



Section 1. History

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ANALYSIS OF "THE LEGEND OF ZHEN HUAN"

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Abstract

"The Legend of Zhen Huan," also known as "Empresses in the Palace" is a Chinese historical drama TV show that aired in 2011. Set during the Qing Dynasty in the Forbidden City, the series immerses viewers in the complex world of the imperial harem, where power struggles, politics, and gender dynamics shape the lives of its inhabitants. This essay will conduct a thorough ideological analysis of "The Legend of Zhen Huan" to unravel the societal and social life narratives depicted, the definition of appropriate roles for various groups, the portrayal of normative and deviant behaviors, the implicit values underlying the content, and the ways in which the show both promotes and challenges dominant ideologies.

Keywords: *The imperial harem, Power, hierarchical, patriarchal, imperial, women, gender roles, power dynamics, morality, ideology*

Social Context

To understand the social context in which "The Legend of Zhen Huan" is embedded, it is crucial to examine the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). This era was characterized by Confucian values and strict hierarchical structures, with the imperial harem serving as a microcosm of the broader society. The emperor held ultimate authority, and the imperial harem consisted of the emperor's consorts and concubines who vied for his favor and competed for power and influence within the Forbidden City.

Storytelling about Society and Social Life

The Story's Reflection of Society and Social Life:

"The Legend of Zhen Huan" provides insights into the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of Qing Dynasty society. It depicts a complex web of power dynamics within the imperial palace, reflecting the intense competition and manipulation among concubines and the struggles they face to gain favor and secure their positions. The show portrays the lavish lifestyles of the royal family and the stark contrast between the opulence inside the palace and the poverty outside its walls. It highlights the rigid social structure and the limited opportunities for upward mobility for most individuals.

Through Zhen Huan's journey, the story sheds light on the challenges faced by women in a male-dominated society. It explores

themes of femininity, sacrifice, and the constraints imposed on women's agency, emphasizing their roles as objects of desire and tools for political maneuvering. The portrayal of Zhen Huan's experiences exposes the vulnerability and fragility of women's positions, as they constantly navigate the delicate balance between power and survival.

For example, Zhen Huan's journey from a naive young concubine to a calculated strategist reflects the harsh realities and power struggles present in the imperial harem. Her experiences mirror the broader society's expectations, where individuals must navigate a complex web of relationships and protocols to secure their positions and influence.

Appropriate role for various groups

The Imperial Family: The Epitome of Power and Authority

In "The Legend of Zhen Huan", the imperial family holds the highest position in the social hierarchy. The emperor, occupying the pinnacle of power, is portrayed as the ultimate authority figure. He is responsible for making crucial decisions, shaping policies, and maintaining the stability of the empire. The media object portrays the emperor as the symbolic representation of the nation's well-being and the embodiment of the ruling class. The appropriate role assigned to the emperor is one of sovereignty, leadership, and the preservation of the dynasty's legacy. He is expected to govern wisely, maintain harmony within the imperial family, and ensure the continuation of the lineage.

Concubines: Competing for Favor and Securing Status

In Qing Dynasty society, concubines played a significant role in the imperial palace. "The Legend of Zhen Huan" depicts the concubines' lives as they navigate a complex web of power struggles and rivalries to gain favor and secure their positions. The appropriate role assigned to concubines is primarily that of companionship and bearing children. The media object defines the appropriate roles for concubines based on their relationship with the emperor and their ability to provide heirs. They are expected to compete for his attention, cultivate alliances, and maintain harmony within the palace. Their

primary purpose is to fulfill the emperor's desires and ensure the continuation of the dynasty through the birth of legitimate heirs.

Eunuchs: Intermediaries and Holders of Influence

Eunuchs occupy a distinctive role in "The Legend of Zhen Huan" as intermediaries between the emperor and the concubines. They are portrayed as wielding significant influence within the palace, serving as a bridge between the inner workings of the imperial family and the external world. Their primary responsibility is to assist the emperor in managing the affairs of the palace and maintaining order. The appropriate role assigned to eunuchs is that of loyalty, obedience, and discretion. They are expected to serve the emperor faithfully and safeguard the interests of the imperial family. Eunuchs in the show are depicted as key players in the power dynamics, exerting influence and shaping the fate of the concubines.

Maids and Officials: Supporting the Palace Machinery

In "The Legend of Zhen Huan", maids and officials represent two important groups that support the functioning of the imperial palace. Maids play roles such as attendants, serving the needs of the concubines, and ensuring the smooth running of daily affairs. They are assigned the appropriate role of providing assistance and surveillance. Officials, on the other hand, represent the bureaucratic system of the Qing Dynasty. They are responsible for advising the emperor, implementing policies, and serving the empire's interests. The appropriate roles assigned to officials include loyalty to the emperor, competence in governance, and upholding the values of the ruling class.

Conclusion

"The Legend of Zhen Huan" provides a captivating portrayal of the appropriate roles assigned to various groups in Qing Dynasty society. The media object reflects the power dynamics and hierarchical structure that defined the era. From the imperial family to the concubines, eunuchs, maids, and officials, each group played a distinct role in maintaining social order and serving the interests of the ruling class. By examining these defined roles, we gain valuable insights into the social

dynamics and ideological framework of Qing Dynasty society as depicted in the TV show.

Different normative or deviant behavior and lifestyle

Normative Behaviors:

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” presents certain behaviors as normative within the context of Qing Dynasty society. These behaviors align with societal expectations, established customs, and traditional values. Examples include:

a) Filial Piety: Filial piety, a fundamental Confucian value, is prominently depicted as a normative behavior in the show. Characters who display deep respect, obedience, and care towards their parents are celebrated. Zhen Huan’s unwavering loyalty to her family and her willingness to sacrifice her own happiness for their sake exemplify this normative behavior.

b) Obedience and Compliance: Characters who exhibit unquestioning obedience and compliance with authority, particularly the emperor, are portrayed as virtuous and commendable. This behavior is exemplified through Zhen Huan’s submissiveness to the emperor’s wishes and her acceptance of the rules and regulations within the harem.

c) Modesty and Virtue: The show reinforces normative values of modesty and virtue, particularly in relation to women. Female characters who demonstrate modesty, chastity, and adherence to societal expectations of femininity are portrayed positively. Zhen Huan’s initial innocence and adherence to these values contribute to her initial rise within the harem.

Deviant Behaviors

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” also portrays certain behaviors and lifestyles as deviant, deviating from the accepted norms of Qing Dynasty society. These behaviors often carry negative consequences and are met with societal disapproval. Examples include:

a) Ambition and Manipulation: Characters who display ambition and engage in manipulative tactics are depicted as deviant and morally flawed. Zhen Huan’s strategic maneuvers to gain favor and power within the harem, as well as her willingness to scheme against others, exemplify this deviant behavior.

b) Nonconformity and Individualism: The show portrays characters who defy societal expectations and prioritize their own desires as deviant. Those who refuse to conform to traditional gender roles or challenge established power structures face social ostracism and punishment.

c) Romantic Relationships Outside of Marriage: “The Legend of Zhen Huan” portrays romantic relationships outside of traditional marriage as deviant. Characters engaging in extramarital affairs, such as Zhen Huan’s relationship with the prince, are depicted as engaging in morally questionable behavior.

Consequences of Deviance

The show emphasizes the negative consequences of deviant behaviors and lifestyles. Characters who deviate from societal norms often face punishment, isolation, or even death. These consequences serve as a deterrent, reinforcing the idea that conforming to normative behaviors is essential for social stability and individual well-being.

Conclusion

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” presents a nuanced portrayal of normative and deviant behaviors and lifestyles within the context of Qing Dynasty society. The show reinforces the importance of filial piety, obedience, modesty, and adherence to traditional gender roles as normative behaviors. Deviant behaviors such as ambition, manipulation, nonconformity, and engaging in extramarital relationships are depicted as challenging the social order and facing dire consequences. This portrayal reflects the influence of societal norms and values in shaping the characters’ choices and experiences within the show.

Implicit values & served interest

Portrayal of Gender Roles:

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” presents a vivid portrayal of gender roles within its historical setting. The show predominantly showcases women’s struggles and challenges in a patriarchal society. Zhen Huan, the main character, navigates a complex web of court politics and power dynamics. Implicitly, the show emphasizes the resilience and strength of women,

challenging societal norms that relegate them to passive roles. By doing so, the TV show aligns with the interests of female audiences seeking empowerment and recognition.

Examination of Power Dynamics

The series delves deeply into the intricate power dynamics within the imperial palace. It highlights the manipulation, intrigue, and ruthlessness that characters employ to gain and maintain power. These implicit values serve the interests of viewers who are intrigued by the machinations of authority and the exploration of political strategies. Moreover, by shedding light on power imbalances, the show offers viewers a critical lens to evaluate similar dynamics in the real world, appealing to those with an interest in social and political analysis.

Critique of the Social Hierarchy

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” provides a subtle critique of the rigid social hierarchy prevalent during the Qing Dynasty. It exposes the unfairness and corruption that often accompany a hierarchical society, where individuals are judged solely based on their birthright. Through Zhen Huan’s journey, viewers witness the unfair treatment of concubines and the challenges faced by those who do not conform to societal expectations. By highlighting these issues, the show subtly promotes a sense of social justice and equality, catering to the interests of audiences who advocate for progressive values.

Exploration of Morality and Ethics

The TV show prompts viewers to contemplate complex moral dilemmas and ethical choices. Characters are frequently confronted with decisions that test their integrity, loyalty, and compassion. These nuanced portrayals of ethical dilemmas provide audiences with an opportunity to reflect on their own values and principles. By encouraging viewers to grapple with moral ambiguity, the show serves the interests of those who enjoy thought-provoking narratives and philosophical introspection.

Reflection of Cultural Heritage

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” is deeply rooted in Chinese history and culture, cap-

turing the essence of the imperial court and its traditions. The show presents cultural values such as filial piety, loyalty, and respect for elders. By showcasing these values, the series reinforces a sense of national identity and fosters pride in Chinese heritage. Consequently, it serves the interests of viewers who value cultural preservation and appreciation.

Conclusion

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” contains a multitude of implicit values that shape its content and serve the interests of various audiences. By exploring gender roles, power dynamics, social hierarchies, morality, and cultural heritage, the show provides a rich tapestry of themes and ideas. Whether it is empowering women, critiquing social injustices, or evoking introspection, the underlying messages of the TV show reflect the interests and aspirations of its viewers. As media objects continue to shape our collective consciousness, understanding the implicit values they embody is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of their impact on society.

Dominant Ideologies

Promotion of Dominant Ideologies:

a) Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles:

“The Legend of Zhen Huan” largely operates within the framework of traditional gender roles prevalent in historical contexts. The show frequently portrays women as navigating a world of power dynamics and court politics while adhering to societal expectations of femininity and subservience. This depiction reinforces the dominant ideology that women should conform to prescribed roles and behave with grace and obedience. For example, Zhen Huan is initially depicted as innocent and naïve, fitting the traditional image of a virtuous woman. This portrayal aligns with societal expectations of female behavior, catering to the prevailing ideology surrounding gender roles.

b) Legitimization of Hierarchical Systems:

The TV show presents an elaborate portrayal of the imperial court, emphasizing the hierarchical structure and the power of the emperor. It depicts the court as a complex web of authority, with characters vying for

favor and engaging in political maneuvering to secure their positions. By showcasing this system, "The Legend of Zhen Huan" inadvertently promotes the dominant ideology that hierarchical structures are both legitimate and necessary for societal order. The portrayal of the emperor as the ultimate authority figure and the characters' constant pursuit of his favor reinforces this ideology.

Challenging Dominant Ideologies

a) Subversion of Gender Expectations:

While "The Legend of Zhen Huan" initially adheres to traditional gender roles, it also presents instances that challenge these expectations. The character of Zhen Huan herself undergoes significant character development, evolving from a passive and obedient concubine to a resilient and strategic individual. Her ability to navigate the complex power dynamics and outmaneuver her adversaries challenges the dominant ideology that women are inherently submissive and lacking agency. Additionally, the show portrays other female characters who defy societal norms, such as the cunning Empress Dowager. These instances of subversion disrupt the traditional gender roles and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of female empowerment.

b) Critique of Patriarchal Systems:

While "The Legend of Zhen Huan" operates within a patriarchal society, it also offers a critique of the oppressive nature of such systems. The show highlights the hardships and struggles faced by women in the imperial court, often subjected to mistreatment and manipulation. Through the experiences

of Zhen Huan and other characters, the TV show reveals the flaws and injustices inherent in patriarchal systems. This critique challenges the dominant ideology that upholds male dominance and superiority, providing a platform for viewers to question and reconsider existing power structures.

c) Exploration of Morality and Ethics:

"The Legend of Zhen Huan" delves into complex moral dilemmas, challenging viewers' understanding of right and wrong. Characters are frequently confronted with choices that test their integrity and loyalty, blurring the lines between good and evil. By presenting these moral quandaries, the show prompts viewers to question dominant ideologies that dictate rigid moral absolutes. It encourages critical thinking and a deeper examination of personal values, challenging the notion that morality is fixed and universal.

Conclusion

"The Legend of Zhen Huan" presents a nuanced exploration of dominant ideologies within society, both promoting and challenging established norms. While it initially reinforces traditional gender roles and hierarchical systems, the TV show also subverts expectations and critiques patriarchal structures. Furthermore, its exploration of morality and ethics encourages viewers to question prevailing ideologies and develop a more nuanced understanding of these concepts. By navigating the complexities of ideologies, "The Legend of Zhen Huan" serves as a catalyst for introspection and contributes to ongoing societal discourse surrounding power, gender, and morality.

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