

Original Paper

Analysis of *Chinglish* from the Perspective of Feminism

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Received: April 9, 2018

Accepted: April 25, 2018

Online Published: May 21, 2018

doi:10.22158/wjssr.v5n2p131

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjssr.v5n2p131>

Abstract

Xi Yan is one of the protagonists and plays a significant role in Chinglish. The paper applies feminism to analyze Xi Yan and to find out what it represents. As opposed to the traditional women, Xi Yan goes after physical pleasure and spiritual fulfillment and gains both spiritual and physical freedom. In contrast with Chinese men, she performs even better than men and wins a certain economic and social status. In terms of foreign men, she prevails in the relationship with Daniel, which is a symbol of the rise of women that portends the rise of China.

The findings demonstrate that: Xi Yan symbolizes the transformation of modern women from being suppressed to the pursuit of spiritual and physical liberation; she is on behalf of strong women who try to improve the situation of women, in pursuit of equality; and the change in the relative power of male and female reveals the variation tendency of the relative force of the East and the West.

Keywords

feminism, Xi Yan, Chinglish, David Henry Hwang

1. Introduction

Born in Los Angeles in 1957, David Henry Hwang is a famous Chinese-American playwright. Hwang attended Stanford University and Yale University, where he wrote his first play *New immigrants* in 1980. Hwang won many awards in the dramatic world, including the Obi-awards, Tony awards and Pulitzer prizes. In 2011, *Chinglish* also had been a big success, becoming the highest-grossing play of Goodman Theatre in Chicago for 80 years. It then performed on the stage of Broadway and was a hit, being named “Top Ten Broadway Play” in 2011 by *The Times*.

Chinglish tells the story of an American businessman Daniel who came to China to promote his traditional family business of signs production. Performed in English and Mandarin with supertitles, the play grew out of the experiences that David Henry Hwang had on business trips to China. And it explores the language barriers that Daniel tries to overcome as he looks to secure a lucrative contract in

China for his sign-making firm.

2. Xi Yan and Traditional Women

From the view of Beauvoir, all subjects have the transcendental character to establish themselves specifically. Only through continuous transcendence and moving towards other freedom, one subject can achieve his or her freedom. Apart from the expansion to an unbounded and infinite future, no other approaches can explain the present existence. All existences as subjects should be both immanent and transcendental, while once transcendence goes back to immanence, the existence would be depreciated to “in-itself” and freedom would fall to artificiality. The male authority intends to fix the female to the role as the object in the society, pushing her to her only immanence, as her transcendence is transcended by the other essential and dominated consciousness (male). A traditional woman usually loses her freedom of physical and psychical just because of this moral fault. She is deprived of transcendence, and her immanence is imposed, which thus takes a form of oppression and frustration.

On the contrary, Xi Yan goes after physical pleasure and spiritual fulfillment. She has an affair with Daniel. In her opinion, “We were the new generation, who would pick good men, and live for love”. When Daniel asks Xi Yan whether she has sex with him for the sake of helping her husband be a mayor, she tells him “The romance was for me. Just me”. Xi Yan breaks social rules (“the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential”) and pursues desires (“the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential”). In this way, she gains both spiritual and physical freedom.

Although Xi Yan wants to drag Cai Guoliang down partly because of her husband and maintains the marriage without love merely on account of her belief in Chinese traditional thought—“Qing Yi”, which does not mean that she is bound by traditional ethics and morality to some extent. Because “To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them; while she posits herself for herself, she will nonetheless continue to exist for him as well”. Xi Yan is not confined to her relationship with Xu Geming. And in the meantime, she does not break the marriage in pursuit of freedom. Making no mention of traditional ideas about marriage, Xi Yan gets the success of transcendence in this sense.

Xi Yan symbolizes the transformation of modern women from being suppressed to the pursuit of spiritual and physical liberation and from being soulless and like a breathing corpse to being alive.

3. Xi Yan and Chinese Men

Simone de Beauvoir has written in *The Second Sex* that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, which reveals the situation of traditional women. The female is defined as the “second” sex or the “other” relative to the male. Their existence is not an autonomous and independent one. “She” is made by the male and is so called “she”. “She is the inessential in front of the essential. He is Subject;

he is the Absolute. She is the Other.” Tao Tiezhu has noted in the preface of his version of *The Second Sex* that the “other” is someone alienated, losing or having no self-consciousness. The one is always at the mercy of the situation or others, in the position of object and without independent personality. “Women are ‘clingy’, they are a burden, and they suffer from it; their lot is that of a parasite that sucks the life from a foreign organism.”

By contrast, Xi Yan abandons the cliché that “a man should act as a man, and a woman should act as a woman, acting even better than a man and being a strong woman, an iron lady. In the world dominated by men, she practically wins a certain economic and social status and obtains much more power of discourse. With making herself financially independent and emotionally independent, she succeeds in turning to “the subject” from “the other”.

Xi Yan is quite rational, tactful, resourceful and smart in comparison with other men in the play. She performs very well not only in the fields of her own business but also among the men in the play. Putting her talents to good use, she finally achieves her goal to bring the Culture Minister (Cai) down and help her husband (Xu Geming) become new mayor of Guiyang. Generally speaking, she plays a leading role in the course of story and controls the development. It seems that things work out precisely according to her plan.

Cai Guoliang is corrupt and conservative, making his higher authority dissatisfied due to his incompetence in handling affairs. Peter says in scene nine that “The Party Secretary feels he’s been too slow to implement market reforms. They’re looking for any excuse to sack him”. He is absent-minded and appears uninterested in the business during the first meeting with Daniel until they refer to Chicago. When Daniel introduces his family firm and its location Cleveland to Cai, he suddenly interrupts, saying: “Chicago! I have visited Chicago! Tell him!”

As Vice Minister of culture, Xi Yan is more competent and responsible. In the first negotiation, when they have incorrect comprehension of each other’s intentional meaning due to translation errors, it is Xi Yan who corrects mistakes and explains to Cai that “Cleveland! Mr. Cavanaugh is from Cleveland! Not a major city, but a significant manufacturing center”. And she also gets the topic back to the business—“All right, we all agree about Peter’s Chinese! Can we move on to the proposal?”

All above indicate that men are not born the Subject or the Absolute and women are not born the Other. Women are also endowed with an autonomous organism; they are also able to fight against the world and wrest their subsistence from it; their dependence can be abolished.

Xi Yan is on behalf of modern strong women that try to improve the situation of women, in pursuit of equality and a place in the male-dominated society. And, despite male-dominated society, she suggests the possibility of realizing equality.

4. Xi Yan and Foreign Men

Finally, in a sense, the East is commonly considered to be weak and feminine, while the West is regarded to be strong and masculine. Viewing Xi Yan as the personification of China and Daniel or Peter as the personification of America, then improvement of women's social status and the rise of women portend the rise of China. And the change in the relative power of male and female reveals the variation tendency of the relative force of the East and the West.

Peter tells Daniel that "the Chinese have maintained consistent growth over decades, at levels the West can only dream about" and "Back in the old days, a Westerner who could speak Chinese like a native—employers fought to give me jobs. And the women? ... whispering how tall I was. Today, in the major cities—foreigners are everywhere. Speaking Chinese. But they're architects and accountants and financial analysts and ...". When Xi Yan and talked in scene eight, Xi Yan says "Westerners have always fed us lies. That's why I'm a Chinese Nationalist", "But soon, it will be our turn to use you! What come around, go around" and "One day, China will be strong". Daniel, though, disagrees, thinking that China is strong now and the United States is the weak one.

In the play, Oriental culture has made a significant impact on Western culture; China has a much better economic situation than America and is going to overtake America.

5. Conclusion

Xi Yan is one of the protagonist and plays crucial role in *Chinglish*. She goes after physical pleasure and spiritual fulfillment and gains both spiritual and physical freedom, as opposed to the traditional women who are deprived of transcendence and loses their freedom of physical and psychical. In contrast with Chinese men who is named as the Subject and the Absolute. She acts even better than a man and wins a certain economic and social status, succeeding in transforming into "the subject" from "the other". In terms of foreign men, she prevails in the relationship with Daniel and Peter. If Xi Yan can be seen as the personification of China and Daniel or Peter as the personification of America, the improvement in women's social status and the rise of women portend the rise of China.

In conclusion, Xi Yan symbolizes the transformation of modern women from being suppressed to the pursuit of spiritual and physical liberation; she is on behalf of strong women that try to improve the situation of women, in pursuit of equality and a place in the male-dominated society; and the change in the relative power of male and female in the play reveals the variation tendency of the relative force of the East and the West.

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