

The Plight and Struggle of Female Characters in Classical Drama: A Case Study of Feng Suzhen in Huangmei Opera Nv Fu Ma (The Female Royal Member)

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Abstract. Attention to women's survival and development has been reflected in various aspects of society in different forms in China, including classical dramatic works such as Nv Fu Ma. Currently, some studies, based on plot analysis, classify the Huangmei Opera The Female Royal Member as a comedy. However, when considered from the perspective of its female characters, the tragic undertones beneath the comedic surface become visible. This paper will employ a feminist lens to further explore the tragic core of Nv Fu Ma. Utilizing the method of literature review, this study investigates the plight faced by the character Feng Suzhen, a daughter of an elite family in the feudal era, namely the materialized constraints of feudal ethical codes represented by the "boudoir" and the ideology of "distinction between men and women." Simultaneously, it highlights Feng Suzhen's arduous struggle for marital autonomy, specifically manifested in her cross-dressing as a man to "rescue her beloved Mr. Li. Lang." Through examining Feng Suzhen's rescue mission, this paper reveals the contradiction between feudal ethical codes and marital autonomy as embodied by elite women in the feudal era, thereby contributing to research that showcases women's resistance under feudalism in regional opera from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Feminism, The Female Royal Member, The Woman Who Married a Princess, Feng Suzhen

1. Introduction

Contemporary Chinese film and television productions frequently feature "big female lead" narratives. The female independence and development portrayed in these works provoke contemplation. Behind this lies societal reflection and conjecture regarding women's survival and development, as well as expectations and prospects for female agency.

Within feminist research and development, the meaning of "woman" is an unavoidable theme. Simone de Beauvoir defines woman as "a human being in search of values within a world of values." This "human being in search of values" points to the essence and significance of women at the social level, indicating that woman is not an appendage but independent individual individuals with subjective consciousness, capable of participating in society and transforming the world. However, such independent individuals were often regarded as the "Other," distinct from the male

subject, within the social life of specific historical conditions. This is not biologically determined but "a becoming" [1]. Factors facilitating this "becoming" included contemporary social customs, family traditions, etc., which compelled women to identify with and perform the role of an appendage crafted for them within society. With the deepening and development of women's studies, female consciousness and its awakening have also become crucial aspects of the meaning of womanhood. Female consciousness emphasizes observing the world from a female perspective, understanding female physical and psychological characteristics, and recognizing one's own value and needs within society [2]. Such consciousness highlights women's subjectivity and agency in social life—no longer viewing women from society's perspective, but viewing women from women's perspective.

The portrayal of female characters exhibiting wisdom and strength is not unique to modern works; it is also evident in past classical dramatic works—such as *The Female Royal Member* in Huangmei Opera. Huangmei Opera, a Chinese regional opera and a typical representative of folk theater, draws from folk wisdom and expresses the people's imagination of life [3]. The Huangmei Opera piece *The Female Royal Member* is adapted from "a rare script" within the Huangmei repertoire called *Double Rescue* [4]. It tells the story of Miss Feng Suzhen in feudal society who, to save her beloved, takes the imperial examination in his place, unexpectedly achieves the top rank (Zhuangyuan), is consequently chosen as the royal consort, skillfully navigates the imperial court, and ultimately reunites with her beloved. The classical opera film *The Female Royal Member* (Director: Liu Qiong) was released in China in 1959; in 1978, the Huangmei Opera script for *Nv Fu Ma* was revised; in 2002, an extended television drama adaptation, *New Female Royal Member* (Directors: Zhang JJiancheng Zhang, Cao Rong Cao), aired in China [4]. As the protagonist, Feng Suzhen, through plot elements such as cross-dressing to take the exam and save her beloved, achieving first rank and becoming the consort, and her clever defense before the emperor, embodies an image of unwavering loyalty, intelligence, and courage. Yet, subtle details also reveal her "coquettishness" and "charm" [5].

Judging by its ending, people often call it a "comedy" due to its "happy ending reunion" [6]. However, this reunion might be the creators' response to audience expectations, behind which lies a contrast between reality and desire, imbuing the "reunion" ending itself with a tragic hue [7]. In *The Female Royal Member*, Feng Suzhen displays personal intelligence and charm, but, at the same time, simultaneously, we cannot ignore the implied helplessness and sorrow behind her actions within the context of a feudal era could not be ignored—physical delicacy, lack of agency in marriage, the necessity of cross-dressing to participate in the imperial examinations, the nature of her wishes after achieving success... This is not only the inescapable fate of the character Feng Suzhen but also the reality for countless women in the feudal era.

Based on this, [this paper, based on a feminist perspective, and starting from the character Feng Suzhen in *The Female Royal Member*, explores the survival dilemmas and struggles of elite women in feudal times from the character Feng Suzhen.] There are This paper is divided into two parts in this paper: the plight of the feudal era, namely feudal ethical codes, and the struggle, namely marital autonomy. The section on feudal ethical codes will analyze the materialized constraint of the boudoir and the ideology of "distinction between men and women." The section on the struggle for marital autonomy will discuss cross-dressing as the form of struggle, cross-dressi, rescuing Mr. Li ng, asand the content of the struggle., "rescuing Li Lang."

This paper will present a fuller image of this female character's core and further explain the tragic core of *Nv Fu Ma*.

2. Plight—feudal ethical codes

Although women's power and status were once secured in the distant matrilineal clan society, with the development of productive forces and adjustments in economic relations between men and women, men's role in society became prominent and gradually replaced women's position in production and life. Consequently, women's status gradually declined [8]. In the feudal era, women facing this decline were confronted with increasing social demands and norms specifically designed for them. These demands and norms gradually integrated into traditional ethical codes, becoming ideologies and means to restrict women in the feudal era. Specifically, feudal ethical codes systematically disciplined women through spatial segregation, behavioral norms, and moral indoctrination. For example, Examples include the moral teachings of Admonitions for Women was conducted (Han Dynasty), legally mandated chastity (Qing Dynasty), and the belief in the "three cardinal guides" ("the ethical norms of old China") was prevalent from the Song Dynasty to Qing Dynasty, which likes —particularly "the husband mastersguides the wife"—prevalent from the Song Dynasty onwards [8. 9]. These restrictions permeated all aspects of society across time. This permeation was undoubtedly terrifying—it could condition women in the feudal context to habitually "take women at a lower state of than men", thereby losing their consciousness to resist. Faced with the impending dissolution of her engagement, Feng Suzhen could not decide on the procedure but could only say: "Li Lang, you must be resolute, Feng Suzhen will never despise your poverty" [4,10].

Although *Nv Fu Ma* (Female Royal Member) is an adaptation, it retains the demands and restrictions of feudal ethical codes on Feng Suzhen from the original play—the boudoir and the concept of “distinction between men and women.” Specifically, the boudoir physically confined women's bodies, while the concept of 'distinction between men and women' further deprived women of their subjectivity in social relations. Together, they implicitly pointed to the situation of women occupying a "non-person" status in the feudal era.

2.1. The boudoir

Feudal ethical codes imposed strict regulations and limitations on the actions of elite women [8], one of the most obvious being the boudoir. The boudoir was the living quarters for elite women before marriage [11]. In *The Female Royal Member*, phrases like "body of a QianJin (Qianjin means Lady, the direct meaning is thousand gold)" and "seldom descend from the boudoir" serve as reminders for Feng Suzhen not to forget the rules she must abide by as a young lady. Precisely because an elite woman is a "body of a Qianjin," precious and fragile, she should be hidden within the "boudoir," avoiding harm or being seen and coveted by others. Using "Qianjin thousand gold" to describe the body signifies both familial value placed on a daughter and potentially commodifies the identity of the elite woman, distinguishing her from others, especially commoners and slaves regarded as "worthless as grass," perhaps prompting her to "voluntarily" adhere to ethical codes and "rightfully" confine herself to the boudoir, not easily seen by others, let alone participate in labor. This likely resulted in them having less practical life wisdom, even if they possessed rich cultural knowledge. In the first and second acts, Feng Suzhen's information comes mainly from her maid, Chunhong, who also guides Feng Suzhen at critical moments. Upon hearing of Li Zhaoting's misfortune, Feng Suzhen, having no means herself, seeks help from Chunhong, who suggests providing aid to support Li Zhaoting; when Li Zhaoting is falsely accused, it is Chunhong who hints at cross-dressing to appeal by citing "Hua Mulan joining the army in place of her father." Furthermore, a limited range of activity may have directly led to delicate physical constitutions. In

the 1959 film version of *The Female Royal Member*, Feng Suzhen tires more easily compared to her maid Chunhong while traveling to the capital.

2.2. Distinction between men and women

The restrictions of feudal ethical codes extended beyond this to the "distinction between men and women." This "distinction" not only created distance in normal interaction between women and men but also differentiated their social lives and perspectives. On one hand, as a woman, Feng Suzhen needed to maintain distance from men, even her own fiancé. In the first act, even upon learning that her beloved Li Zhaoting, whom she had not seen for seven years, was visiting, Feng Suzhen "wants to go but stops," unwilling to descend from her embroidered tower, solely because "men and women are distinct, though close, they are worlds apart" [4]. What held Feng Suzhen back was not a few steps but the upbringing expected of the Feng family's daughter and the restraint an elite woman needed to maintain. On the other hand, the "distinction between men and women" in social life likely led to different perspectives on the same issues. As the daughter of a wealthy family, had she not encountered the humiliation of her beloved and the forced remarriage into the Liu family, she would have been expected to serve her husband and raise children, spending the rest of her life thus. She could not take the imperial examinations, let alone participate in court politics. However, Feng Suzhen's brother, Feng Yimin (formerly Feng Shaoying) "is a man, he can travel far and wide" [4]. Different life experiences led them to have different considerations regarding Feng Suzhen's cross-dressing and achieving the top rank. From Feng Suzhen's perspective, cross-dressing to go to the capital and take the exam was a necessary act to save Li Zhaoting, a thought process based on practicality. Whereas Feng Yimin, as a former top graduate (Zhuangyuan) and an imperial inspector with rich political experience, viewed cross-dressing and "taking the exam under a false name as a crime of deceiving the emperor," a terrifying act that endangered one's life—a consideration based on applicability. As a woman, Feng Suzhen lacked, and could not have, political experience, and thus could not possess Feng Yimin's political sensitivity. Women were confined to the home, gradually becoming disconnected from society. Over time, women became "helplessly skilled in emotions, and because they value emotions, they are willing to be so" [12]. Love is the source of Feng Suzhen's actions, and thus valuing love above all, even life, is understandable. Therefore, the political consequences of participating in the imperial examinations, which selected court officials, might not have been the primary consideration for a boudoir woman focused on saving her beloved.

3. Struggle in the feudal era—marital autonomy

Marriage was regarded as the primary vocation for women in the feudal era, and it was not easy for Feng Suzhen, as a woman, to master her own marriage. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" [1]. In other words, women needed to conform to and satisfy societal expectations. Feudal society attributed women's value and ultimate destination to marriage [12]. The marriages of elite women were tools for maintaining family interests; in the feudal era, they could not decide their own marriages [7]. In *The Female Royal Member*, the daughter Feng Suzhen's marriage must bring value to the Feng family, while her personal wishes are insignificant. Such situations were not uncommon in feudal patriarchal society. Women occupied a "subjugated" position within social and family ethics, and those who are dominated find it difficult to decide their own marriages [8]. During Feng Suzhen's first engagement, although she had feelings for Li Zhaoting, it still required the initiative of Feng Suzhen's birth mother to finalize the engagement. This was because adhering to "parental orders and matchmaker's words" was the prerequisite for marriage at that time. Similarly, regarding

the remarriage into the Liu family, Feng Shunqing and his wife did not need to consult Feng Suzhen's wishes to arrange her marriage again. Defying "parental orders" could lead to "punishment and ostracization," as it would bring shame upon the close-knit relational network, including the family [13]. Precisely because of this, the resistance of female characters in classical drama against the transgressions of feudal ethical codes and the duties of arranged family marriages is all the more shocking and moving.

To master her own marriage within the passive feudal era, Feng Suzhen cross-dressed as a man to go to the capital and take the exam, solely seeking the opportunity and power to save Li Zhaoting. Essentially, this was a struggle action, with marital autonomy at its core, taking the form of cross-dressing and the content of "rescuing Li Lang".

3.1. Cross-dressing

Cross-dressing was Feng Suzhen's clever strategy to utilize the ethical codes to break through their limitations. Clothing naturally conveys information about the wearer in a non-verbal manner, avoiding unnecessary controversy [14]. Wearing male attire made Feng Suzhen's travels appear normal in the eyes of others—almost no one would be curious about a young man's journey. Furthermore, cross-dressing is often seen as a way to access male privileges [14]. Indeed, Feng Suzhen's male attire and adoption of the "Li Zhaoting" male identity granted her unprecedented convenience.

First, she gained greater freedom of movement, allowing her to break through the "confinement" of the boudoir and shift from passively awaiting news to actively creating rescue opportunities. Based on Prime Minister Liu Wenju's aria in the third act and Feng Suzhen's address to Liu Wenju as "a (respected master)" in the fourth act, after Feng Suzhen and Chunhong arrived in the capital from Xiangyang, Feng Suzhen, under the identity of "Li Zhaoting," became a disciple of Liu Wenju. This move not only aided Feng Suzhen's exam journey but also secured future conveniences for "Li Zhaoting" in official circles. Simultaneously, she could receive guests as the host, confronting problems directly, without having to retreat due to "distinction between men and women." In the fourth act, facing visits from Prime Minister Liu Wenju and Inspector Feng Yimin, Feng Suzhen, as the top graduate "Li Zhaoting," went to the front hall to receive them.

Second, Feng Suzhen gained eligibility to participate in national political activities. In the feudal dynasty depicted in *The Female Royal Member*, achieving top rank in the imperial examinations and having one's name listed on the golden roll were experiences and honors reserved for men. In the feudal era, "a woman without talent is virtuous" was a common consensus, and Feng Suzhen was ensnared by this; she could not strive for wealth and power on her own [8]. Even though Feng Suzhen had studied in the capital, her talents could only remain hidden while she resided in the boudoir, ultimately to be deployed in serving her husband and raising children, certainly not in the examination hall, and never recorded in history. As a woman, desiring wealth, honor, and historical fame could only be achieved through her husband's "promotion leading to her being conferred the title of Lady of Honor" [12]. This also meant she "could only serve as an auxiliary to men's political careers," not the protagonist; in other words, she could only exercise her talents from behind a man, unknown to others [12]. Feng Suzhen's female identity meant she was easily not accepted by the power structure. Feng Suzhen was clearly aware of this, even accepting it willingly. She took the exam and became the top graduate, "not for fame" nor "for high office," but only to "rescue Li Lang." Simultaneously, she wanted to give the honor and future of the "Zhuangyuan" to Li Zhaoting.

Although cross-dressing became a crucial step for successful rescue, it also added another layer of tragic color to *Nv Fu Ma*. Superficially, Feng Suzhen utilized a male identity, conforming to the

privileges afforded to men by ethical codes and bridging the normative gender gap through an act of 'deceiving the emperor,' yet she did not completely escape the ideology of "woman as appendage." As Ye and Wu state, no matter how ingenious Feng Suzhen's resistance, it never allowed her to escape the influence of feudal patriarchy [11]. This tragic color precisely illustrates the limitation of feudal women's resistance—they could not directly negate the ethical codes but could only circuitously strive for rights through 'disguise.'

3.2. Rescuing Li Lang (Mr. Li, pointing to Li Zhaoting)

Feng Suzhen's success lies not only in successfully rescuing Li Zhaoting and marrying him but also in successfully asserting control over her own marriage within feudal society and changing her destiny through her own efforts. In classical drama, women who fight to protect their love exhibit remarkable willpower and consciousness of struggle [7]. "A perfect conjugal bliss with Li Lang" being Feng Suzhen's life pursuit, motivated her to undertake a series of actions to "rescue Li Lang." The phrase "rescue Li Lang" appears in Feng Suzhen's dialogue in five out of the seven acts of the entire play, [appearing a total of ten times (see Table 1)]. These ten instances consistently emphasize Feng Suzhen's motivation and, to varying degrees, drive the plot development.

Table 1. Statistics of Feng Suzhen's "Rescue Li Lang" utterances

Instance Mark	Act Occurred	Purpose	Action	Effect and Impact
First	Act 1	To help Li Zhaoting overcome difficulties	Gives Li Zhaoting gold and silver jewelry (her birth mother's relics)	Deepens emotional bond with Li Zhaoting; foreshadows Li Zhaoting's subsequent false accusation
Second	Act 2	To rescue Li Zhaoting from prison	Assumes "Li Zhaoting" identity, cross-dresses, goes to capital for exam	Introduces the subsequent plot of achieving top rank and being chosen as consort
Third	Act 4	Believes her Zhuangyuan status can save Li Zhaoting	Expresses joy through speech and song	Great joy leads to the subsequent "great sorrow" of being chosen as consort
Fourth	Act 4	Continuation of the expression of joy and belief in her ability to save		
Fifth	Act 4	Believes her brother has the ability to rescue Li Zhaoting	Pleads with brother Feng Yimin to rescue Li Zhaoting	Feng Yimin agrees to rescue
Sixth	Act 4	Fears being punished and unable to rescue Li Zhaoting	(Expressed through speech)	Demonstrates sincere love for Li Zhaoting
Seventh	Act 5	Dares not reveal her gender to the Princess after being chosen as consort	Anxious, unable to sleep past the fourth watch, talks to herself	Princess notices something amiss and overhears Feng Suzhen's soliloquy, leading to Feng's confession
Eighth	Act 5	Hopes for Princess's understanding despite fear of punishment; seeks	Explains the whole story	Successfully gains the Princess's trust and support, facilitating successful exoneration before the emperor for herself and Li Zhaoting
Ninth	Act 5	Princess's support to save herself and Li Zhaoting		
Tenth	Act 6	After being exonerated and named Princess, expects the Emperor to rescue the still imprisoned Li Zhaoting	Reminds the Emperor promptly that Li Zhaoting is still imprisoned	Successfully rescues Li Zhaoting, leading to marriage

Among these, the first instance of "rescuing Li Lang" is the foundation upon which the entire story unfolds. When Feng Suzhen learns that her father, Feng Shunqing is pressuring the destitute Li Zhaoting to break off the engagement, she asks Chunhong to help her find a way to save Li Zhaoting. Here, Feng Suzhen's act of "rescuing Li Lang" is giving Li Zhaoting gold and silver jewelry from her birth mother's relics. This action, in terms of character shaping, demonstrates Feng Suzhen's unreserved, lifelong commitment to Li Zhaoting. However, in terms of plot, it significantly contributes to Li Zhaoting being falsely accused later.

The second instance of "rescuing Li Lang" is a key link in the story. Feng Suzhen's three actions—assuming the name "Li Zhaoting," cross-dressing as a man, and going to the capital to take the exam—all become core factors triggering conflicts in the subsequent story. Assuming the name "Li Zhaoting" becomes the opportunity to resolve the issue of royal face concerning the Princess marrying the female consort "Li Zhaoting"—if Feng Suzhen could also be recognized as a Princess and marry Li Zhaoting, to the common people, it would still be the Princess marrying the new top graduate Li Zhaoting. Cross-dressing leads to Feng Suzhen being mistaken for a man, achieving top rank, and being chosen as consort. Going to the capital to take the exam is the nodal point of the

story's development; without it, the above events would not occur. Therefore, for The Female Royal Member, these three are closely interconnected, indispensable to each other and to the story.

The tenth instance of "rescuing Li Lang" is Feng Suzhen's most successful achievement of her goal to "rescue Li Lang," ultimately enabling her to marry Li Zhaoting and achieve conjugal bliss. In terms of outcome, Feng Suzhen changed her destiny: instead of waiting in the boudoir to marry into the Liu family as the wife of the Fifth Young Master, she persisted in her own choice regarding marriage and unexpectedly became the emperor's adopted daughter, forming a sisterly bond with the Princess.

4. Conclusion

Feng Suzhen's actions to rescue her husband elucidate a contradiction embodied by elite women in the feudal era—the conflict between feudal ethical codes and marital autonomy. From a feminist perspective, the elite woman Feng Suzhen suffered under feudal ethical codes; she was confined to the boudoir, seldom allowed to descend; the phrase "distinction between men and women" not only forced her to retreat from her beloved but also barred her from participating in broader social activities, limiting her perspective on the consequences of her actions. Her strategy of cross-dressing was an ingenious move within the constraints of these codes, granting her the convenience of movement and eligibility for political participation, constituting the key to successfully "rescuing Li Lang," yet also representing another manifestation of the play's tragic undertones. Nevertheless, in a feudal era where women occupied a dominated position within the family, Feng Suzhen dared to fight for her own marital autonomy and change her future through her own efforts. It is precisely within this heavy historical context that Feng Suzhen's wisdom and courage shine exceptionally bright, which constitutes the charm of Feng Suzhen as an outstanding female character in Huangmei Opera.

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