

A Seemed-Like Love Story - The Revolutionary Nature of *Feng Yun Er Nv*

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ABSTRACT

The 1935 Shanghai left-wing film *Feng Yun Er Nv* used the story model of triangle love, in which the choice of the hero reflected his patriotic political orientation, and as well the appeal to anti-aggression fight that the filmmakers aimed to convey. By scrutiny towards the political background and the history of the script adaptation, features and reasons behind this story model were found. Though using a form of love story, the film itself shows the obscuration of the love narration, which is a result of strengthened revolutionary narration and inharmonic script adaptation. As a result, *Feng Yun Er Nv* is merely a seemed-like triangle love story that virtually serves to be a revolutionary discourse. Examining the text-making process of *Feng Yun Er Nv* with its specific historical context, this paper offers a new perspective of understandings towards this film.

Keywords: *Feng Yun Er Nv*, love narration, revolutionary narration, Shanghai left-wing film

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1935, a left-wing film called *Feng Yun Er Nv*, as well known as *Children of Troubled Times* in English, was screened in Shanghai. The film was directed by Xu Xingzhi, and the script was written by Tian Han, Xia Yan and Sun Shiyi, all known as left-wing and patriotic literary workers at that time. The film itself was not a hit, but later its theme song, *March of the Volunteers*, became famous and was selected as the national anthem of the People's Republic of China, which expands the publicity of the film. Yet, the film has long caused controversy throughout the cinema history. Praised by several critics though, it has been seen as a "malnourished work" by the original writer Tian Han and the director Xu Xingzhi, for the thin plot and character settings, and the wrongly-laid emphasis on the fickle nature of life [1, 2]. It also received criticisms by other scholars on the stereotypical character settings and hasty anti-imperialist slogans [3]. Basically, the authority of the national anthem and the artistic imperfection of the film create a tension that polarizes criticism.

The main purpose of this paper is to display *Feng Yun Er Nv* under the context of the 1930s Shanghai Left-wing films, study it as a representative narrative model that combines love narration and political appeal into one, seeing from it the success and failure of this attempt, and as well the reasons behind.

2. POLITICAL CONTEXT

It is common to see formulaic female images of different classes in Shanghai left-wing films in 1930s, and under this circumstance, *Feng Yun Er Nv* serves as a representative case of the Shanghai left-wing films in 1930s. During 1932 to 1935, several films aimed at discussing woman issues emerged (all directed by male filmmakers), in which a usual narrative method is to divide urban women into several types, and end the film by letting one of the woman figures win out in both narration and ideology. This narrative method appeared in *Three Modern Women* (1932), *Cry of Women* (1933), *Three sisters* (1934), *New Woman* (1935) and so on [4]. Similarly, *Feng Yun Er Nv* followed this narrative approach, added in factors of romance, portraying both a self-centered bourgeois woman and a patriotic proletarian woman, and the hero's political orientation of fighting for anti-aggression aligns with his final turning towards the proletarian woman.

The story took place after the September 18th Incident, in which the Japanese army attacked Shenyang, and later occupied the three provinces of the northeast China and set up the puppet regime of Manchukuo. Because of the war was happening there, thousands of the original inhabitants in the northeast China left their hometown and drifted to other places for living. Many of

them came down south and settled in Shanghai, a prosperous city that could accommodate so much people and offer countless opportunities for them to make a living. The hero Xin Baihua and the proletarian heroine A Feng was one of those people who drifted to Shanghai with patriotic fervor, but found themselves easy to be lost in the city full of dangerous charm. Shanghai at that time, was a semi-colonized city crowded with non-local residents who accounted for more than 80% of the total population, including both domestic and foreign nationals. For more than half a century, concessions of France, Britain, the United States and other countries was established there, triggering rapid economic growth and producing an all-embracing environment of a mixed culture. East and west, old and new, it was a place where different ideas collided and unprecedented things emerged. The inclusive environment of Shanghai aligns with the main characters' hazy state of mind, serving as a platform for them to make liberal choice of their own life paths.

As mentioned above, the story of *Feng Yun Er Nv* conveys a transition in political orientation through a choice in triangle love, and this transition implies the core concept that the filmmaker tried to convey. The hero Xin Baihua first fell in love with a beautiful rich young lady Ms. Shi. This bourgeois woman's beauty was so stunning that in a poem Xin described her as "the daughter of Eve, the envoy of Satan" who has "eyes of a wolf". Ms. Shi has profound knowledges of poetry and art, and in the meantime a relatively pessimistic attitude towards life, believing that life is like a strange dream in which the good things fade quickly like the smoke rings do. She sheltered Xin from the hunt for revolutionaries, taking him to travel north to Qingdao, and finally they broke up for their divergent life pursuit. The other heroine is an artless girl called A Feng, whose mother died in the beginning of the story, and then by chance got sponsored to go to school by Xin and his friend. Later, they were separated because Xin's friend got captured and Xin went on hiding. A Feng was drifted into a music and dance troupe, coincidentally meet Xin again when making a performance tour in Qingdao. The patriotic song she sang on the stage strengthened Xin's resolution to fight against imperial aggression, and later after receiving the last letter of his sacrificed friend, he decided to join the voluntary army against Japanese aggression in the northeast China, where A Feng and him finally reunited with each other in the end of the story. Xin's shift in love, from towards a hedonistic bourgeois lady to a proletarian woman who dedicated herself to the patriotic movement, seems to indicate that once he was lost from the pleasure of bourgeois life style and romance in the private realm, but then he found his way back to his enthusiasm of patriotic fight and the collective cause of anti-imperial aggression. Through the change in Xin's state of mind, the filmmakers conveyed their call upon the patriotic

spirit, as well as the disapproval of romantic love in private sphere and hedonistic life style.

Interestingly, though, by the design of plot, it is implied that the anti-aggression spirit aligns with proletarians, rather than bourgeoisie. The bourgeois life style was set up as the opposite of the anti-aggression patriotism. It needs to be noticed that these ideas was not initially antagonistic to each other, but made to be in this way under specific history context, according to the domestic political situation in the early 1930s' China. After the Japan invasion into the northeast China, the government of Chiang Kai-Shek took the strategy of non-resistance to the Japanese invasion into northeast China, for Chiang decided to first clean up the domestic Communist Party and then start fighting against Japanese Army. At the same time, under the siege and suppression of the Nanjing government, the domestic Communist Party appealed against Japanese aggression, in line with the patriotic enthusiasm of the public. *Feng Yun Er Nv*, produced by Shanghai Tongpian Film Company, a company that is sponsored by the Communist Party of China, indicated the political stance of the Communist Party before 1936, which is both anti-Japanese and anti-Chiang. In film, the disapproval of the bourgeois hedonism reflects both the hindrance of this lifestyle to the Anti-Japanese revolution and the communist camp's attack on the bourgeois foundation of the Nationalist government.

3. THE SCRIPT ADAPTATION HISTORY

Taking closer look into the history of the script adaptation, more clues relating to the film's revolutionary narrative features could be found. The very first version of the story was a novel written by Tian Han, originally named *Rebirth of the Phoenix*. As Tian Han got captured into jail by the Nationalist government after he handed in the draft, Xia Yan and other coworkers in the Tongpian Company took over his work and adapted the novel into a film script [5]. By comparing these two versions of the story, tension between the narration of revolution and romance could be traced. Xia Yan's work was mainly to simplifying character settings and removing non-revolutionary colors in the plot settings. For example, in the original novel, Xin was a total love captive of Ms. Shi, and he left her primarily out of the jealousy towards her flirtation with another young man and the hurt by her change of heart. But in the later film script, Xin was always dissatisfied with Ms. Shi's only concerning about her private happiness and neglecting the crisis-facing country and suffered people. He frowned whenever she took out a small mirror to admire herself in it, and his leaving this charming bourgeois lady seemed easy. In other words, Xin's subjectivity is strengthened, for his choice of the anti-imperialism path becomes a result only driven by his own strong patriotic passion, rather than a mixture with certain degrees of frustration in love. As

mentioned above, the bourgeois values represented by Ms. Shi here is showed as a hedonistic and self-centered lifestyle, which is criticized by the film-makers of *Feng Yun Er Nv*, and is what Xin meant to abandon. If Xin indulges too much into the romantic relationship with Ms. Shi, the purity of his mission to choose the anti-imperial aggression path will be damaged, thus weakening the revolutionary narration of the story.

At the same time, the romantic color between Xin and A Feng in the first novel version is weakened by the script writers. In the original scenario, A Feng came from somewhere near the Great Wall in Hebei province, which is connected with the recurring imagery of the Great Wall throughout the story, and also adds coincidental romantic color to their love because Xin had written a series of poems about the Great Wall. Also in the novel, a young man once suggested that a poet's biggest task is to encourage people to protect the Great Wall, rather than to praise the romance happening under the Great Wall, which serves as an implication of the romance between Xin and A Feng. However, Xia Yan changed A Feng's hometown to Liaoning, a province in the northeast China far away from the Great Wall, and deleted the line "romance happening under the Great Wall" [6], consequently cut down the romantic color of Xin and A Feng's love.

As analyzed above, *Feng Yun Er Nv* conveyed political appeal in the form of a love story, while its own love narrative was drastically curbed in the service of the revolutionary narrative. Through Xin's easy abandonment of his love of Mrs. Shi, and the comrade-like but flat affection between A Feng and him, it could be seen that the model of love story used by *Feng Yun Er Nv* seems merely a skin, while the political thought behind is the only-existing discourse. However, the tension between romantic love narration and revolutionary narration in *Feng Yun Er Nv* does not directly indicate that the romantic love in private sphere is in conflict with the proletarian revolution narration, but rather reflects the disharmony between the original work and the adapted version. Tian Han's original work sets up a framework of a love story, in which the love between Xin and the two women is coincidentally romantic, and Xin's own devotion to love highlights the strong romantic color of the story, which is consistent with Tian Han's "dream making" style of writing [7]. Xia Yan, acknowledged as cool and acute in article, changed some details of the story to make it more realistic and revolutionary, but did not change the general framework of the original work, in which the relatively thin storyline and characters retained [8]. And at the same time Xia Yan enhanced the political discourse by crowding out the narrative space of love, causing the love narration of the same volume becomes pale and far-fetched.

4. CONCLUSION

Feng Yun Er Nv carried out a narrative mode that transports political appeal through love story. In this mode, two formulaic women figures were set to symbolizing two different political paths that the hero was placed with, the bourgeois woman for self-centered hedonistic life style, and the proletarian woman for anti-aggression patriotic movement. Through the character and plot settings, it could be perceived that the filmmakers expected the audience to connect proletarian with patriotic and bourgeois with the opposite, which does not necessarily relate to each other, but developed to be in this way under the context of the non-resistance strategy towards Japanese invasion and the civil war conducted by the Chiang government, which put Communist Party into the highly anticipated position of anti-imperial aggression. And this film, made by Tongpian Company sponsored by Communist Party of China, conveyed the Communist Party's patriotic appeal, and in a slight degree, its attack towards the bourgeois basis of the Nationalist Party. The film becomes a more complex text after taking the adaptation history of script into account. Tian Han's original manuscript is a novel with more love narrative and romantic color. However, Xia Yan and his coworkers' adaptation strengthened the revolutionary narration, making it more convincing, while weakened the love narration, causing the story seemed pale and stiff because of the unbalanced frame structure. That is to say, the frame remained as a major love story, while the decreased content of love narration could hardly support the frame. As a result, inharmony occurred, and relative criticism emerged.

In conclusion, the frame of love story in *Feng Yun Er Nv* serves as a tool of transmitting political ideas, while the attempt can be considered rather unsuccessful, for the artistic imperfection of the love narration influences the whole result.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Qingyang Zhou.

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