

The Promise: Re-writing Romantic Archetypes

By: Ya-chen Chen

In *The Promise*, writer/director Chen Kaige digests, combines, sinicizes,ⁱ enriches, problematizes, and rewrites the romantic archetypes of Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beautyⁱⁱ (Chow 39; Hou). Qingcheng is the sinicized Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White whose beauty conquers the city. Her name also reminds Chinese viewers of Lady Li's beauty and her love story with Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (156-87 B.C.) as depicted in Li Yannian's poem. I argue that the stories of Snow White and *The Promise* seem to give women more freedom to interact with different men, to compare and contrast them, and to choose their "Princes Charming." I contend that in the story of Snow White, the seven dwarfs are not merely physically shorter than Prince Charming but also "defeated" and thus "dwarfed" by him in the competition for Snow White. In *The Promise*, male characters Duke Wuhuan and General Guangming are not simply physically "killed" or "dead," but also "defeated" by the slave Kunlun and thus "die" in their competition with Kunlun for Qingcheng. Kunlun "wins" and therefore is "alive" at the end of the competition for Qingcheng with Wuhuan and Guangming. This is perhaps Chen Kaige's cinematic problematization and "proletarian revolution" of the archetype that the stories of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Lady Li in Li Yannian's poem share: the archetype that aristocrats or men with higher social status always win the women they want.

Qingcheng: The Chinese Cinderella That Conquers the City

Qingcheng is a Chinese version of Cinderellaⁱⁱⁱ (Lang 96-104; Gallehugh 17-24; Jameson 74). Her name, Qingcheng, denotes glamour and allure. Literally, *qingcheng* means to defeat the city; metaphorically, in this context, it refers to a pretty woman whose beauty conquers the whole city.

"Qingcheng" is a name that derives from a famous *yüefu* poem by Li Yannian in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), as well as the well-known love story of Emperor Wu and Lady Li. Li Yannian, as Emperor Wu's royal musician, wrote a poem about his beautiful sister and put it to music:

Beifang you jiaren
Jueshi er duli
Yigu qing ren cheng
Zaigu qing ren guo
Ning bu zhi qingcheng yu qingguo
Jiaren nan zai de

According to Hans H. Frankel's English translation, this poem describes how Li Yannian's sister is so attractive that one would prefer the beauty of Li Yannian's sister to a city or country of men:

In the North there is a beautiful woman,
Unique, Unequal in the world.

With one glance she conquers a city of men,
With another glance a country of men.
Don't you know? A city and a country conquering
Beauty cannot be found again. (Frankel 256)

Because of this poem, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty fell in love with Li Yannian's sister and turned her into a royal concubine. *Qingcheng qingguo*, the phrase that describes how beautiful Lady Li is in the poem, gradually became a popular phrase to emphasize how attractive a woman can be.

“Qingcheng” is a name that indirectly equates Goddess Manshen's sorcery with the magic power of Cinderella's godmother. While Goddess Manshen turns a poor, starved, and dirty girl in the battlefield into a woman whose beauty defeats a city or country of men in *The Promise*, Cinderella's godmother transforms Cinderella from a poor and mistreated girl in her stepmother's house to an extraordinarily enchanting and adorable princess in glass slippers who dances with her “Prince Charming” in the luxurious ballroom of the royal palace:

[Cinderella's] godmother only just touched her with her wand, and, at the same instant, her clothes were turned into cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels. This done, she gave her a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the whole world. (Perrault 18)

As Chen Kaige comments, “Goddess Manshen is the sorceress in everyone's heart; Chen Hong, [the actress who plays Goddess Manshen, the producer of *The Promise*, and also Chen Kaige's wife] is exactly the witch in my heart.” For Chen, it is important that Goddess Manshen be semi-deified and semi-human and that her dresses and hairstyle are graceful (Chen).

In addition, “Qingcheng” is a name that immediately reminds the Chinese-speaking audience that Qingcheng in *The Promise* is as alluring and enticing to men as Li Yannian's sister. It is also a name that relates Goddess Manshen's promise about Qingcheng's future appearance with Li Yannian's promise as well as the promise of Cinderella's godmother. Cinderella's godmother enables Cinderella to meet her “Mr. Right” in the royal party and become the hostess of the royal palace. Similarly, Goddess Manshen's promise enables Qingcheng to be the King's beloved woman in the royal palace, and Li Yannian's promise about his sister's beauty enables his sister to enter and live in the royal palace. From this point of view, Qingcheng in *The Promise* is truly a Chinese version of Cinderella^{iv} (Du; Bin). Chen Kaige is known for choosing a “style that looks international but has deep Chinese roots” (Clark 180) and exemplifies contemporary China's “spread of popular culture”^v (Lu 10). In *The Promise*, he negotiates the past of both China and the West (Berry 87). As a Chinese filmmaker, he mediates stories “between the repressive and ideal order of the myth that is familiar to all Chinese and the problematic ‘real’ world onscreen so as to criticize, modernize, and revitalize the myth ... through some sort of narrative resolution” (Berry and Farquhar 139).

Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White

In *The Promise*, Qingcheng shares something with Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White: the warning of the negative outcome or limits of sorcery and their beloved princes' salvation of

them. Sleeping Beauty's father tries his best to protect her, but she still only narrowly escapes from her fate. She still needs the prince to rescue her from the enchantment. Cinderella returns to her original status, and resumes the endless housework in her stepmother's house; her destiny is not changed until the prince finds her. Snow White does not wake up until her Mr. Right's kiss. In *The Promise*, Qingcheng does not escape from Goddess Manshen's prophecy about her fate, either. Although Guangming claims his love for Qingcheng and Wuhuan has also been cordially concerned about Qingcheng since his childhood, Guangming and Wuhuan kill each other in front of Qingcheng. They also severely injure Kunlun. At the end of the film, Qingcheng cannot help but depend on Kunlun, who puts on the dark cloak in order to run faster than the light and let time move backward; otherwise, she has no opportunity to escape her destiny. This is probably why the Chinese title of this film is "Wu ji."

"Wu ji" can be deemed a container that includes destiny. Or it can be regarded as something that writes our destiny. However, according to the legendary story, you can peep into the changes of fate in the container through "wu ji," and you can also read the changeable fate through "wu ji." However, "wu ji" can be read only. It cannot be revised (Guo 152).

Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Qingcheng share the same archetypal pattern: female protagonists waiting for their boyfriends' or lovers' arrival and efforts to rescue them from prophecies and advance their romantic relationship. As a matter of fact, Chen Kaige himself indirectly supports my argument that Qingcheng should be compared to a princess. He says,

I feel that the archetype of Qingcheng is (Princess) Diana. What an admiring woman this is! However ... she probably did not gain any true love... She is like a cursed woman... [She] represents the fate that many women have in common. She is not a proud princess. She is a woman who comes from the ordinary world (Chen).

Therefore, it is truly reasonable to compare Qingcheng in *The Promise* to Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty^{vi} (Harries 13). The cage is like the destiny from which Qingcheng cannot escape, and the feather coat that Duke Wuhuan wants Qingcheng to put on indicates that Qingcheng is like a bird caged or enslaved within her fate.

But More Than Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White

In terms of gender egalitarianism, Chen Kaige awards more freedom and critical thinking faculties to Qingcheng in *The Promise* than either Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty possess. Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty do not seem to evaluate their interactions with different men and consider why one man is more attractive than another. They do not have enough opportunities to know different men, interact with them, compare them, and rationally judge whether they will be truly happier with one man for whatever reason. After the princes find them, select them, and declare their love for them, they are not given the opportunity to decide whether they would like to choose the princes or other men. However, Snow White and Qingcheng are both given enough freedom to meet, know, interact, compare, and even live with different men before they determine who their "Princes Charming" should be; meanwhile their "Princes Charming" and

other men enjoy the male privilege to choose their beloved women among all the women they meet, know, interact with, evaluate, and compare in ancient male-centered societies and gender ideology. From this perspective, Qingcheng and Snow White enjoy more gender egalitarianism than Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. From this standpoint, Chen Kaige does deeply rethink and problematize the gender inequality in the stories of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, and compensates Qingcheng and Snow White by rewarding them equal rights and the capacity for critical thinking. Although Qingcheng is indeed Chen Kaige's cinematic creation of a Chinese version of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White, she is more than simply a Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty who "revolves around ... physical attraction and the mating games ... with male characters" in fairytales (Smith 21).

Men... According to What Women Truly Want

With reference to the equal rights that Chen Kaige gives to Qingcheng and Snow White to evaluate and compare different men according to their own criteria of true "Princes Charming," Chen successfully cinematizes Qingcheng's comparing and contrasting of different men. In Qingcheng's point of view in *The Promise*, Guangming and Wuhuan are not compatible with Kunlun and are thus treated as "defeated and dead" in terms of their competition for Qingcheng. Kunlun is the chosen one among the three male protagonists; therefore, he is the only "living" man in terms of his competition with Guangming and Wuhuan for Qingchen at the end of the film. His final possession of the crimson armor symbolizes his triumph in the competition for Qingcheng.

The crimson armor is like Kunlun's reward for winning the competition. Kimiya Masago, the Japanese costume designer who produced three hundred costumes in ten months for this film, points out that the crimson armor derives from the mask-like makeup in Chinese Peking opera and stands for the fighting spirit. According to him, this crimson armor is a "living" armor (Wang). The blossoms on the armor bloom when the person who wears it is triumphant and happy; the flowers on the armor wither when the person who wears it is upset or in trouble:

Lotus blossoms seem to represent the destiny that nobody can change. The elegance of peonies signifies the limitless power and authority. The prosperity of chrysanthemum symbolizes the glory of triumph ... [and] the plums foretell the doom of life-long solitary. (Wang)

The life and death of Kunlun, Guangming, and Wuhuan emphasize Qingcheng's consideration about who her "Prince Charming" should be. Snow White also indirectly discloses her thoughts about who her "Mr. Right" should be and her comparison of different men. According to the criterion of what Snow White wants from her "Mr. Right," the seven men in the woods are not chosen by Snow White as her "Mr. Right," and thus are regarded as "dwarfs" in terms of their competition for Snow White with Prince Charming. In other words, the seven men in the woods are physically "dwarfs" on the one hand and "dwarfs without enough compatibility" in the competition for Snow White's love on the other hand.

Social Status of the Winner

The conflict of social status between the winner and losers in the competition for Qingcheng intensifies the conflicts between Kunlun and Guangming. In the story of Snow White, the man who wins Snow White is Prince Charming, an aristocrat, while the losers in the competition for Snow White are seven laborers in the woods; however, in *The Promise* the winner in the competition for Qingcheng is Kunlun, a slave, while the losers are his master, General Guangming, and another aristocrat, Duke Wuhuan. There is an incredible gap between Guangming's and Wuhuan's social status and Kunlun's, just like the gap between Prince Charming's social status and that of the seven dwarves. The storyteller lets the aristocrat defeat the seven dwarf laborers in the competition for Snow White. Yet, in *The Promise*, Chen Kaige switches the preference for aristocrats and princes by letting the slave outshine his master and Duke Wuhuan. At the beginning of the film, Guangming easily dominates, conquers, and enjoys having Kunlun as his slave by feeding him meat, but at the end of the story, he loses everything, including his own life, in the competition with Kunlun for Qingcheng. If the fact that Qingcheng says the initial half of the magic password to General Guangming denotes that the man with higher social status is almost the winner of the competition for Qingcheng, the fact that she says the final half of it to Kunlun, Guangming's slave, shows Chen Kaige's "proletarian revolution" of the archetypal pattern of the stories of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Lady Li in Li Yannian's poem, and Snow White: the archetype that aristocrats or men with higher social status always defeat men with lower social status and win the hands for the female protagonists in their love stories.

Ya-chen Chen's academic backgrounds are in comparative literature, women's and gender studies, and Asian studies. She edited and published Farewell My Concubine: Same-Sex Readings and Cross-Cultural Dialogue (2004). Most of her other academic publications are included in Ohio State University's MCLC (Modern Chinese Literature and Culture) on-line resource center. After teaching at various universities and colleges across the Pacific Ocean, she will teach at City College of New York beginning fall of 2007.

Notes

ⁱ I agree with Rey Chow's statement:

Chen Kaige confirms O'Brien's judgment: "In China the east is mountainous, the west is flat; the west is poor, and the east is rich.... In this spirit ... recent graduates of the Beijing Film Academy ... have chosen this yellow earth—poor, barren, and yet full of possibilities—to begin our artistic careers."

ⁱⁱ Although Chen Kaige was criticized because of his pollution of the environment, the box office of *The Promise* reached 1.8 billions RMB in China within only twenty days after the first release on December 14, 2005. One of the possible reasons for this film to successfully enthrall its audience is probably Chen Kaige's cinematic digest of the Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty love stories. At the Cannes Film Festival, Chen Hong, Chen Kaige's wife, the producer of this film (and also the actress that plays Goddess Manshen) invited 258 distributing companies to take a look at a part of this film.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since the story of Cinderella is a fairytale and legendary story. There are various versions of the same story. According to R. D. Jameson, the oldest written European version is Des Periers'

Nouvelles Récréations et Joyeux Devis, published at Lyon in 1558. The single most popular version of the story of Cinderella is told by Charles Perrault and translated into English and included in *The Blue Fairy Book* edited by Andrew Lang. I base my argument on the most popular version that includes Cinderella's godmother, instead of revised or more modernized version of the same story. For instance, D. Sue Gallehugh and Allen Gallehugh wrote *Bedtime Stories for Grown-ups: Fairy-Tale Psychology* and created their own version of Cinderella. In their version of the story, Cinderella does not have any godmother.

^{iv} Some Chinese viewers think that Chen Kaige lacks his own Chinese ego because they assume that *The Promise* is nothing but a Chinese copy or byproduct of Hollywood films. They complain that “from the story plot to special effects, the film includes only Chen Kaige's obsession with Hollywood.” For details, consult Du Chunqiu's “Ping *Wu ji*—Chen Kaige de jingying shi wulitou” (On *The Promise*—Chen Kaige's elite nonsense) in *Xinhua News* on December 26, 2005. Some film critics believe that the special effects in this film exceed and outshine the story plot. In other words, the content of this film is too weak. For details, consult Bin Ni's “*Wu ji yao haohao huo zhe*” (*The Promise*, Live Well) in *Huiyuan yingping (Film Criticism of Memebbers)*. While opening myself to all kinds of possible interpretations of the same work of art, I acknowledge this criticism in this footnote and mention the possibility for Chen Kaige to negotiate himself between China and the West without losing too much of his own Chinese ego in the main text.

^v Sheldon H. Lu remarks, “In the post-Tiananmen era (1989 to the present), or what Chinese intellectual historians call the “post-New Era” (*hou xin shiqi*), Chinese society is characterized by the expansion of consumerism, the spread of popular culture, the commercialization of cultural production, and the advent of postmodern formations.”

^{vi} Some feminist literary critics regard the female protagonists' waiting for their men's arrival as a pattern for “feminine passivity and martyrdom.” For details, consult Elizabeth Wanning Harries's *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*. However, I would like to defend Chen Kaige. In *The Promise*, Qingcheng's strong refusal to be with any men after the king is assassinated and before Kunlun jumps off the cliff is probably Chen Kaige's cinematic rejection of this sort of “feminine passivity and martyrdom” in the fairytales.

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