

The Portrayal of Women in
Chinese Popular Culture: Female
Agency in the TV drama *The
Story of Yanxi Palace*

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Introduction

In this thesis the main topic is: The Portrayal of Women in Chinese Popular Culture: Female Agency in the TV drama *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. TV drama and internet are the most important media of our time. As TV and internet are so important, one can assume that their portrayal of women in popular culture has a great influence on women in reality. The status of women in the world has undergone changes and feminism has been the driving force. A major topic in feminism is agency, so I have chosen feminism and agency as part of my research. To examine to what extent female agency is portrayed in popular culture, I have chosen to analyze the worldwide popular¹ TV series, or actually internet series, *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. The main character of the series, Wei Yingluo, is portrayed with a great deal of agency. Does Wei Yingluo's agency contribute to this popularity? Other costume drama-series are popular as well, yet not as popular as *The Story of Yanxi Palace*.² I will elaborate on Wei Yingluo's agency and how she is portrayed in *The Story of Yanxi Palace* in this thesis. The Qing-setting of the Forbidden City of the drama provides for a background of normalcy of female subordination and powerlessness, especially in comparison with the Emperor. In comparison, Wei Yingluo is portrayed as witty, clever and always on her feet, as she constantly knows how to get out of difficult situations, often times even using these situations as stepping stones to further her own social standing.

In Chapter 1 I shall discuss the development of women's status (feminism) in China. I shall discuss Feminist Theory (Post-Structuralism and Neoliberalism) alongside these developments.

1. PR Newswire, "iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama "Story of Yanxi Palace" Comes to a Close, Being Streamed Over 15 Billion Times," *Yahoo! Finance*, August 31, 2018, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/iqiyis-summer-smash-hit-drama-101200755.html?Guccounter=1>.
2. Andreas Illmer, "Yanxi Palace: Why China turned against its most popular show," *BBC News*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-47084374>.

In Chapter 2 of this thesis I shall first discuss the term “agency” and several meanings and definitions of the term in different time periods and from different points of view. I mention the definitions of agency according to Deleuze³; Eva Chen⁴; He Zhen⁵; Qiliang He⁶; Jinhua Li⁷; Zheng Wang and Ying Zhang⁸; and Mary Hawkesworth⁹. I shall discuss which definition of agency is the most useful for my analysis.

Chapter 3 discusses women and their portrayal in popular culture in China. In Chapter 4 I shall state my method of analysis and explain the choices that I have made regarding my methodology.

3. As mentioned in Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, “36 Feminism/Post-structuralism,” in *Research methods in the social sciences*, ed. Bridget Somekh, Cathy Lewin (Sage, 2005), 312-313.
4. Eva Chen, “Neoliberalism and popular women’s culture: Rethinking choice, freedom and agency,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 4 (2013): 441, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413484297>.
5. As mentioned in Peter Zarrow, “He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China,” *The Association for Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (Nov. 1988): 808-809, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2057853>.
6. Qiliang He, *Feminism, Women’s Agency, and Communication in Early Twentieth-Century China; The Case of the Huang-Lu Elopement* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018) 41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89692-2>.
7. Jinhua Li, “Consumerism and Chinese Postfeminism: Visual Economy, Chick Flicks, and the Politics of Cultural (Re)Production,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 6, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 566.
8. As mentioned in Wang Zheng and Ying Zhang, “Global Concepts, Local Practices: Chinese Feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women,” *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40607999>.
9. Mary Hawkesworth, “The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age,” *Signs* 29, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 973, <https://jstor.org/stable/10.1086/383492>.

In Chapter 5, I analyze two scenes of the popular TV series *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. The scenes I have chosen are both one of many examples in the series where Wei Yingluo shows her agency in her thinking, acting and speaking. I analyze these two scenes with headings taken from Florian Schneider's book: *Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series*.¹⁰ Schneider describes that his method of analysis is breaking the scenes down into their: "narrative, visual, and acoustic elements".¹¹ I analyze the way Wei Yingluo is portrayed in the final Chapter, Chapter 5.

Yet, before we come to the conclusion and the analysis of the character and agency of Wei Yingluo, I shall discuss Feminism and the role of Feminism in contemporary popular culture.

10. Florian Schneider, *Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 15.

11. Idem.

Chapter 1 Feminism in China

In this chapter I shall first explain the meaning of Post-structuralist feminism and Neoliberalist Femininity. Second, I shall elaborate on the background of Feminism in China and its past achievements.

In the West there have been (and are) many movements of Feminist Theory. Of all these movements, I shall use both Post-Structuralist Feminism and Neoliberalist Femininity in this thesis. In analyzing *The Story of Yanxi Palace* I have found that my Western Neoliberalist background was overly extant. To get a deeper understanding of the existing prejudices, binaries, and subject texts (the material that is studied) in *the Story of Yanxi Palace*, I decided to use Post-Structuralist Feminist methods of Discourse Analysis and Deconstruction. Post-Structuralism and Neoliberalist Femininity go together in this thesis in the way that I use both to analyze the phenomenon that is Wei Yingluo, the main character of *The Story of Yanxi Palace*.

According to Post-Structuralist Thought, a text exists in multiple ways (Postmodern, Post-Structural, and Critical Theories In: Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis, p. 19). Firstly, it exists in the time a memory was created. Secondly, it exists in the moment that a concept or a binary is deconstructed in the telling or writing about that first moment (Postmodern, Post-Structural, and Critical Theories In: Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis, p. 19). Coming from a Neoliberalist perspective, I bring in Neoliberalist elements, which I deconstruct where possible. Wei Yingluo is the studied text in the dual moment of the scene of the series I analyze, in the moment it portrays, a narrative taking place in the Qing Dynasty.¹² The duality of this analysis comes from the second part, where the scene is created and filmed for a Neoliberalist audience¹³ worldwide¹⁴ in the (almost) second decade of the 21st century. The audience becomes part of this text as the scene portrays Wei Yingluo as a personality the producer(s) think will attract a large (female) audience.

12. Newswire, "iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama."

13. Nan Z. Da and Wang Zheng, "Feminist Sinologies: An Introduction," *Signs* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 553, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/679610>.

14. Newswire, "iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama."

Post-Structuralist Feminism

Post-Structuralist Feminism often uses the method of taking texts (that what is studied) apart to find out what the subject text entails.¹⁵ In one of these methods, for instance: Discourse Analysis, “Discourses are complex interconnected webs of being, thinking, and acting.”¹⁶ a deconstructivist approach is used to find out which strands (e.g. of power) play the biggest part in the subject text.¹⁷ This deconstruction is seen as important because every text exists partially of other texts and other texts exist partially of the subject text. This is called “inter-relatedness”.¹⁸ In this inter-relatedness, binaries (for instance the binary male-female) are addressed and made clearer by deconstruction.¹⁹ Often times the female body itself is the subject text.²⁰ Bodies in general are seen as texts because they are written on socially, in terms of power and in terms of experience.²¹ They are also inter-related with other subjects through the body,²² which feels, thinks, senses and acts. The goal of Post-Structuralist Feminism is to make these binaries and the ways in which the subject text is inter-related, more clear by deconstruction.²³

15. Davies and Gannon, “36 Feminism/Post-structuralism,” 313-314.
16. Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern, Post-Structural, and Critical Theories,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2012), 12, <https://dx-doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.4135/9781483384740.n4>.
17. Davies and Gannon, “36 Feminism/Post-structuralism,” 313-314.
18. As mentioned in Gannon and Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern,” 17.
19. As mentioned in Gannon and Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern,” 17-18.
20. Gannon and Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern,” 11.
21. As mentioned in Gannon and Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern,” 13.
22. As mentioned in Gannon and Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern,” 17-18.
23. Gannon and Davies, “Chapter 4 Postmodern,” 18.

According to Rosi Braidotti, Post-Structuralist Feminism is anti- “socially coded and enforced ‘differences’ and of the systems of value and representation that they support”.²⁴ In the case of *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, this means that the cultural norm of for instance the difference in status between the Emperor (a man) and his concubines (Wei Yingluo, etc.) is unequal and unwanted. Postmodernist feminists are in favor of: “the positivity of difference within a theoretical platform for a politics of diversity”, yet this goes only as far as concepts like “ ‘gender, ‘race’, and ‘ethnicity’ ” are not seen as a “given”, yet are carefully deconstructed and only then acquire meaning.²⁵ According to Postmodernist Feminism, and Simone de Beauvoir in particular, women are more than just the binary of body and spirit.²⁶ In *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, this becomes clear in the second scene I analyze, as Wei Yingluo uses her emotions as motivation to steer clear of staying the night with the Emperor. I will elaborate on this in chapter 5.

24. Mary Eagleton, ed. *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 204.

25. Idem.

26. Eagleton, ed. *A Concise Companion*, 206.

Neoliberalist Femininity

Feminism in our time and day, according to Eva Chen, is being undermined because there is a new agency, that lets women grasp their old, newfound identity.²⁷ This old, newfound identity is an active pursuit of consumerism and erotic femininity. Neoliberalism entices women to “choose” women subjectification, that is, as an active “autonomous, confident and desiring sexual subject” instead of a passive and subordinate, traditional sexual “object”.²⁸ In this way, feminism is rendered obsolete.²⁹ This is the case because feminism is no longer seen as the harbinger of active equal rights between men and women, yet as the harbinger of womens’ active choice of the status quo.³⁰ In women’s active choice of the status quo, feminism and all it stood for (“the feminist movement or to advance the goal of social change or elimination of inequality”)³¹ is effectively alienated.³² In its place there is only the patriarchy.³³

Neoliberalism is a philosophy that entails the presupposition that (western) women already have it all: “neoliberal choice refers to one’s ability to choose maximum material gain and profit in order to construct one’s own self, and agency now means the ability to be active in this materialistic, profitable self-actualising project.”³⁴ It is the neoliberalist notion of economic freedom that women in the West have the means to only be responsible for their own choices, built on that economic freedom.³⁵ Feminism, as a consequence more and more becomes the enemy of women who want freedom of choice, as it's use of morality and mutual responsibility is constrictive of an

27. Chen, “Neoliberalism,” 442.

28. As mentioned in Chen, “Neoliberalism,” 442.

29. Idem.

30. Idem.

31. Idem.

32. Idem.

33. Idem.

34. Chen, “Neoliberalism,” 443.

35. Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Cultural Studies*, 28, no. 3 (2014) 420, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>.

economic “laissez faire”.³⁶ This paradox is ingeniously fabricated around the faulty assumption that women in the West today are judged the same as men and are thereby winners of equal status as men.³⁷

Feminism in China

He Zhen, who is now considered the founder of Chinese feminism, published in magazines and her influence can be found in the general attitude after the 1911 revolution in China.^{38,39} All the Chinese men and women, feminists who went before us, are extremely important to the study of global feminisms.⁴⁰ They have laid the foundation of where we are now. The West is not anymore what it used to be to the world, therefore, the West is not anymore the only author of sinologies, or of feminisms.⁴¹

As He Zhen saw that “class” was part of the “feminist problem”, so did other feminists call attention to class to turn to Global Capitalism.⁴² Socialism has been replaced by Neoliberalism.⁴³ Since the mid- 1980s gender has been the focus of many debates and these have played an enormous role in the class maneuvers of the Chinese elite.⁴⁴ Both in theory and practically, feminist sinologies has influenced people, (either a nation, a culture or a group of people) studying and trying to help them.⁴⁵ Feminist studies are particularly useful for the people using feminist theory to help others that assert that they, themselves, are part of the postfeminist world (here postfeminist means “in light of the knowledge of”), a world where feminist theory has become part of the social structure.⁴⁶ Feminism has also become part of culture, as feminist theory can also be seen in “fiction and film.”⁴⁷

36. Chen, “Neoliberalism,” 442.

37. Rottenberg, “The Rise,” 422.

38. Zarrow, “He Zhen,” 810-811.

39. Nan and Wang, “Feminist Sinologies,” 549.

40. Idem.

41. Idem.

42. Nan and Wang, “Feminist Sinologies,” 553.

43. Idem.

44. Idem.

45. Nan and Wang, “Feminist Sinologies,” 554.

46. Idem.

47. Nan and Wang, “Feminist Sinologies,” 555.

According to Tani E. Barlow the Chinese women's movement is old and has been around since Marxist-feminist thinking in Mao's time in China.⁴⁸ Communism and Nationalism have not always gone hand-in-hand in China. I shall now briefly discuss the history of the women's movement in China.

He Zhen was an Anarcho-Feminist, who claimed women's freedom was important. She is now known as one of the founders of Chinese feminism.⁴⁹ The example she set is found again in May Fourth writings and in Communist feminists's thoughts about how the general political struggle and women's liberation were connected.⁵⁰ In part due to He Zhen, in the 1920s, footbinding, "the three followings" (which means the unequal relationship between ruler and subject, parent and child, and husband and wife),⁵¹ polygamy, filial piety, marriage, and the family were renounced.⁵² In Ibsen's play *A Doll House* (a Western play from 1879) the main character Nora also rejected the family and formed an example of revolutionary thought, which I will mention more about in Chapter 3.

In the 1920s feminism was not fighting for only one inequality between men and women.⁵³ There were more issues at stake, for instance poverty, women's right to education, etc. Because there were more problems in society, the plays that depicted society also depicted these problems and were therefore called the Chinese "problem play".⁵⁴ According to Zarrow, Anarcho-Feminists

48. Tani Barlow, "Globalization, China, and International Feminism," *Signs* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 1287, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3175373>.

49. As mentioned in Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

50. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

51. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 799.

52. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

53. Chengzhou He, "'Before all else I'm a human being': Ibsen and the rise of modern Chinese drama in the 1920s," *Neohelicon* (2018): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-018-0465-6>.

54. Idem.

like He Zhen understood that most glaring (women's) problems in Chinese society were derived from modern class divisions, economic exploitation and traditional culture.⁵⁵ He Zhen was one of the few who did not fight for women's rights for nationalism or "The Nation", yet sought equality between the sexes "out of moral necessity."⁵⁶

Communist feminists, of whom a few had studied anarchism, were of the same opinion as He Zhen that women had to organize and fend for themselves.⁵⁷ They agreed that they were being suppressed by two forces, namely by that of male domination and by class differentiation.⁵⁸ The Chinese Communist party agreed that women and society were oppressed by class differentiation and decided to reject all of traditional society to achieve women's liberation. He Zhen and Chinese Communists also agreed on liberation being only of society as a whole.⁵⁹

In 1949 the slogan: "Women hold up half the sky" was promoted in China. The promotion of this slogan contributed to the increasing number of women workers in the workplace to almost 100% from 1949 until mid-1980s.⁶⁰ The growing number of girls going to school also showed the changed status of women.⁶¹ However, even though the status of women was improved by the Party, it was only to become a second-class male. Women were allowed to work, yet as officials, men and women have different mandatory retirement ages.⁶²

55. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 796.

56. Idem.

57. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

58. As mentioned in Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

59. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

60. As mentioned in Zhuyi Zheng, "Stereotyping of women's images portrayed in prime time Chinese TV series from 1979 to 2008 : Has the picture changed over time?" (Theses and Dissertations, Iowa State University, 2011) 20, <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/12247>.

61. As mentioned in Zheng, "Stereotyping," 2.

62. As mentioned in Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 47-48.

Chen mentions that during the Mao era, there was a lot of “equality between men and women,” meaning that men and women had to do exactly the same work.⁶³ However, many contemporary feminists now are critical of that state feminism of the Mao era, as it is gender equality that feminists wish to achieve.⁶⁴ According to Zheng Wang and Ying Zhang, feminism must be understood correctly in its context.⁶⁵ Gender equality is not the same thing as being the same.⁶⁶ This feminism must be seen in the context of language.⁶⁷ There is a distinction between the phrases “gender equality” and “equality between men and women”. They write that “gender” is a wider concept when used in the context of “gender equality” in China after 1995.⁶⁸ “Gender equality” is based on equal rights for human beings, whereas “equality between men and women” in China conveys the idea that women can and must do the same things as men.⁶⁹ Because of this difference in meaning feminists in China prefer to talk about Gender.

After the Mao era, feminist NGOs and the State Women’s Federation have been cooperating, mostly at the initiative of the feminist NGOs.⁷⁰ In turn, the Women’s Federation has called upon urban professional women for their input.⁷¹ The input of energy of the Women’s Federation has been important for later collaborations between the State Women’s Federation and the non-State NGOs.⁷² Together, Feminists have won decisive battles in eliminating domestic violence.⁷³ In fighting

63. Wang and Zhang, “Global Concepts,” 65.

64. Idem.

65. Idem.

66. Idem.

67. Idem.

68. Wang and Zhang, “Global Concepts,” 47.

69. Idem.

70. Wang and Zhang, “Global Concepts,” 62.

71. Idem.

72. Idem.

73. Wang and Zhang, “Global Concepts,” 55.

domestic violence, a combination of top-down authority as well as from the grassroots up, was used.⁷⁴ Top-down authority is the state feminism (The Women's Federation) that has the duty to put women's issues on the agenda of all the bodies of the State, central or local. From the grassroots up indicates the NGOs that choose to fight for women's rights on their own, separately from the state. This is a combination that is unique to the Global Feminisms Project in China.⁷⁵ The Global Feminisms Project has interviewed ten Chinese feminists and in their speeches these feminists did not speak about class or class difference at all.⁷⁶

According to Chen this is an indication of class and class difference being taboo in China.⁷⁷ Helping women on the poor spectrum is seen as "protecting women's rights".⁷⁸ However, arranging for the poor to be helped as a class, against the rich, is not done in post-socialist China because of this taboo. Chinese feminists are aware of this situation. They can not express themselves as they would like to because the mentioning of class refers to "a backward identification with a Maoist past".⁷⁹ According to Perry Link and Kate Zhou, sociologists who did research in China during the early 1980s were generally disappointed that the great Communist Revolution had not given women a better status and that women were not "liberated".⁸⁰ These Sociologists had expected communism to overthrow the ties that made women still dependent on the men in their families.⁸¹

74. As mentioned in Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 62.

75. As mentioned in Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 65.

76. Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 66-67.

77. Idem.

78. Idem.

79. As mentioned in Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 66-67.

80. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz, *Popular China, Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society*, (Lanham, Md., [etc.]: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 102.

81. Link, Madsen and Pickowicz, *Popular China*, 102.

Another point of view is expressed by Lin Chun. She mentions in her article that there have also been feminists who claim that “Women’s liberation” under Socialism has never happened and that women before the 1911 revolution, contrary to common belief, most definitively did have agency.⁸² According to these claims, women’s agency was taken away from women who bound their feet and during the May Fourth Era, women were harmed, not set free.⁸³ This perspective has more to do with politics, the defeat of Soviet communism and the now hegemonic state of capitalism worldwide, than with women in China.⁸⁴

Despite these negative connotations with “women’s liberation”, one must be careful not to ignore all of feminists’ past achievements:

“the best-known examples are massive female participation in socially organized activities, equal pay for equal work as a legal and managerial principle, educational parity between the sexes as a social commitment and a policy goal, freedom in marriage, the development of public health provisions and child-care service, and government and community intervention in the private sphere against violence and discrimination. Gender equality as a "public notion of justice" is especially vital in that it continues to legitimize the causes for women in the face of widening gaps between laws and reality, between promises and enforcement measures, between hopes and setbacks.”⁸⁵

Despite traditional Chinese culture, “equality between men and women”, and class being taboo in China, there has been considerable improvement in women’s rights and gender equality in China. Like in the West, it may have been a long way, but now we can build on the achievements of the past.

82. Lin Chun, “Whither Feminism: A note on China,” *Signs* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 1282, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3175372>.

83. Idem.

84. Lin Chun, “Whither Feminism,” 1284-1285.

85. Lin Chun, “Whither Feminism,” 1285.

Chapter 2 Agency

There are many definitions of “agency” being used in academic discourse today. I have looked into both general and more specific definitions of agency. I was searching for a specific definition that I could apply in analyzing the popular Chinese series called *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. I shall provide several examples and then argue why I choose the definition of agency as a Praxis in my analysis.

Agency according to Post-Structuralism

According to Deleuze, agency is shown when a (wo)man is open to “the not yet known”, an ethical subject” and knows what (s)he is in relation to others and other things and is aware of this differentiation and on-going process.⁸⁶ This definition is difficult to use in my analysis because I can not look into the producer’s head and see what he meant to show of Yingluo’s character. As a passive knowledge is difficult to portray to an audience, and even more difficult to observe as an audience, I will not use this definition.

Agency according to Neoliberalism

Eva Chen defined agency as: the idea that women since the 1990s have everything and do not need feminism anymore, as neoliberalism makes women (and men) believe that women of this age already have everything they could possibly need in the (western) world.⁸⁷ The so-called “Girl Power” (empowerment to girls or young women in ‘their choice’ to be ultra-feminine) seems to be conditional female agency because it emphasizes feminine looks and feminine sexuality to give women empowerment and agency once they embrace these.⁸⁸ This definition of agency is misleading and inherently contradicting, yet not obvious so, therefore I will not use it in my analysis.

86. As mentioned in Davies and Gannon, “36 Feminism/Post-structuralism,” 312-313.

87. Chen, “Neoliberalism,” 441.

88. Idem.

Agency in China before the 1920s

He Zhen participated in writing in China before the 1911 Revolution.⁸⁹ In these writings the relationship between feminism, individual rights, political freedom and nationalism was discussed. He Zhen was one of the revolutionaries who held that “women’s liberation” ought to be done for women’s own sake instead of out of some nationalistic feelings.⁹⁰ This insight was impressive because until 1907 Chinese feminism was thought to be necessary for the greater good of the nation’s independence, women’s rights were not so much a cause in itself.⁹¹ He Zhen was one of the feminists who from the early 1890s fought for equal rights for men and women,⁹² yet she argued that women had to free themselves and be an “active agent” instead of a “passive agent” in this fight for liberty.⁹³ He Zhen’s feminism shows she thought women needed to take control over their own lives and fight for their rights, in order to succeed in the world and be free. This concept of agency comes close to what I understand agency means. However, this interpretation of feminism or agency does not show to what degree an action is feminist or how much agency is required to reach a certain goal.

Agency in China in the 1920s

In July 1928, Huang Huiru (1907?–March 20, 1929?) eloped with Lu Genrong (1907?–November 30, 1975?).⁹⁴ Huang Huiru’s family was well-off and Lu Genrong was a male servant in their household. Qiliang He writes about a “self-activating agency” to “battle the oppressive family in a new urban public”.⁹⁵ This definition might be worth considering if it did not also refer to Miss Huang’s new-found awareness of her womanhood, in which the media played a considerable role, one may even say that the media played a decisive role in determining her identity by swaying her decisions.⁹⁶ One could ask whether agency should come from within or from the media outside oneself, as I believe agency should come from within oneself, I shall not use this definition.

89. Zarrow, “He Zhen,” 796.

90. *Idem.*

91. *Idem.*

92. *Idem.*

93. As mentioned in Zarrow, “He Zhen,” 808-809.

94. As mentioned in He, “Feminism,” 1.

95. He, “Feminism,” 41.

96. *Idem.*

Agency in China post-Mao

The definition of agency as mentioned by Jinhua Li seems to contradict the above definition of female agency mentioned by Eva Chen because Jinhua Li mentions women need to: “delimit and repress sexuality”, because of Chinese social and cultural regulations.⁹⁷ Chinese women were historically Post-Mao seen as the same as men, with no distinction between the two or their tasks.⁹⁸ This made it impossible for women to complain or seek change, because men did not complain. And there was no feminist movement to seek guidance from.⁹⁹ Chinese women do not even have a mouthpiece as the “Other” because of their “sameness” with Chinese men.¹⁰⁰ Li seems to say that Chinese women need a Neoliberal definition of agency, not much different from the definition Eva Chen gave above:¹⁰¹

"The need to re-establish a characteristically Chinese postfeminist awareness and its visual representation requires a full embrace of femininity, portraying postfeminist Woman as financially independent, emotionally mature, and sexually conscious, a person who seldom verbalizes her conscious feminist stance or articulates radical political statements."¹⁰²

This definition of agency seems to also refer to Wei Yingluo, the main character in *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. I will elaborate on this in Chapter 5.

97. Li, “Consumerism,” 566.

98. Idem.

99. Idem.

100. Li, “Consumerism,” 567.

101. Idem.

102. As mentioned in Li, “Consumerism,” 567.

Agency in China recently

In their article,¹⁰³ Zheng Wang and Ying Zhang mention that women's rights were what the Party told women to do.¹⁰⁴ However, actively using the rights that were given by the (patriarchal) state, should be used to determine what is good for oneself and then actively further pursue the rights one needs. These are *real* rights. This is what is meant by gender-equality.¹⁰⁵ The term "agency" could be used here to denote the difference between passively doing what the State tells you to do, and on the other hand, actively pursuing what is good for you as a person, using those rights.

Agency in the case of Wei Yingluo

As a praxis, feminism is more practical and shows how a simple action could be called feminist, such as the speaking of Wei Yingluo, the main character of *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, which I will more elaborately discuss in Chapter 5. Mary Hawkesworth discusses how feminism is sometimes connected to big, social gatherings of which the duration is limited and the fight which is symbolized by the event goes on much longer than the event suggests.¹⁰⁶ This is an unwelcome and unfortunate byproduct of what feminism entails. Hawkesworth argues that the solution to this momentary side-effect is to see feminism as a praxis:

"Conceptualizing feminism as praxis helps to make sense of the multiplicity and poly-vocality of feminist activism. Within a praxis frame, there could be as many modes of feminism as there are lived experiences of raced-gendered inequities.

The concept of praxis shifts the site of feminist activism from the drama and spectacle of mass demonstrations designed to capture media attention to the

103. See Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 40-70, The theme of the conference was: the status quo in 1995 in China of gender equality.

104. As mentioned in Wang and Zhang, "Global Concepts," 47.

105. Idem.

106. Hawkesworth, "The Semiotics," 973.

politics of everyday life, thereby illuminating the manifold feminist struggles involved in women's efforts to subsist, to live with dignity and respect, to withstand violence, and to build equitable and sustainable communities."¹⁰⁷

I shall use feminism as Praxis as my main definition of feminism in the analysis of Wei Yingluo because it makes possible the analysis of seemingly small actions that may seem insignificant, yet lead to great improvements/changes. I shall also where possible use the term agency in a Neoliberalist sense as a woman who already "has it all" as I have explained above and in the sense of the meaning of "active". In the following chapter I shall discuss how feminism is related to Chinese popular culture. In the analysis (two scènes of *The Story of Yanxi Palace*) I will discuss the agency of Wei Yingluo in *The Story of Yanxi Palace* as a Praxis and argue that she is a character with agency.

Besides arguing whether Wei Yingluo acts as a Postmodernist feminist or as a Neoliberal feminist and besides arguing whether she uses the definition of a "praxis" to (consciously or not) guide her actions, Wei Yingluo also seems to live according to the following: According to Sara Ahmed, many feminist structures are built upon thinking about what feminists and feminist theory is against.¹⁰⁸ Seen in this light, feminism is a balance of thinking about the world and actively changing what we do not want into something positive.¹⁰⁹ In Yingluo's case, she fights for a more just world, a world where there is room for the innocent. I shall discuss this further in Chapter 5.

In this chapter I have described different definitions of agency. Agency as a Praxis in the case of my analysis of Wei Yingluo from *The Story of Yanxi Palace* is for practical reasons the most fitting.

107. Idem.

108. Eagleton, ed. *A Concise Companion*, 236-237.

109. Idem.

Chapter 3 Women in Chinese Popular Culture

In this chapter, I shall first elaborate on the influence of Ibsen's play *A Doll House*. Second, I shall inform you of the role of the media on agency in the case of the Huang-Lu elopement. Third, I will elaborate on Zhuyi Zheng's research, about the portrayal of women in TV series in China during Prime Time from 1979 to 2008. Then I will give some background information about the portrayal of women in Chinese popular culture and finally I shall briefly state how Neoliberalism is embodied in popular culture. All this information shows how women are portrayed in past and contemporary popular culture and how this reflects on women in reality.

In the achievements improving women's rights, drama and media played an important role.¹¹⁰ After the May Fourth Movement there were several performances of drama and media, which were inspired by Ibsen's *A Doll House*.¹¹¹ The commonality of these performances was the "pursuit of women's freedom and equality", and together these performances of drama and media made a new social and cultural Chinese modernity in the 1920s.¹¹²

Nora was one of the first dramas in which realism played a significant part and in doing so spread new ideas and educated young people.¹¹³ *A Doll House* is comparable with *The Story of Yanxi Palace* because both were/are tremendously popular. *A Doll's House* was one of the first stories in which realism was featured. It also promoted freedom and independence for women and men alike and brought social progress and revolution in early contemporary China.¹¹⁴ He Zhen and Ibsen (with *A Doll's House*) were similar in what they fought for: a rejection of the family.^{115,116} Nora and Wei Yingluo were similar in that both wanted to free themselves from oppression. What

110. He, "'Before all else,'" 4.

111. Idem.

112. Idem.

113. He, "'Before all else,'" 12.

114. Idem.

115. Zarrow, "He Zhen," 811.

116. He, "'Before all else,'" 7.

they do to achieve that is different. Nora leaves her family behind, and Yingluo (she does take a break from the Forbidden City by working in the gardens for a while but she goes back to the Forbidden City) fights back by using her wit and cunning.

Nora struggled for her own independence, yet as a symbol, she and other women in China, struggled for everyone who was oppressed in whatever way. In this way, Nora stood for the “New Culture” and gained the favor of many Chinese people.¹¹⁷ Nora, as a symbol in China, was made universal, local and even more radical, at the same time, because so many could identify with her character in the 1920s.¹¹⁸

During the first wave of Chinese feminism, in 1920s, Ibsen’s Nora inspired other Chinese “problem plays”.¹¹⁹ The main characters in all these became very popular and instrumental to define the “New Woman”.¹²⁰ These main characters were icons in the deconstruction of the patriarchy for women’s rights and their stories were the cornerstone on which gender politics in this “New China” rested.¹²¹ Thus, women symbolically became “heroines of Chinese modernity”.¹²² The combination of all these processes made a rethinking of gender possible in China.¹²³

Ibsen’s plays in China in the 1920s, like Chinese television in the 1980s (and later), have had a tremendous effect on the Chinese public. Cao Yu, a Chinese playwright, mentioned in 1978 that he was greatly indebted to and inspired by Ibsen, in fact he claimed that there were many others who had been inspired by Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.¹²⁴ One could claim that TV Drama is now what

117. As mentioned in He, ““Before all else,” 13.

118. He, ““Before all else,” 13.

119. Chengzhou He, “Women and the Search for Modernity: Rethinking Modern Chinese Drama,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2008): 48.

120. Idem.

121. He, “Women,” 60.

122. As mentioned in He, “Women,” 60.

123. He, “Women,” 60.

124. As mentioned in He, ““Before all else,” 7.

Ibsen's spoken drama was in the 1920s, as *A Doll's House* was very popular in the 1920s and *The Story of Yanxi Palace* is very popular nowadays.^{125,126}

The role of the media in the portrayal of women can also be seen clearly, when in the late 1920s, in the countryside Huang Huiru and Lu Genrong had a love affair. Miss Huang was the daughter of a well-off family and Mr. Lu was one of the staff members in the household. The press alternatively portrayed Huang as a: "new-style woman fighting for marital freedom" or a: "victim falling prey to the villainous man's rapacious sexual desire."¹²⁷ Huang's character and portrayal changed several times during and after the affair because of the involvement of the press.¹²⁸ Huang, the public, journalists, commentators, and the judiciary institutions found it hard to keep to one ideology, especially Huang found herself baffled by all the possibilities.¹²⁹ In the past the Chinese government has also used its power to forbid media from telling their story for the "public good". During the Huang-Lu elopement, it wasn't the central government that forbade the press from portraying the elopement, it was the Suzhou government: "[it] outright banned any folksongs, operatic plays, or films regarding the elopement to "nurture public morals" (wei fenghua)."¹³⁰ Huang and her character changed so much during the legal procedures, and could not stay the course, that in the end she lost all her agency.¹³¹ Nobody knows what really happened to her in the end. Even a "progressive feminist" found it hard to cope with all the attention and pressure.¹³²

125. Newswire, "iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama."

126. Illmer, "Yanxi Palace."

127. He, "Feminism," 26.

128. He, "Feminism," 41.

129. He, "Feminism," 70.

130. As mentioned in He, "Feminism," 42.

131. As mentioned in He, "Feminism," 70.

132. As mentioned in He, "Feminism," 68.

After the Tian'an men Incident in 1989, new media were introduced on the socialist market, and youths found they could express themselves by use of Television and the Internet, along with which came "blockbuster movies, popular music, TV drama's and an infinite flow of digital images."¹³³ How were women portrayed in these new media? Most research about women in popular culture has been done in the U.S.A. and does not consider Asian television programs.¹³⁴ Zhuyi Zheng's research, comparing women's professions and roles in TV drama and in reality, contributes to the general understanding of women's portrayal in Chinese television series during Prime Time from 1979 to 2008.¹³⁵ I have especially looked at the research of the most recent years and her findings about the entire period in general.

Traditionally, women in China were seen as home-makers and house wives and as inferior to men.¹³⁶ In 1981 Siu did research, testing four of the traditional perspectives on gender on TV.¹³⁷ These perspectives were: "females are inferior"; "The Three Obediences"; being a virtuous wife and a good mother"; and "women mind the internal affairs".¹³⁸ The Three Obediences meant that a woman had to be obedient to her father as a daughter, to her husband as a wife and to her son(s) as a mother. Siu found that on TV the perspectives of: "females are inferior" and "The Three Obediences" were not met.¹³⁹ The other two perspectives were met.¹⁴⁰ According to Siu's research a female character was usually portrayed as independent enough to make her own decisions and lead

133. Angelo Maria Cimino, "Interpreting China: myth, nationalism and global culture," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 5, no. 3 (2018): 262, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-018-0120-y>.

134. As mentioned in Zheng, "Stereotyping," 21.

135. Zheng, "Stereotyping," 24.

136. As mentioned by Pearson and Lai, in Zheng, "Stereotyping," 20-21.

137. As mentioned in Zheng, "Stereotyping," 20-21.

138. Idem.

139. Idem.

140. Idem.

her life without interference or support from a male character.¹⁴¹ The research also showed that women were inclined or expected to pay attention to both the situation at home and in society.¹⁴²

In the TV series Zheng researched, she also found women were often portrayed as independent or self-governed.¹⁴³ Over the course of the years, from 1979-2008, there was a growing number of working women in the research (from 9 during 1979-1982 to 143 during 2001-2008), and their status rose.¹⁴⁴ During the years 2001-2008 a large number of women in television series had the opportunity to: “do managerial tasks and be involved in decision-making as time goes by.”¹⁴⁵

Zheng’s findings show on the one hand that most female characters were portrayed as keeping calm in moments of crisis and seeking to solve the problems themselves (without help from any male characters).¹⁴⁶ The education level of these women was also quite high, having college degrees or even advanced degrees, which put these women on the same intellectual level as their male counterparts.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, Zheng argues that women were usually depicted as having middle to middle to high level occupations and were not depicted in top-positions.¹⁴⁸ Only three out of 298 female characters were portrayed as a powerful leader, and *male* characters in the series pointed out the flaws of these women in management.¹⁴⁹ Considering the female characters in prime time Chinese TV series could function as role models for women, female viewers may believe that television series reflect reality for 100% and therefore not believe in themselves and

141. Idem.

142. Idem.

143. Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 43.

144. Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 48.

145. As mentioned in Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 49.

146. Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 71.

147. Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 71-72.

148. Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 72.

149. Idem.

be confined in their self-image.¹⁵⁰ Limiting the self-confidence of women may also discourage the women's movement in the Chinese public.¹⁵¹

According to Zheng, the women who are a mother or a wife in the series, are the two most popular groups portrayed.¹⁵² Women who have the highest social status were all shown as wives.¹⁵³

Even though the slogan of "Women hold up half the sky" was promoted in 1949 and women were considered to be able to do the same work as men, women in the television series were still portrayed as figures without "top power" and as unsuccessful unless they devoted enough energy to both family and career.¹⁵⁴ According to Chu and McIntyre women and men: "learn norms, codes and concepts similarly within the same social context, and one may have a stereotyped view toward someone within the same gender."¹⁵⁵ This makes it difficult not to produce a stereotyped image of a woman or a man. Chu and McIntyre also added: "when females voluntarily take up the 'second sex' status, the socialization of women into 'second sex' encounters little or no resistance".¹⁵⁶ These two reasons make it hard to dispose of sex role stereotypes in television drama and mainstream society. Zheng does not specify on the comparison between the top-positions of management in the researched TV series and in reality.

In her research about Chinese socialist feminism in the 1980s, Lingzhen Wang challenges assumptions about Chinese Socialist feminism through a study of "Chinese women's multidimensional engagement with cultural production, namely cinema" in the 1980s.¹⁵⁷ According to Wang, Socialist China and Chinese women's cinema had for a long time been seen in a Western, Cold War, perspective.¹⁵⁸ Wang describes how women's Socialist cinema was influenced by ideas different from Western feminism and also different from the People's Republic of China (PRC) state.¹⁵⁹

150. Idem.

151. Idem.

152. Zheng, "Stereotyping," 54.

153. Idem.

154. Zheng, "Stereotyping," 70.

155. As mentioned in Zheng, "Stereotyping," 19.

156. Idem.

157. As mentioned in Nan and Wang, "Feminist Sinologies," 556.

158. Nan and Wang, "Feminist Sinologies," 556.

159. Idem.

During the mid-1990s, TV reached its epitome in playing a general leading role for youths in China, in which they could express themselves and distinguish themselves as different from others, for instance, parents, siblings, teachers or even other class mates.¹⁶⁰ Chinese youths were so enthusiastic about television that it became the norm in popular culture.¹⁶¹ It remains unclear how this norm was expressed, except that it excluded Party leadership.¹⁶²

Later on, by the first decade of the twenty-first century, internet, film and TV drama were becoming more popular and taking over the roles as a trend setter and discussion board.¹⁶³ Developments that started in the mid-1990s and reached their climax in 2008, gave youth internet, film, and TV drama through which change (e.g. for engagement in feminism or for engagement in the Party) was discussed and shown, these media were the worlds where Chinese youth could adapt and change the world for their own benefits.¹⁶⁴

In early 2010 two films in China competed for the attention of (young) Chinese viewers: Confucius and James Cameron's Avatar.¹⁶⁵ The Chinese government prioritized the Chinese movie in several ways to encourage its citizens to see that movie (first).¹⁶⁶ Netizens were, however, not so easily persuaded to value the Chinese movie more and said it was advocating: "class oppression and obedience by the lower orders", whereas the American movie stood for: "resistance and action".¹⁶⁷ On the internet Confucius' old name (from the Cultural Revolution) was used again: 'Cuckold Kong' (Kong lao'er).¹⁶⁸

160. Paul Clark, *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 195, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.1017/CBO9781139061162>.

161. Idem.

162. Idem.

163. Clark, *Youth Culture*, 143.

164. Idem.

165. Clark, *Youth Culture*, 191.

166. Idem.

167. Idem.

168. As mentioned in Clark, *Youth Culture*, 191.

The mass media in the PRC has the official capacity to: “enforce State policies and Party interests, to teach appropriate values and behaviors, to indicate good behavior and to activate people’s application of proper social norms”.¹⁶⁹ The programs aired on Chinese TV have all carefully been scrutinized and judged on their “moral capacity”, if these elements (such as advertising, TV series, talk shows, etc.,) are deemed appropriate, the program is allowed to be aired.¹⁷⁰

Since February 2019, *The Story of Yanxi Palace* has been banned from Chinese television, supposedly because it is “bad for Chinese society”.¹⁷¹ In reality the Party wants to control its image internationally and wants its international image to be peaceful.¹⁷² The last thing the Party wants, is for China’s international image to be of palace intrigue and of backstabbing.¹⁷³ *The Story of Yanxi Palace* has not been banned from iQiyi, where it was initially shown.¹⁷⁴ According to the BBC, the censorship the Party imposes, and the self-censorship the Chinese tv-channels enforce, demonstrate that a show on Chinese TV can not become too popular and tell a story of China’s history or rise that is not peaceful or harmonious.¹⁷⁵ However, it is also interesting to see that China’s most popular drama series of 2018 with a female protagonist, who is intelligent, cunning and witty, as well as grounded in agency and responsible in a Neoliberalist way, has been dismissed from State television. I will elaborate on Wei Yingluo in Chapter 5.

169. As mentioned in Zheng, “Stereotyping,” 19-20.

170. Idem.

171. Illmer, “Yanxi Palace.”

172. Idem.

173. Idem.

174. Idem.

175. Idem.

Recently, historical dramas have become quite popular; for instance *Nirvana in Fire*,¹⁷⁶ and *Princess Pearl*.¹⁷⁷ Like *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, this is a palace drama taking place in the Forbidden City, during the Qing Dynasty.¹⁷⁸ Recent Chinese movies that portray a strong, confident, intelligent, and beautiful female post-feminist protagonist are for instance: “Stanley Kwan’s *长恨歌 Everlasting Regret* (2005), Ang Lee’s *卧虎藏龙 Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Xu Jinglei’s *一个陌生女人的来信 Letter From an Unknown Woman* (2004), and the recent film remake of *花木兰 Hua Mulan* (2008)”.¹⁷⁹ In these movies the protagonist is post-feminist because the movie shows a woman who is independent financially, emotionally mature, sexually conscious, and who has integrated feminism in her perspective without verbalizing it.¹⁸⁰

Neoliberalism

In her article: “Neoliberalism and popular women’s culture: Rethinking choice, freedom and agency”, Eva Chen states that: “Reflected in popular culture, there has been an increasing trend since the 1990s towards a celebration of conspicuous consumption and solipsistic individual gratification, embodied above all in the image of the empowered, assertive, pleasure-seeking, “have-it-all” woman of sexual and financial agency.”¹⁸¹ This description applies to the post-feminist heroines above. In the U.S.A., this so-called “Girl Power” started with heroines like The Spice Girls and Charlie’s Angels.¹⁸²

176. Layne Vandenberg, “Meet Lin Xi: A Progressive Female Character in a Chinese Drama,” *The Diplomat*, September 27, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/meet-lin-xi-a-progressive-female-character-in-a-chinese-drama/>.

177. As mentioned in Clark, *Youth Culture*, 189.

178. Idem.

179. Li, “Consumerism,” 567-568.

180. As mentioned in Li, “Consumerism,” 567-568.

181. Chen, “Neoliberalism,” 441.

182. Idem.

Eva Chen argues that women in contemporary western society, often do not realize the neoliberal influences at work in their choices, when they assume *they* are making their own *free* choices (italics mine).¹⁸³ These neoliberal influences seek to make women think they are making the right choices for themselves in choosing for patriarchal choices.¹⁸⁴ Thus, these women (unknowingly) fight against feminism in choosing in favor of traditional roles.¹⁸⁵ In popular culture this is reflected for instance by Charlotte, from the American TV series *Sex and the City*, when she chooses to quit her job to get married and have a baby.¹⁸⁶ She tells her friends: “It’s my life and my choice ... I choose my choice”.¹⁸⁷ In situations like this, feminism is shown as a restricting influence.¹⁸⁸

Concluding, Ibsen’s protagonist Nora has had considerable influence on Chinese popculture during and after the 1920s. The agency Nora stood for was taken up by other playwrights to produce similar “problem” plays. During and after the Huang-Lu elopement, Miss Huang had trouble to stay the course in portraying who she wanted to be and the pressure and attention of the press negatively influenced her. Zheng’s research on the portrayal of working women Prime Time Chinese television shows that there is an improving trend in how women are portrayed in Chinese television. The Neoliberal feminine subject is shown in recent Chinese and Western popular culture, showing how our society has a Neoliberalist bias.

183. Chen, “Neoliberalism,”442.

184. Idem.

185. Idem.

186. Idem.

187. Idem.

188. Idem.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter I shall explain what my work method is in my analysis of two scenes of *The Story of Yanxi Palace* in Chapter 5. I shall explain my choice of scenes. In my analysis I have a Neoliberalist bias, which I shall further inform you about. I shall explain why I use Post-Structuralist methods and why I have based my methods on Florian Schneider's methods. Then I will explain my choice of screenshots. I shall provide some background information on *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, especially concerning the funding of the series. Furthermore, I shall argue why I argue that Wei Yingluo is a character with agency. Finally, I discuss the term "class" and why I choose to exclude this term and its meaning from this thesis.

When discussing feminism, agency and popular culture, *The Story of Yanxi Palace* provides an excellent example of all three. I have chosen to analyze two scenes from *The Story of Yanxi Palace* because it illustrates female agency by portraying the protagonist as a woman who finds her way in a world (Qing in Forbidden City) where women have to behave according to very strict rules, observing the wishes of the Emperor, who is the highest authority in the country. I shall elaborate on this in Chapter 5. In the following analysis, one must remember that we as an audience are ourselves part of a learned construction called society. Our dispositions, premises, attitudes, as well as the balance of power are part of a constructed cultural system so common in our understanding, that we no longer realise it is a construct.¹⁸⁹ This becomes more clear when we look at a cultural system different from our current cultural understanding, for instance the construct of the drama-series *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, in which a completely different set of dispositions, premises, attitudes and balance of power is considered the norm. Thus, the glaring difference in status between men and women in the Forbidden City during the Qing dynasty, or more accurately, the producer's representation of the difference in status, becomes even more evident. The maneuverability of Wei Yingluo, despite this glaring difference, stands out more in comparison. Moreover, this excellence makes others seem incompetent.¹⁹⁰

The choice of the two scenes in both cases has to do with the protagonist Wei Yingluo managing to get out of difficult and precarious situations, using her wit and out of the box thinking. Both show the inferior position of lower class women and how Wei Yingluo despite her subordinate

189. Eagleton, ed. *A Concise Companion*, 175.

190. Chen, "Neoliberalism," 449.

position, handles both situations with agency. There are also some differences between the first and second scene: In the first scene Wei Yingluo “meets” the Emperor for the first time and is only a palace maiden. In the second scene her status has risen to become one of his concubines. In the second scene she is portrayed as knowing exactly how far she can go and how she can exploit the situation to her benefit, showing how her character has grown. I have chosen these two scenes out of many examples of the protagonist’s agency, as these illustrate the best how the character of Yingluo sets an example with her agency and also show how her character grows during the series. I would have liked to show more examples of her agency, yet the scope of this thesis does not allow for it.

I will use Post-Structuralist deconstruction and discourse analysis to analyze the two scenes because these methods make clear what connects and alienates people.¹⁹¹ As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, I have a Neoliberalist bias, which I am (mostly) aware of. I expect other viewers of the series might have a similar bias. Where possible, I will refer to this bias.

The method I use for Discourse Analysis is based on Florian Schneider’s work.¹⁹² I am using Schneider’s work because he taught me how to analyze the medium of film in one of the classes he taught and his work is the most comprehensive work on the subject of analyzing film that I have read.

The classification I use in the analysis is based on Schneider’s classification.¹⁹³ The headings I use are: Plot; Camera Angle; Lighting; Mise-en-scene; Acting/Demeanor; Music/Sound Effects; and Spoken text.

I use screenshots to support my analysis. The screenshots I use most clearly and concisely illustrate my analysis, especially the mise-en-scene and the inter-relatedness of the characters in the series.

The background of *The Story of Yanxi Palace* is also very interesting. It was already extremely popular right after it was released in 2018.¹⁹⁴

191. As explained in Davies and Gannon, “36 Feminism/Post-structuralism,” 315-318.

192. Schneider, *Visual Political Communication*, 249-250.

193. As mentioned in Schneider, *Visual Political Communication*, 249-250.

194. Newswire, “iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama.”

It is a story of palace intrigue of 70 episodes produced by iQIYI and Huanyu Film Works and had been streamed over 15 billion times by the time the original production was aired and concluded.¹⁹⁵

iQiyi is a Beijing-based video-streaming site that also lets its users stream series from the platform.¹⁹⁶ *The Story of Yanxi Palace* is one of those series. On March 29, 2018, the company for the first time sold its stocks in the U.S.A. and raised \$2.25 billion.¹⁹⁷

Huanyu Film&Television Culture Co.,Ltd has several supporting organizations, which are: China Film Administration; The Central Office of National Broadcasting and television; The Producers Guild of America; and Writers Guild of America West.¹⁹⁸ These supporting organizations may or may not fund Huanyu Film&Television, yet their input probably does not fall on deaf ears. Besides supporting organizations, there is also a considerable number of partner organizations, which might try to influence Huanyu Film&Television Culture Co.,Ltd.¹⁹⁹ This is important to know because of likely political ties.

This being said, Sasha Roseneil voices the argument that it is much easier to analyze and understand that someone misses agency and that it is much harder to describe how someone *does* have agency in doing something.”²⁰⁰ Despite her argument I would like to analyze the two scenes in favor of agency, because often acting with agency looks deceptively easy. In this humble opinion one can learn from it and how it is used and implemented. In the case of *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, female agency for a just cause is a rare gem; all the other concubines are either evil or helpless. Moreover, *The Story of Yanxi Palace* is very popular.²⁰¹ and perhaps an analysis of Wei Yingluo’s

195. Idem.

196. Crystal Tse, “iQiyi Is Said to Raise \$2.25 Billion in IPO Priced at Midpoint,” *Bloomberg*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-29/iqiyi-is-said-to-raise-2-25-billion-in-ipo-priced-at-midpoint>.

197. Idem.

198. “Huanyu Film&Television Culture Co.,Ltd.,” accessed July 25, 2019, <http://cafilmfestival.org/en/huanyu-filmtelevision-culture-co-ltd/>.

199. Idem.

200. As mentioned in Eagleton, ed. *A Concise Companion*, 237.

201. Newswire, “iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama.”

agency sheds some light on what the portrayal of Wei Yingluo contributes to why this series is so popular (and inspirational).

In the analyses I shall not bring the aspect of “class” into the discussion, even though “class” is a very important and meaningful concept in the context of status in *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. Adding “class” as a concept to this discussion is simply not in the scope of this thesis.

Concluding, I have chosen to analyze *The Story of Yanxi Palace* because of the agency of the protagonist, Wei Yingluo. The two scenes I analyze are both cases in point of how she uses her agency to get out of dangerous situations.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, I will analyse two scenes of *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, scene one: Wei Yingluo scratches a tree; and scene two: Wei Yingluo serves the Emperor. First, I shall briefly explain the plot.

General Plot

The Story of Yanxi Palace is the story of Wei Yingluo and how she becomes Empress of China during the Qing dynasty. It is a TV drama that was launched on the Chinese youtube (iQIYI) and was very popular from the beginning.²⁰² Wei Yingluo enters the Forbidden City as a humble palace servant, a seamstress. Her secret reason to enter the Forbidden City is to find her older sister’s killer and have revenge for her. Wei Yingluo’s elder sister died in the Forbidden City, but Yingluo knows it was murder because she examined the body. Her elder sister raised her because their mother died giving birth to Wei Yingluo and therefore Yingluo had grown very attached to her elder sister. As Wei Yingluo is both good-looking and a praised seamstress, many women in the Forbidden City are jealous and frequently cause trouble for her. They make it seem like Yingluo did something or other that a palace maiden is not supposed to do, for instance have an affair with a Palace Guard. Wei Yingluo always finds a way to prove her innocence in her fight for a more just world. In addition, Yingluo finds ways to get back at the ones who make her life hard. At a certain point, the Empress develops a liking for Yingluo and Yingluo is promoted to handmaiden of the

202. Newswire, “iQIYI's Summer Smash Hit Drama.”

Empress. After the Empress' death, Yingluo mourns the loss of a dear friend. Step by step, Yingluo climbs up the social ladder in the Forbidden City, earning the Emperor's respect and trust. As a woman, Yingluo can not climb higher than Empress, outranked only by the Emperor himself. In the analysis of the following two scenes, I will deconstruct Wei Yingluo's composure, speech, and actions, showing how she presents herself to the Emperor (and to the audience).

Scene 1 Wei Yingluo scratches a tree

(Episode 2, 42:02-42:53 – Episode 3 01:48-02:56)

The scene is spread out over two episodes, the first half at the end of episode 2 and the second half at the beginning of episode 3.

Plot

In this scene the main character, Wei Yingluo, meets the Emperor for the first time. She is caught red-handed hitting a sacred cypress tree. The tree is considered sacred because the story goes that its spirit accompanied the Late Emperor to southern China and caused the Late Emperor to have a pleasant journey. The servants were all complaining about the heat, yet the Late Emperor did not sweat at all.

The current Emperor's first reaction on hearing that Wei Yingluo was hitting the tree is to punish her with 30 lashes by cane. The servants want to take her away, yet she continues talking. The Emperor then decides to hear her out. Instead of admitting the truth, i.e. that she was expressing her anger at life's unfairness, Yingluo explains that the spirit of the tree came to her in a dream last night and asked her to scratch an itch. She says she was only doing what the spirit of the tree had asked her to do. Instead of punishing Yingluo with 30 lashes with a cane, the Emperor seems to believe her and leaves.

Post-Structural Deconstruction

The main participants (or texts) in this scene are: Wei Yingluo, the Emperor, and the sacred cypress tree. The eunuch is a participant, yet has a mediating function. Yingluo's mentor is present, but only in the role of spectator.

The binaries in this scene are: man-woman, high status-low status, and spirit-body. The man-woman binary is to be seen in that the Emperor is a man and Wei Yingluo is a woman. The same

can be said of the binary high status-low status; the Emperor is of high status and Wei Yingluo is of low status. The binary of spirit-body can be found in the sacred cypress tree as the tree's spirit (supposedly) came to Yingluo in her dream and the body of the tree can be seen on the scene, being "scratched" by Wei Yingluo. I shall point out these binaries in the following analysis. In this scene Yingluo finds herself in the inferior position as a woman and at the lower end of the status spectrum. The solution Wei Yingluo comes up with shows how she thinks out of the box and actively engages with the situation to set herself free of blame by using agency as a praxis.

Camera angle

Camera angle on Wei Yingluo

During the meeting between Yingluo and the Emperor, the camera is focused on Yingluo from above, making her seem even smaller, compared to the other people in the scene. This camera angle may also represent the perspective of the Emperor physically looking down at her.

The shots from above are alternated with close-ups of Yingluo's face, to show the audience that her story is indeed made up. This is shown by Yingluo scrunching her face, by frowning, by biting her lip, by her eyes looking around, searching for an answer and by looking surprised when she has "explained" the situation. The close-ups are for the audience to see, the Emperor can not see her facial expressions as she is kneeling and facing the ground. In this way the audience becomes involved more and effectively becomes inter-related with the scene.

Camera angle on others in the scene

The camera is focused on the Emperor's servants at eye level. This makes the servants seem more important than Wei Yingluo. The Emperor is the most important person in the scene. This is shown by viewing him from below, making the Emperor seem bigger. Some close-ups show his face and facial expressions more clearly. The effect of the close-ups is that the Emperor is portrayed as a human figure, not a God. The close-ups also have the effect of adding suspense to the scene, as the Emperor is shown looking at the tree and debating what to do.

Lighting

The scene is outside. The lighting in the scene seems natural and evenly distributed. No special lighting has been observed.

Mise-en-scene

At first Yingluo, a young woman in Qing imperial dress code, is standing next to the sacred cypress tree and hitting it. Then the Emperor, with his nearly bald head and braid at the back, with his entourage passes by, the Emperor himself sitting in an open chair, being carried by eunuchs. The entire entourage is dressed in Qing imperial eunuch uniform. The head eunuch walks at the front of this entourage and sees Yingluo first. He calls to Yingluo to stop hitting the cypress tree and kowtow for the Emperor as he is passing by. Yingluo does as he says and stays kowtowed during the whole conversation that follows. The Emperor calls his entourage to a halt in front of Yingluo and the Emperor and the head eunuch interrogate her. In this situation the mise-en-scene is as follows: Yingluo is prostrated on the ground in the left corner, under the sacred cypress tree. In the middle of the scene is the head eunuch standing facing the audience. On the right is the Emperor in his held-up chair. This mise-en-scene reflects the binary of high-status – low status in the way Yingluo is prostrated on the ground and the Emperor is high up in his chair. The man-woman binary is also reflected in this way.

Acting/Demeanor

Initially, Yingluo seems startled and tries to hide behind the sacred tree. Then she is addressed by the head eunuch and she composes herself. Much like the female, independent characters from the TV series Zheng describes in her study, Yingluo keeps her calm and does not rely on others (*men*) to save her from a difficult situation. Her composure is the condition for her agency, without it she would not be able to think up a solution for this dangerous situation. Her agency becomes apparent when she convincingly tells her lies. That the Emperor seems to believe her is the consequence of her agency, not a condition for it.

The Emperor is at first looking in front of him, without apparent emotion, yet he seems disturbed by Yingluo, orders his entourage to a halt and is dismissive in his order to punish Yingluo with 30 lashes by cane. Then Yingluo starts talking and this seems to cause a change in the

Emperor. He seems to become intrigued and starts to listen; he looks at the tree, debating whether to believe her or not.

The sacred cypress tree is present during the entire scene. It is linked to Yingluo as its body was being “itched” by her. The tree is linked to the Emperor as he looks at the tree in debating whether the spirit of the tree really came to Yingluo in her dream. The binary of spirit-body is in this way shown in this scene by the presence of the tree.

Music/Sound effects

There is a gong sound when Yingluo hides. There is suspenseful music and heavy breathing of Yingluo’s mentor, who had been rushing after her, but now hides behind a wall.

In the beginning of episode three, there is a gong sound, reminding the audience of the end of the last episode. Then there is a light kind of music with a suspenseful undertone. This tune forms the background to Yingluo’s explanation. When the Emperor has spoken his decision, to let her be and leave, the tune changes to the Emperor’s theme, which is a louder and more ominous version of the relaxed tune described above. A gong commences the Emperor’s theme.

Spoken text

Yingluo’s speech is audible, clear, smooth and to the point, making her story easy to believe. She uses the new information about the spirit of the tree to her benefit, showing quick thinking and agency.

Yingluo: I’m new to the palace so I didn’t know the Cypress tree had a spirit./奴才刚入宫 不识灵 bai。

There is a reason for my behavior, however./不过奴才所为是有原因的。

Head Eunuch: Shut her mouth./堵上她的嘴。

Emperor: Let her talk./让她说。

Y: I truly didn’t know this Cypress tree had a spirit./奴才确实不知道这个是灵 bai。

However,/不过,

Last night a tree came to me in a dream./昨天晚上有一颗树给奴才托梦。

It said it had been here for a long time and it had an itch on its body./说它日久于此身上痒痒。

It asked me to come find it in the garden and scratch its back./让奴才来花园寻它给他挠背。

Yes, that's it./对。

I was scratching its back just now./奴才刚才就是在给它挠痒痒。

H. E.: What the hell are you talking about?/你说的什么混账话?

How can a tree manifest itself in your dream?/一棵树能托梦给你?

Y: Well, since the tree has a spirit, it makes sense that it could manifest itself in my dreams./既然柏树幽灵那自然就能给奴才托梦啊。

Your Majesty, every word of what I have just told you is the truth./皇上，奴才说言句句属实。

I'm not lying./没有半句谎言。

E: Forget it./罢了。

Get out of here./走吧。

What Yingluo says shows her quick thinking and processing new information, using it to her advantage. This quick thinking is only one action, but it saves her from lashes by cane, showing her agency. In addition, the way she speaks also conveys agency.

She sounds self-assured, without hitches in her speech or without making the listener wait for the story to come. Yingluo's easy communication makes it seem normal that the Emperor is listening to her, even though Yingluo is only a lowly servant in the Forbidden City and the Emperor is the highest authority. In fact, her speech is so smooth, that it almost sounds rehearsed and it seems impossible that she made this up on the spot, as the series wants the audience to believe. The only moment she does not seem self-assured is when she hesitates, after she has told the whole made-up story, and says: "Yeah that's right, I was scratching its back just now."/“对，就是在给它挠痒痒。” Yingluo conveys her agency by the way she speaks, as much as in what she says.

Written language on objects in the scene

On the sacred cypress tree there is a written sign saying: “Sacred Cypress Tree” as the head eunuch points out. The Chinese is: (靈-) , ling2bai2.

Conclusion

Everything in this scene contributes to emphasizing the binaries, by showing how small and powerless she is compared to the Emperor who is high and powerful. The set-up of this scene makes it look impossible for Yingluo to get out of trouble and underlines her agency when she *does* come up with a very original explanation for her behavior. This agency resembles the agency of the beautiful, young, Neoliberalist heroine.



Wei Yingluo's Mentor is watching Yingluo talk herself out of trouble.

Scene 2 Wei Yingluo serves the Emperor

(Episode 42, 37:20-40:08)

Plot

After the Empress commits suicide and Yingluo is saved by the Empress' testament, two years go by without any incident. Then, Yingluo plans two miraculous events for the Empress-Dowager's birthday. This grants her a title and the status of a noblewoman from the Emperor and happiness from the Empress-Dowager. As she is now one of the Emperor's concubines, he asks Yingluo to serve him in bed this night in the former Empress's home. Yingluo can not defy his request, as she would defy the Emperor's orders and be sentenced to death. Yet, she can not obey the Emperor's request with a clear conscience, as she is still loyal to the Late Empress, and has to find a third option. When she arrives at the former Empress's home, the Emperor makes her wait for two hours and finally invites her inside. Wei Yingluo is summoned to the Emperor's side and he makes clear that he wants to sleep with her in the Late Empress' house to show the Late Empress what kind of backstabbing woman Yingluo really is. He states that she would abandon honour in favor of fame and wealth.

The audience only discovers Yingluo's plan when the Emperor orders her to undress. Then it becomes apparent to the Emperor and to the audience that she had decided to wear mourning robes under her normal robes, to make clear to the Emperor that she can not serve him tonight. She disproves his assumptions about her and asks him to allow her to observe 27 months of mourning for the Empress. She explains that because of his assumptions about her the only thing she can do is to show her true intentions and if he still judges her negatively, she will accept any punishment. He then dismisses her and she leaves.

Post-Structural Deconstruction

The main participants in the scene are Wei Yingluo, the Emperor and the spirit of the Late Empress. In this scene the following binaries can be found: man-woman and high status-low status. As in scene one, the binaries man-woman and high status-low status are between the Emperor and Wei Yingluo. In this scene, however, the relationship is not the same. Wei Yingluo is now a concubine and the Emperor is her master, so there is still a considerable difference in status, yet instead of speaking to him from a kowtowed position, she speaks to him while standing.

The binary of man-woman is also shown in a different way. The relationship of the Emperor and Yingluo as his concubine is such that they can have a dialogue. She is now in a position where she can carefully disagree with him, although she can not disobey him.

The Late Empress is also present, as is made clear by the references to the Late Empress' house. The Emperor and Yingluo both talk and act as if her spirit is still present; the Emperor by wanting to show the Late Empress what kind of person Yingluo is and Yingluo by dressing in mourning clothes.

Her mourning clothes cause the Emperor to visibly be startled, giving Yingluo the opportunity to ask for permission to observe 27 months of mourning for the Late Empress. The Emperor did not expect this. Yingluo, by startling the Emperor, gains the upper hand in the conversation. When asking for permission to stay in mourning, Yingluo kneels down and after she explains that she can only show her true intentions, she kowtows. Thus, making herself smaller and assuming a subordinate position to the Emperor, restoring the high status-low status balance.

Camera Angle

The shots of Wei Yingluo are alternatively shots of the room, in which Wei Yingluo is standing in the middle; of Yingluo's upper body and face (especially when she is in conversation with the Emperor, these shots show her facial expressions very well); and lastly one shot of the back of her head, a close-up, which seems to focus on Yingluo's elaborate hairdo. The shot of the back of her head shows Yingluo to the audience as the Emperor sees Yingluo at that moment, kowtowing and making herself seem small and insignificant in relation to the Emperor. The camera also follows Yingluo as she walks out of the former Empress's home. Again showing the audience that this story is about her.

The mid-shots and medium close-ups of Yingluo are at the same level as her face. This shows her as an equal to the viewer, making it easier for the audience to identify with Yingluo.

The shots of the Emperor are alternatively mid close-ups and of the Emperor in the room. The mid close-ups of the Emperor's face are on eye-level and show his facial expressions very clearly. This may show that the Emperor is of the same status as the viewer, allowing the viewer to identify more with the Emperor.

The mid-shots and medium close-ups of the Emperor's upper body and face, and the shots of his face show the Emperor's emotions more clearly. He frowns at times, responding to Yingluo's speech and behavior.

As Yingluo undresses, the shots focus on the sitting Emperor, from behind Yingluo's left arm/left side. This way, the audience first sees the Emperor's reaction and only then finds out why he reacts this way. The camera angle adds to the suspense of the scene. It underlines that the Emperor clearly has not expected this from Yingluo, and it shows Yingluo's inventiveness and agency in coming up with this solution.

Lighting

The scene is inside and it is night time, so the lighting is artificial. There is enough light in the room to see the two characters' facial expressions clearly, yet the light comes from the side the audience is watching, at times leaving the left side of the Emperor's face in semi-shadow. He often turns his face to look at his left, possibly to express that he has difficulty in handling the situation.

Mise-en-scene

In the shot of the entire room (in the Late Empress' house), there are curtains framing the scene, giving a theatrical impression. Both the Emperor and Yingluo are wearing elaborate imperial dresses. Yingluo is standing in the center of the room and behind her one can see a round table with stools. Behind the table, the bed with open doors is visible. On both sides of the bed, there is wooden paneling with a painting on either side. The Emperor is sitting in the farthest of the two wooden chairs on the left.

That Yingluo is standing in the center of the room shows that Yingluo is somehow more important than the Emperor. The Emperor is sitting, while Yingluo is standing. This could indicate that the Emperor is of higher status than Yingluo as she has to exert more energy to stay standing. Yet this could also mean that Yingluo has risen in status, as she does not have to kowtow anymore and her status is now closer to his.

Acting/Demeanor

When the Emperor tells Yingluo to come over, she walks a little toward the Emperor and turns to the camera so the audience can see that she is starting to undress herself. When she is free of her normal clothes, wearing only mourning robes, Yingluo bends down on her knees and starts explaining how much the former Empress meant to her. She ends her explanation by throwing her body on the floor, saying: “If you insist on blaming me, I am willing to accept any punishment.” / “若皇上执意怪罪， 嫔妾甘愿接受一切责罚。” With this she makes herself small again, showing the difference in status between her and the Emperor. In general in this scene, Yingluo has an upright stance, except when she is laying on the floor. This stance shows that she is not afraid of the Emperor and proud. Considering the circumstances, it seems the Emperor could easily interpret this as arrogant or too proud. However, knowing her integrity as an audience, one should probably interpret her straight stance as self-confident. Acting as she does in this scene, one can easily see Yingluo has agency here, she acts considering the rules, but bends them to her advantage.

The Emperor calls Yingluo and insists that she undresses herself. As she does so, he looks the other way. The Emperor rubs his face with his hand and then the top of his head. This possibly indicates that he is weary as it is getting late. This may have nothing to do with Wei Yingluo, yet it could be interpreted that he is weary of her or the situation. When the Emperor looks back at Yingluo, he is shocked by the mourning clothes Yingluo wears underneath her normal clothes. After her explanation of what the former Empress meant to her, he lets her leave.

The Late Empress’ spirit is present in the acting and speaking of the Emperor and Wei Yingluo. The house/the environment of the scene represents the spirit of the Late Empress.

Music/Sound Effects

There is light music when the scene starts. When Wei Yingluo undresses from her normal clothing and she is wearing mourning clothes, the background music changes to the former Empress’s theme. As Yingluo gets up to leave, one hears Wei Yingluo’s success theme.

Spoken Text

As in the first scene, her voice is clear, and she does not falter in her speech. Her appearance and speech are self-confident, expressing agency. The conversation goes as follows:

Emperor: Aren't you supposed to serve tonight?/今夜不是你侍寝吗?
Where are you going?/要去哪儿啊?
Come over here./过来。
Are you waiting for me to undress you in person?/你是在等着朕亲自替你宽衣解带吗?
Silence as Yingluo undresses.
You ... /你。。。

Yingluo: Your Majesty, 皇上,
as you see it, former Empress is already passed away./在您看来, 先皇后已经是故去的人了。
But in my mind, her Highness is not only my master,/但是在嫔妾心里, 娘娘不光是主子,
she is my mentor, and my sister./她是璎珞的恩师和姐姐。
Which is why,/所以,
I want to observe a 27-months mourning for her./嫔妾要为她守孝二十七个月。
The time is not due yet./如今孝期未滿。
Even though it is your Majesty's order, I dare not to serve tonight./即便是皇上的命令, 嫔妾也决不敢侍寝。

E: If you're in mourning, then why did you come?/你既要守孝, 那还来干什么?

Y: In his Majesty's eyes, I am just a greedy and vain person,/在皇上眼中, 嫔妾就是个贪慕虚荣的人,
there's nothing to explain./这没什么好解释的。
As time goes by, your Majesty will understand me for who I am./日子长了, 皇上就会明白嫔妾到底如何。
But I know, defying a decree is a death punishment./只是嫔妾知道, 抗旨是死罪。
All I can do is present myself to you and show you my intentions./只能前来向皇上表明心意。

If you insist on blaming me, I am willing to accept any punishment./若皇上执意怪罪， 嫔妾甘愿接受一切责罚。

E: Leave./下去吧。

Y: Thank you for his Majesty's grace./谢皇上恩典。

When the Emperor insists that Yingluo should undress herself, he sees she is wearing mourning clothes underneath. She had planned this in advance, using her wit and her emotions in relation to the Late Empress as guidelines and well thought-through excuses to not serve the Emperor. Yingluo asks that she can observe 27 months of mourning for the Late Empress and this is granted by the Emperor after Yingluo explains that the former Empress was not just her Mistress, yet also her mentor and her sister. Yingluo's speech is well executed and logical, without hitch or stammering. The way she speaks shows self-confidence and agency. She explains herself as an equal, even though she is not equal to him in status. Her quality of speech shows Yingluo has thought this through and her speech and actions combined show agency.

Conclusion

In scene two the binaries are less extreme and more subtle than in scene one. The presence of the binaries is expressed more in what is said than in how it is said. In scene two there is more of a dialogue and it is more personal, since Yingluo's status has changed.

Yingluo has to consider the power of the Emperor and the rules she has to obey to survive. In scene two her agency shows in how she came up with an out-of-the-box solution, planned everything in advance and presented herself in an assertive way. The mise-en-scene and the camera angle both add to the suspense.

In both scenes, Yingluo presents herself and speaks in a way that demands attention. She shows her wit and presence of mind in how she applies her agency, with the definition:

“The concept of praxis shifts the site of feminist activism from the drama and spectacle of mass demonstrations designed to capture media attention to the politics of everyday life, thereby illuminating the manifold feminist struggles involved in women's efforts to subsist, to live with dignity and respect, to with-

stand violence, and to build equitable and sustainable communities.”²⁰³



The Emperor is shocked by Wei Yingluo’s mourning robes.

203. Hawkesworth, “The Semiotics,” 973.

Conclusion

From the times of He Zhen and her Anarcho-feminist contemporaries, to Mao's time, in which female Red Guards were second-class men, to recent times, in which feminist NGO's are trying to obtain equal rights regarding gender equality, feminists have achieved important improvements in women's rights and women's status.

Agency as a praxis is the most fitting definition to use in the analysis of the portrayal of Wei Yingluo in *The Story of Yanxi Palace*. Post-Structuralist Deconstruction and Discourse Analysis have proven to be useful tools in analyzing the binaries present.

The status of women in reality and their portrayal in popular culture influence each other as can be seen in Ibsen's *A Doll House* and the Chinese "problem plays" in China in the 1920s. This interaction can also be seen in the Huang-Lu elopement and how the press influenced Miss Huang's course of action, showing that keeping agency is not always easy. Luckily, Zheng's research shows that the portrayal of working women during Prime Time TV in China is steadily improving and as more women are seen in managerial positions, their status is becoming higher.

Wei Yingluo stands up against a man of higher status. I have argued that Wei Yingluo demonstrates agency in the scenes. In spite of the rules she walks her own path and finds a way out while both surviving and following her own set of morals. In this setting of Qing Imperial China, the rules and the balance of status were quite clear, yet speaking up was not easy. Might a woman from our time, from a Neoliberalist background, feel that this is the other way around? Might it be the case that a Neoliberalist woman finds that speaking up is easy, yet the rules remain unclear? To fully understand what is happening in our contemporary society, Post-Structuralist methods and a better understanding of Neoliberal values are needed. We can look to popular culture as a mirror of our own society and hopefully, like Yingluo, think out of the box to keep improving ourself and self-image and inspire others around us. To fruitfully undertake this challenge, more research is needed.

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Appendix 1

Scene 1 Wei Yingluo scratches a tree



Yingluo is kowtowing to the Emperor.



The Head Eunuch is questioning her explanation.



An overview of the lay-out of the scene.



The Emperor is sitting in his Chair.

Appendix 2

Scene 2 Wei Yingluo serves the Emperor



Yingluo kneels in front of the Emperor.



The Emperor and Yingluo are in conversation.



Yingluo starts to undress herself.



Yingluo kneels to the Emperor to request a mourning period of 27 months.