of the

Africa-China-West triad but also Africa-China relations.[30] Here, the Chinese, especially Chinese Han people, replace the west, acting as the main reference point. Added gender, geopolitics, and other perspectives, his multiple triangulation may render more insights and be suitable when discussing racial or ethnic issues in the era of globalization [31]. Therefore, this study applies this model to measure the relationship of the representations of Han, Manchu, and other ethnic minorities in the TV series *Empresses in the Palace*.

Although Han ethnic group is the most closely associated with and recognized as China and “the Chinese” in the western world [32], China is a country of 55 minority nationalities. Focusing on ethnic minorities is as important as the majority [33]. Scholars have noted that globalization has not only affected the modern world in general but also has had a huge impact on China and its ethnic minorities in particular [34]. In other words, with the development of globalization, ethnic minorities have been impacted more than the Han people. On the one hand,— building an efficient modern state means that the country needs to be integrated, and it needs to avoid secession [35]. Since globalization has the potential to weaken and even determine a country as an independent state [36], the Chinese government has to do its best to serve the problem by oppressing local minorities [37]. On the other hand, globalization and modernization mean differently for the ethnic majorities and minorities, who value their ethnic identities more [38]. Furthermore, Globalization has led to a significant improvement in the media infrastructure [39], and ethnic minority cultures are becoming more and more integrated with a holistic China. For one thing, mass media like television, radio, telephone, and the internet make it easier for Chinese central authority to reach and influence these ethnic areas [40]. For another, in the contemporary world, what is local is likely to yield to what is outside. When consumerism has become the norm in the West, it tends to have a universal appeal to Chinese ethnic minorities [41]. Although the statements above focus on the impact of globalization on Chinese ethnic minorities and the important role mass media play in progress, they only emphasize the influence from Chinese central authorities and the western world, ignoring the cultural products created by Chinese mainstream media.

Researchers have realized that while globalization connects people, it also isolates them [42]. The mass media is one of the main reasons for this process. Some studies on the representations of local ethnic minorities by mainstream media suggest that first, the media in multi-ethnic countries will represent the local ethnic minorities more frequently [43]. Second, TV producers tend to portray a simplification of ethnic identity and relations over the less containable and complexities of the real world [44], while ethnic majorities audience would much prefer to deal with those basic stereotypes, devaluing the ethnic others [45], and therefore “threatening and glorify themselves and their own community” [46]. Therefore, ethnic minorities are always represented as complete absence, under-representation, simplistic representation, or negative representations [47].

3. Han People, the Main Reference Point Evaluating Manchu and Other Ethnic Minorities

In the TV series *Empresses in the Palace*, for one thing, through the process of “relative valorization,” Han people valorizes Manchu people relative to other ethnic minorities on the cultural ground. For another, through a process of “civic ostracism,” [48] Han people construct Manchus as permanent outsiders or ethnic others. In other words, Han people are the main reference point to value other ethnic minorities through Manchu people.

Han people are the fixed reference point in the triangulation. First, during its adaptation, TV producers moved the story entirely set in the court of a Han people to the palace in Qing Dynasty, which Manchus dominated [49]. As a palace drama, *Empresses in the Palace* tells the story of beautiful young concubines fight for the emperor's love by all means. As Mandarin has become the official language in mainland China, every character in *Empresses in the Palace* speaks Mandarin. However, as the rulers of the Qing Dynasty, the Manchu's language was one of the official languages

of the Qing Dynasty [50]. In other words, this palace drama is a Manchu story told and constructed in Chinese.

Also, in the palace drama, Empresses in the Palace, from the emperor to concubines, are all performed by Han actors or actresses. For example, the Emperor Yongzheng (雍正) of the Qing Dynasty was a Manchu in history, while in this story, this character is acted by a Han actor Chen Jianbin. Therefore, this story of the Qing Dynasty is directed, mainly acted, and narrated by Han. Although Manchu and other ethnic minorities are also represented in the TV series, the main reference point of the story itself is still Han, who evaluates Manchu and other Ethnicity.

Thirdly, the main character, Zhen Huan (甄嬪), who is also historically a Manchu, is represented as a beautiful Han woman in the TV series with all the characteristics of Han. Thus, the audience observes Manchus and other ethnic minorities through the character's eyes in the Manchu palace. For example, before Zhen Huan entering the palace, a maid tells her as well as the audience about the concubines. So they could know that there were the Empress dowager, the Emperor, the Empress, concubine Fucha (富察貴人), other royal families who are all Manchu, and there were also many concubines, such as Hua Fei (華妃) Jing Pin (敬嫔) and who are all Han. After knowing the personnel structures of the palace, from the perspective of the main character, the audience will also evaluate other ethnic minorities according to the standard of Han culture. For example, Manchu prince Yun Li (允禮) is portrayed as a considerate, gentle and respectable person because he is familiar with the Han culture. On the contrary, another Manchu Prince Yun'e (允禩) is described as rude and vulgar because he refuses to accept the Han culture.

Han people are the fixed reference point in the triangulation of Empresses in the Palace, a TV series showing Manchu palace lives in Qing Dynasty. First, it is a story directed, acted, and narrated by Han people. Secondly, it is a story that the audience can observe ethnic minorities through the perspective of a Han main character. Finally, the other ethnic groups in the story are evaluated by the values of the Han main character.

4. Representations of the Manchus: Approach Han While Measure Other Ethnic Minorities

As the most prominent minority in Empresses in the Palace, the representations of Manchus are completely absent, underrepresented, simplistically represented, or negatively represented.

Complete absence and underrepresentation. Because Manchus are represented when Han people is the reference point, the historical events in the background of the Manchu palace were mainly acted and narrated by Han people, resulting in the complete absence of Manchu. Only some basic Manchu customs, such as horse riding, archery, and sacrifice, are briefly mentioned in the story. However, they only appear as the background of the story.

The Manchus were simplified and negatively represented either. One example could be the surname of the Manchu characters, which is the token of their Manchu identity. But in the series, the surnames are simply symbols that have nothing to do with Manchu identity or the plot. Also, most of the Manchu characters in the story are minor, secondary, or background roles of little consequence in the TV series. These roles not only lack character development and complexity but may also be based on negative and unflattering images that re-circulate into racial fantasies motivated by both the conscious and unconscious need for security and esteem. One example is Fucha, who is a Manchu concubine. As a background character, she is represented to be the silly villain without any charming personalities. Manchu characters who play the main role in the story are the enemies of the main character. Such as the Emperor and Empress, who is portrayed as a vicious, cold woman.

Although the representation of the Manchu in Empresses in the Palace is completely absent, underrepresented, simplistically represented, or negatively represented, They are a relatively

significant ethnic minority. The Manchu is used in the triangulation to measure other ethnic minorities. First, the Manchu are more valued than other ethnic minorities and shaped like the model minority myth. In order to win the favor of the emperor, the Manchu concubines learned Han cultures like calligraphy, the walking posture of ancient Han ladies, and other Han customs. Thus, these Manchu concubines are depicted as people in distress, while Han customs rather than Manchu customs are the solution to their problems. Second, although Manchus are represented by the outsider of Han people. For example, in *Empresses in the Palace*, Emperor's favorite concubines, such as Zhen Huan, Hua Fei, are both selected according to the Han patriarchal disciplines, and all of them are Han. This standard did not favor the Empresses who were proficient in Han calligraphy and Manchu concubines who studied other Han customs.

5. Representations of Other Ethnic Minorities: Absent, underrepresented and Negatively Represented

The representation of other minorities is completely absent, underrepresented, and negatively represented. First, they are completely absent and underrepresented. In the Qing Dynasty, there was the custom of marriage between Manchu and Mongolia. The Mongolian, Uygur, and other ethnic minorities occupied a large proportion in the Qing palace. However, in *Empresses in the Palace*, most of the imperial concubines are Han, a few are Manchu, while the other ethnic minorities completely disappeared.

Other ethnic minorities people are negatively represented. One of the examples is how this drama represents the Mongolian emperor Moge Khan (摩格可汗). As the king of the neighboring country of Qing, he was portrayed as a brash, malicious, devil-liked male and greedy for beauty. Mongolian and Manchu marriage customs allow a woman to marry another man after her husband's death, which is discouraged in Han Confucian culture. In *Empresses in the Palace*, once Moge Khan loves Zhen Huan, he asked the Manchu emperor to let her marry him. This action is judged to be shameless by the Manchu emperor according to the standards of the Han culture. In other words, the representation of the ethnic minorities here is that the Manchus became "advanced" by learning the Han culture. Still, the Mongolian emperor is more backward than Manchu since they do not follow the Han culture.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The progress of globalization has deeply impacted Chinese ethnic minorities in many aspects, including the media. However, the studies on ethnic minorities mainly dose anthropological research, while the studies on global communication rarely focus on representations of Chinese ethnic minorities. In order to fill the research gap and better understand the politics beyond the representations of Chinese ethnic minorities in popular culture, this study examines the representations of relationships among Chinese ethnic majorities and minorities in one of the most popular Chinese historical palace dramas, *Empress in the Palace*. By applying the model of multiple triangulation, I found that the Han people are the main reference point in the representation, evaluating the other ethnic minorities even in the TV series telling stories in Qing Dynasty, which is ruled by Manchu, one of the ethnic minorities in China. However, in this palace drama, Manchus are completely absent, underrepresented, simplistically represented, or negatively represented. At the same time, their representations are valued more and used to measure other ethnic minorities such as Mongolian people. This study reveals the relations of ethnicity representations in Chinese palace drama and proves that the multiple triangulation is also suitable for analyzing such issues. However, it lacks an audience study and a quantitative method as well.

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