

# An Ode to Love: Analysis on Suju Opera *Liu Ru Shi*\*

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**Abstract**—The performance of Suju opera *Liu Ru Shi* is a major event on the stage of Suju opera, national intangible cultural heritage, since the 21st century. Based on a unique perspective and carefully polished by an elite team, *Liu Ru Shi* has become an epoch-making work in the history of the development of Suju opera. Despite its flaws, it is a symbol of the revival of Suju opera in this century.

**Keywords:** *intangible cultural heritage, Suju opera, Liu Ru Shi, Chen Yinque*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Suju opera is a local opera formed in Suzhou in the early 1940s. The tunes of Suju opera are beautiful, the melodies are melodious, and the dialogue is the Suzhou soft dialect with local features. Together with Kun opera and storytelling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect, it is called "Three Flowers in Suzhou Art Circle". In the 1950s, 1960s and early 1980s, Suju opera reached a climax in the Suzhou area and became a household name. However, considering the decreasing audience of today's drama, the Suju opera has inevitably faded from the public consumption view. In May 2006, China's first batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists was promulgated, and Suju opera was included (199IV-55). The performance of the 2011 Suju drama *Liu Ru Shi* is an important event in the stage history of the opera since the 21st century. Prior to this, the opera had disappeared from the stage for ten years. With a unique perspective and after repeated polishing by the elite team, *Liu Ru Shi* was elevated as a comeback work, bearing great expectations for the revival of the opera.

## II. UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

In 1645, the second year of Emperor Shunzhi, the southern capital of the Ming dynasty collapsed. Lord Hedong (Liu Rushi) was 28 years old, and Muzhai (Qian Qianyi) was 64 years old. Lord Hedong hoped to die with Muzhai for righteous cause, but the latter refuted ... In 1648, the fifth year of Emperor Shunzhi, Qian was involved in Huang Minqi's case and imprisoned in Nanjing. Thanks to Liu's rescue and mediation, Qian was safe from the misfortune. (Chen Yinque, *The Unofficial Biography of Liu Rushi (II)* [1])

From 1954 to 1964, Chen Yinque, a famous historian, spent 10 years writing *The Unofficial Biography of Liu Rushi* to "commend the spirit of national independence and the thought of freedom". [2] In his works, he deeply sympathizes with and understands the "unique insight and eternal regret" of this woman, thus establishing the basic perspective for contemporary people to pay attention to Liu.

In the opera history, female characters have always been crown jewels. Regarding women, Beauvoir said: "Women are not born, but rather formed gradually. Physically, psychologically, or economically, no destiny can determine the performance image of human women in society. It is the entire civilization that determines the feminine person between men and eunuch." [3] Although women were repressed and despised in real life and forgotten by social ruling thoughts then, women were always under the spotlight on the stage of opera. Generations of playwrights have always devoted great enthusiasm to show their pain, their humiliation, their dissatisfaction and resistance. Especially in the operas after the late Ming Dynasty, the description of the awakening of women's humanity and their life values has almost become a generation wave.

Liu Ming Ten Jiao Jia Bai Yan, Zhu She Wei Sheng Song Hong Zhuang. (This is his evaluation of himself. Mr. Chen, who had been treated with courtesy, suddenly became the target of public criticism. Even his knowledge was no longer popular. As a scholar who had been conceited all his life, this was the heaviest blow! He did two things in ten years. The first is the textual research of *Zaisheng Yuan*, storytelling to the accompaniment of stringed instruments, as the only epic in the Han national literature. The other is to use the textual research method of recurring poetry to proof history to complete the great works of literary history: *Written Record of Marriage Poems Between Qian and Liu*. Both of the great books focus on women!) In the autumn of 1961, when he was writing his book *The Unofficial Biography of Liu Rushi* and professor Wu Mi came to visit from afar, Chen Yinque wrote a poem entitled "*The Answer to Old Friend who came from Chongqing in July to Guangzhou to Ask about My Recent Situation*". The sentence above mentioned is included. In his diary, Wu Mi made the following comments on the academic conception of "Song Hong Zhuang":

Yinque's research on the history and works of "Hong Zhuang" reveals the real situation of politics (Yi Xia) and

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morality (integrity) at that time, which is of profound significance, not idle and romantic behavior... [4]

This is exactly the same as Chen Yinque's confession in text indicating the cause of *The Unofficial Biography of Liu Rushi*:

After browsing through the incomplete poems of the two, I often caught a glimpse of their unique insight and eternal regret, which made people cry. The aspiration that just but temporarily weak force has strong triumphalism, and diction in *Aiyang of Jiuzhang*, even if come from the literati then, should be extended to the original intention to commend the spirit of national independence, and free thought. This is especially true of the young beautiful women who come from brothel, and who love passionately, but vilified by the pedantry of the time. Later generations of frivolous people are deeply deceived by such statement. [5]

Cai Hongsheng takes that "Song Hong Zhuang" is about celebrating independence and freedom. The basic tendency of both "weeping ancients" and "lecturing later generation" is not to be nostalgic, but to face tomorrow. [6]

In the early 1990s, the playwright Zheng Huaixing wrote and published *An Ode to Love*. "With a serious attitude of 'sacrifice', he changed people's single perspective of Liu Rushi and depicted the inner world of Qian Qianyi with great emphasis, so as to find the elegant demeanor of human nature hidden by history." [7] In October 2011, the play was performed in the stage of Suju opera. In 2012, it was renamed *Liu Ru Shi* after major revisions.

Qian Qianyi, an old adherent to the collapsed Ming Dynasty and a man of high moral standing, profound knowledge, and admired by thousands of people, was a model. As a "master of literature", he did two things that made people "shocked": In the 14th year of Emperor Chongzhen (1641), the 60-year-old Qian Qianyi built another garden and officially married the 24-year-old Liu Rushi. It was an astonishing move. "This caused uproar then. Some people publicly denounce his behavior and take him tarnish the reputation of the imperial court and scholar-officials. The spectators gathered bricks and threw them at the boat." [8] The other is that he should have led the way against Qing Dynasty and restored Ming Dynasty, but he took refuge in the Qing court with shame and humiliation. Since then, he has been reviled and lost all his reputation. At this point he no longer showed the past "scholar" demeanor, became desolate and alone. What's worse, the Qing court did not think much of him, and he heard that his wife was calling friends at home, which leads to the thought that she had returned to her old ways. So he resigned in March and went back to his hometown.

The plot of *Liu Ru Shi* started here, and the whole Suju opera was divided into six scenes: the return of the husband, welcome ceremony to the husband, take the blame for her husband, the burial of the husband's clothes, and accompany the husband to face hardships.

Because of the despising for her husband's behavior of treachery, she made friends in Hongdou village, rescued

Huang Yuqi who was injured in the fight against Qing Dynasty and hid him in Wowen Shi. Qian Qianyi returned to his hometown after hearing rumors, only to encounter clansmen Qian Chaoding come to search in the name of "loose and immoral", he severely reprimanded and drove them away. But Liu Rushi, a hard woman, still separated from him. Qian Qianyi, who was neglected, recalled the scene of the West Lake when they promised to be together, and lingering about their quarrel caused by the changing times. Liu Rushi, who valued the old affection, came to Banyetang. Unexpectedly, when the two aftertaste the true feelings of the past, they had another quarrel because of different opinions. Liu overheard Huang Yuqi's talk about Qian Qianyi's "prefer the beauty to country hate, and damage integrity in his later years for love". Deeply moved, she decided to take the blame for her husband and donate money to the fight against Qing Dynasty on his behalf. Qian felt guilty after learning this, knowing that he wronged his wife. He lingered in the month to see his wife carrying a hoe with wine, and making cenotaph for the now him, who no longer ambitious. The tears of revealing mind made Qian finally discover the true affection and love hidden under his wife's cold appearance. The couple talked to each other about the sorrowful past, and reflected on each other, thus reaching a consensus on "Sticking to integrity is no equal to falling with the Ming Dynasty". When Qian Chaoding colluded with Qing soldiers and came to Wowen Shi again, Qian Qianyi resolutely released Huang Yuqi from Banye Tang, next to the Wowen Shi, and took the initiative to admit his guilt. Facing her husband who had regained his vitality, Liu Rushi was willing to accompany him to Nanjing, and she pleaded to the red bean:

Liu Rushi: (taking the cup) red beans, red beans, pear blossoms are too white, peach blossoms too red, plum blossoms bitter solitude, and orchids raffish; only you are fragrant but not kitsch, clear but not aloof, which is the true nature of female. The fall of your flower indicates the arrival of spring, and you cultivate love peas and share the same opinion with the talent. The short life is filled with farewells, and it's lucky to be with you all the time. I hope you spread the love peas, so that those who married for love can brave all difficulties and challenges to be together. And the awe-inspiring integrity is forever floating world! [9]

Without complicated character relationship and turbulent storyline, the playwright employs many plots to shape the couple's emotions of extreme tension and the undulating inner world. There are few characters in the play: an old couple, a naughty boy, a clever girl, an old friend of the Taoist, a disciple of the righteous, and a few unfilial children.

On the surface, the play mainly tells the story of how the famous prostitute Liu Rushi in the late Ming Dynasty inspired his husband and leader of Dong Lin Party, Qian Qianyi, to adhere to the moral integrity of the scholar-official and to restore the Ming Dynasty. Its essence is the call for the redemption of the soul and character of today's intellectuals. Although the main line lies on the love and enmity between Liu and Qian in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the play focuses on the description of Liu,

who, as a national hero, should be respected and admired from the perspective of history, humanities, integrity, and individuality of Chinese female. Through the interpretation of Liu, the audience is encouraged to reappear the Chinese intellectual's insistence on character and integrity facing major issues of principle and materialistic society, and to provoke their thought on the ethical culture of the Chinese nation.

### III. THE POLISH OF THE ELITE TEAM

An elite team composed of first-class directors, top screenwriters, and leading actors gathers to create the play. Zheng Huaixing, state level A scriptwriter, has created more than 30 screenplays such as *Xinting Lei* and *Fu Shan Jin Jing* over the past 30 years. He has won Caoyu Screenplay Award, Wenhua Screenplay Award, and Lao She Literature Award · Excellent Screenplay Award. In his early years, he was equal to Wei Minglun, thus the phrase "Zheng of southern China and Wei of northern", and was honored as one of the "three masters" of Chinese opera in the 1990s. Sources indicate that the young playwright has made his figure in the 1980s:

In the winter of 1986, Li Sheng troupe, a Puxian opera group from Xianyou County, Fujian, was invited to perform in Beijing and presented three new plays to the audience. What is remarkable is that these plays were written by the young playwright Zheng Huaixing. Although the play is a bit laborious (considering language barrier here), it still interests the audience a lot. Whether it is the historical tragedies *Xinting Lei*, *Jin Gong Han Yue* or the modern comedy *Biography of Ugly Little Duck*, they are all facing today. With the help of the interweaving of history and reality, these plays highlight the psychological depiction of the characters, express the playwright's feelings and understanding of real life, and imprint the spirit of the times with quite distinct subject consciousness. [10]

Director Shi Yukun, has directed the Peking opera *Rickshaw Boy*, *Prime Minister Liu Luoguo*, Jin opera *Fu Shan Jin Jing*, etc., and has won Wenhua Award of the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China, Wenhua New Program Prize, Excellence Award of China Stagecraft and the Five-one Project Award of Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China.

The leading actress, Wang Fang, won the Plum Performance Award twice and Wenhua Award. The leading actor Qian Qianyi was played by Zhang Tangbing, National Class-A actor and deputy head of Wuxi opera troupe.

The play presents exquisite audio-visual enjoyment. The whole performance is compact and smooth, with exquisite stage design, lighting, costumes, and props. In music, it not only inherits the tradition, but also boldly innovates. It is accompanied by the traditional instruments including the erhu, zheng (a 21-or 25-stringed plucked instrument in some ways similar to the zither), flute, sheng (a reed pipe wind instrument), and Western instruments like cello, violin, clarinet, and bass. The beautiful music in which the East meets the West made the audience get up and visit the

orchestra pit curiously. Zhang Tangbing, a top actor who plays the leading role, is gentle and elegant, acting naturally and truly. Montage is employed in the play twice to interpret the dream, which conveys profound meaning and beautiful scenery. What is particularly interesting is that the maid in the play speaks soft Suzhou dialect, the boy speaks a unique Changshu language, while the protagonist speaks a nonnative Mandarin with Suzhou accent. The play covers not only Kun opera, but also the charm of Wuxi opera and Shanghai opera, which is tender and delicate. The unique style of the Yangtze River Delta created on the stage is refreshing.

Liu is a native of Wujiang (another statement holds that she comes from Jiaying, and was sold to Shengze, Wujiang as a child); Qian is a native of Changshu. After their marriage, they settled down in Hongdou village, Changshu, where the story Liu Ru Shi took place. The interpretation of their stories in Suju opera seemed fit and interesting. Familiar stories, familiar characters, familiar living environments, and familiar languages suddenly brought their hearts closer. Not only can the nostalgic complex of the older generation of audiences be released, but also the younger generation can understand the excellent local opera through this play, and obtain the enjoyment of beauty and inspiration of thought.

"Suju opera Liu Ru Shi pushed me a big step forward." (Quoted from Wang Fang) [11]. Here is a look at the wonderful performance of the actors.

In the Scene II, Qian Qianyi comes on stage and drove the clansman away, and Liu Rushi appeared again. This is the first time that the two meet after long absence. Both had their own concerns, but nothing could stop the love between the couple. Liu walked hurriedly across the corridor and pavilion, calling out "honey" and came forward to hold his hands. At that moment, she became rational and said: "You do come back!" Then the husband expressed his longing for his wife, saying that he had come back after the court allowed him to resign, braving wind and rain without halting to rest. Hearing this, Liu could not help but choked her voice, and stroked his face with infinite love and compassion. Next, the maid, Xiao Hong said casually, it was because my lord missed madam so much that he forced his way into Wowen Shi. This quickly brought Liu back to her senses. Instantly, all tenderness is suppressed by reason. It occurred to her that her husband had now changed his mind, and that he must not know the secret. She had to force her husband to leave. She did not expect him to break in again. At the moment, Liu played by Wang Fang is really "ruthless". She opened her eyes angrily, determined, and said to him word by word: "To tell you the truth, here is no longer your hidden place for mistress, but mine." After this, she turned back and walked away. After a few steps, she stopped. With sharpness of the eye subdued, she turned her head to listen to her husband's sad departure. Suddenly she turned and ran after him, and stopped at the door. Her infinite loneliness was betrayed by her extended fingertips. In this scene, emotion and reason, love and resentment interweave and change rapidly. But no matter how tough the reason, the emotional line has always been there, carrying Liu's abundant love and deep hope for

her husband. Wang fang's performance is well-measured, rich in layers, clear in rhythm, natural and smooth, and wonderful.

#### IV. HIGH HOPES FOR THE REVIVAL OF SUJU OPERA

Suju opera *Liu Ru Shi* (formerly *An Ode to Love*) premiered at Suzhou Municipal Center of Public Culture and Art on October 10, 2011. In December of the same year, the play became a blockbuster in the Sixth Jiangsu Provincial Theatre Festival, winning many awards such as Excellent Theatre, Excellent Screenwriter, Excellent Director, and Excellent Actor. Later, it participated in the fifth Chinese Kun Opera Festival and the 13th Chinese Opera Festival and won the Excellent Theatre Award. In December 2011, it was listed as one of candidates for Project to the Distillation of the Stage Art in Jiangsu. In 2012, it won the Award of Nomination of Five-one Project of the 8th Spiritual Civilization Construction of Jiangsu Province after major revision. In December 2013, it was selected for the 24th China Shanghai International Arts Festival held in Shanghai Art Theatre, and the two leading actors both won the Best Opera Performance of the Magnolia Award.

Since its debut in October 2011, the print media, including *Journey of Literature and Art*, *China Art News*, *Chinese Theatre*, *Chinese Actors*, *Drama and Film Journey*, *Stage Culture*, *Shanghai Performing*, *Xinhuanet*, *Suzhou Daily*, *Gusu Evening Paper*, and *Urban Commerce* local to Suzhou, and Internet media such as subaonet and Suzhouet, have paid great attention to the play. They not only made a lot of reports and special comments on it, but also published many critiques by art experts. Many viewers have commented on the play through blogs and newspaper supplements. It is believed that the play has a new interpretation and expression of historical figures with a new thinking and vision. With vivid and real characters, it is a drama integrating thought, artistry, and appreciation, in which national consciousness, traditional civilization and the spirit of the times are reflected.

Profound thoughts, mature scripts, excellent actors, appropriate drama types, together with a concerted team, have jointly launched such a beautiful and contemporary stage art for opera stage in the new era, which is inspiring. The strong Suzhou style in the play has changed the long-term sluggish situation of Suju opera, so that the cultural character of the opera as national intangible cultural heritage can be fully manifested. There is no doubt that *Liu Ru Shi* has become an epoch-making work in the development history of Suju opera, and it will naturally become an exemplary work created by the inheritors of the opera in the contemporary era. [12]

Shouldering the great hope of revitalizing Suju opera, *Liu Ru Shi*, "a landmark work in the history of the opera", has been widely praised. However, the play inevitably has some flaws.

The first is that the stage is too realistic, limiting the performance of actors. The stage, lighting, costumes, and props of the play are all delicate and colorful, just like a

movie blockbuster, giving people a beautiful audio-visual experience, which is really in line with public aesthetic now. But one of the scenes was when Qian Qianyi was drunk into a dream.

[In his dream, he and Liu are boating on the West Lake.

[Backstage singing: The surface of the lake in early spring is like a mirror, reflecting sky, light and clouds flashing back and forth. The small boat swings gently, full of tenderness!"]

Liu Rushi says, look! (Singing) Do you like that girl on the shore who has not been betrothed?

Qian Qianyi (singing): There are so many women in the world, but they are not as good as you, who are both a beauty and a talent.

Liu Rushi (singing): As soon as he tells the truth, I'm shy to open my mouth.

Qian Qianyi: Hahaha, the color of peach blossom and human face complement each other, and the peach blossom is so beautiful. The peach blossom is full of vitality against the beauty.

Liu Rushi: What do you love about me?

Qian Qianyi: I love your black hair and white skin.

[Liu Rushi nestled happily in Qian Qianyi's arms.

Qian Qianyi: So, what do you love about me?

Liu Rushi: I love your white hair and black skin.

Qian Qianyi: Honey, I want to marry you with colors flying and the band playing, so that the whole world can be informed of the news.

Liu Rushi: Ah! I am of humble birth, a brothel woman. Are you not afraid of the ridicule of the world, and the obstruction of your kinsmen, if you take me for your wife?

Qian Qianyi: Prosperity and wealth are easy to get, while confidante is difficult to meet. To marry you in my old age is really the greatest gift god has given me. I'm willing to die for this.

Liu Rushi (singing): After searching for many years, I just met a bosom friend today. With the moon and the West Lake as witness, my love lasts forever and ever. (Take out the red bean and give it to him carefully) Here! (reading) "Red berries grow in southern land. How many load in spring the trees!"

Qian Qianyi (reading) "Gather them till full is your hand; They would revive fond memories." "Honey!"

Liu Rushi: Love! (Hugging tightly with Qian Qianyi)

[Behind-the-scenes chorus: "With the moon and the West Lake as witness, my love lasts forever and ever." [13]

Before watching, I personally expected the scene of "I love you with black hair and white skin". As a result, when a ship moves into the stage, the characters sit on it, which is

eye-opening and hilarious. The artistic conception of the West Lake, conveyed by the reflection of sky, light and clouds, and a tiny boat, is ruined by the scene of the boat on the stage. After all, the boat on the stage is no equal to a "leaf boat" on the lake.

Secondly, the music is relatively flat and lacks the popular core vocals. The play is both traditional and innovative in music. It is accompanied by not only the traditional instruments erhu, zheng, flute, sheng, but also cello, violin, clarinet and bass. During the intermission, many spectators got up curiously to visit the orchestra. However, after the performance, although the audience may have a good impression of the music, they cannot remember the impressive sing. And the passage of the sings has an influence that cannot be ignored for the spread of the play, just like the classic *Battle of Wits* for the Peking opera *Sha Jia Bing*.

Third, the costumes of the characters are beautiful, but there is a gap with the actual image of the role. Qian Qianyi once wrote a poem describing Liu, Fang Yan Shu Jing Si Man Man, Nan Guo He Ren Geng Yi Lan. Yi Jie Qian Hua Cui Shu Se, Geng Cai Hong Bi Zhu Chun Pan. Zao Mei Ban Mian Liu Can La, Xin Liu Quan Shen Nai Xiao Han. Zi Ci Feng Guang Chang Jiu Shi, Mo Jiang Feng Yue Deng Xian Kan. [14] According to Chen Yinque, the statement of "Quan Shen Nai Xiao Han" makes sense. Sentence from *Dawn of Spring of Butterflies Linger over Flowers* by Chen Zilong: Gu Tuo Yu Mian, Ren Nai Han Shi Jie (So she took off her tight-fitting clothes to welcome the cold weather), has indicated the cold-resistant of Liu. The record of Liu Rushi by Gu Ling says that Liu is small and neat. The quotation of Taoist Bainiu reveals that in winter, she only wears a coat, but her cheeks are still red, the man standing beside her can feel their own warmth. Speculation about her skill in the bedroom also has to do with her cold tolerance. Liu is petite, and she usually doesn't wear too many clothes to avoid looking bloated. If she wears thin clothes, her body heat is easy to send out. So, people standing next to her will feel their body temperature is high. The cultivation of such habit requires perseverance, so Qian is not only to explain Liu's physical cold tolerance, but also to highlight her perseverance in the face of difficulties. So this sentence has two implications. [15]

According to Shen Qiu's *The Records of Liu Rushi, Prince of Hedong*, "Liu often wore Confucian clothing, and walked through the market, talking with people from all corners." [16] Apparently, Liu is a thin-dressed, cold-resistant woman (It also refers to her spirit of perseverance in the face of difficulties). However, the character in the play is rich and luxurious, which is counter to her historical image (external cold-resistant and inner tenacity).

Although the performance received warm applause at the scene, but some people think that most of the applause is for the actors' appearance and skills, the novelty and chic of the stage, the director's fanciful and wonderful ideas, rather than the story and the characters themselves. There are different opinions on the magnificent stage. Some people praise it for

being beautiful and well-made, while some hold that "opera is an art of poverty" and it should have its unique and concise symbolic aesthetics.

## V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the development of Suju opera, its repertoire has always been dominated by traditional operas, most of which are adapted from Kun opera or other historical legends, and some of which are historical dramas created by themselves, or transplanted and adapted from the excellent repertoire of twin operas. Among them, there are distinctive and long-lasting opera highlights are as follows: *Dou Gong Song Zi*, *Duan Qiao*, and *Zui Gui*, *Chu Lie*, and playlet *Yue Lei Zhao Qin*, the regular plays performed at the reception of domestic and foreign guests. As regards to full-scale drama, there are *The Peach Blossom Fan*, *Romance of the Western Chamber*, *The Story of a Prostitute*, *Wang Shi Peng*, *Bao Zhuang He*, *Jin Yu Yuan*, *Huo Xiao Yu*, *The Phoenix Hairpin*, *The Fifth Maiden* (taken from Wu Geben), all of which are fine-cut plays of high artistic quality. In doing so, some modern dramas were created or adapted. After a decade of silence, Suju opera finally ushered in its own spring. First performed in 2011, the full-scale drama *Liu Ru Shi* has received a great response and is widely recognized as a work of revival of Suju opera. The play has created a distinctive female image of the Suju opera — Liu Rushi, a headstrong prostitute. What conveys from the lyrics, music, performance, and stage design of the play is both the artistic achievements of Suju opera in the 21st century, and the innovation and attempts of the opera in its revival.

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