

Feminist Scholarship Review

Women in Theater and Film

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Letter from the Editors:

By examining the history of women in film and theater cross-culturally, it is possible to see how this medium of art chronicles the change in women's role internationally. Here in the United States, women's position in theater and film is more established, and we often take that position for granted. In other cultures women are still struggling to gain recognition in the world of performance. The following articles provide insight into the growing prominence of women in theater in film in other countries.

In this addition of the Feminist Scholarship Review, Beth Notar, and Anne Lambright introduce us to two cultures where women's roles are transforming. In the essay, From Model Woman to Model Woman: Shifting Interpretations of Chinese Film, Notar traces the movie musical, *Five Golden Flowers*, in terms of audience response since its 1959 release to the present. She illustrates how spectator reaction to the film reflects the changes in gender ideology in Chinese society. In Woman, Body, and Memory: Yuyachkani's Peruvian Antigone, Lambright examines all aspects of female participation in Peruvian theater through Teresa Ralli's one-woman play, *Antigone*. She notes the significance of the solo performance in representing woman's solitude, power, and transformation.

This edition of the Feminist Scholarship Review can enlighten us to the transformation of women's position cross-culturally. We hope that this volume adds to our understanding of the role of women in theater and film.

Daniella Bonanno

Amara Westheimer

From Model Woman to Woman Model: Shifting Interpretations of a Chinese Film

Beth Notar

Feminist film critics have shown that a film, as a kind of cultural text, reflects a society's gender ideologies. Cultural studies scholars and cultural anthropologists are now extending this analysis to examine not only the film itself, but audience responses to it. Changes in audience response to the same film over time can reveal much about the politics of shifting interpretations of gender. While most research has focused on films and audiences in the European and American contexts, scholars are starting to broaden their scope of inquiry to include African, Indian and Chinese cinema culture. While conducting research on the impact of tourism in a Bai (Tibeto-Burman) minority area of China's southwestern Yunnan province during 1993-1995, and 1999, I came to learn of one film which aptly illustrates shifts in Chinese gender ideology over the past half century.

In 1959, during the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the movie musical *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo Jinhua*) was released to national acclaim, and went on to win best director (Wang Jiayi) and best actress (Yang Likun) at the Second Asia-Africa Film Festival. Based on the real life story of a Bai minority woman assistant commune head, the film extolled the successes of Chinese socialist modernity: agricultural collectivization, mechanization and women's liberation. In her ethnic headdress, the film character of Assistant Commune Head Golden Flower oversees hundreds of her commune's workers in a reservoir construction project, directs male engineers and deftly dispenses advice on resource allocation and relationships alike. This character radically broke with imperial Chinese representations of the borderland woman as an exotic yet dangerous temptress. Instead, Assistant Commune Head Golden Flower was intended as a model liberated woman for all Chinese women: smart, strong, and dedicated to her work.

The film ironically depicts Golden Flower as a bit *too* dedicated to her work, and the humor and musical duets enter in as other film characters try to distract her long enough so that she may unite with her farmer lover, Ah Peng. It was this boy-meets-girl love story that caused the film's crew, cast, as well as the Bai villagers on which it was based, much trouble during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In 1970, student Red Guards labeled the film a "poisonous weed" which polluted the minds of the masses through its bourgeois romanticism. Film director Wang Jiayi was sent to do hard labor in the countryside. Star actress Yang Likun had a nervous breakdown during a struggle session in which Red Guards ripped out her hair. Bai villagers were called upon to denounce the film in the national media. Film character Golden Flower, once a model for all Chinese women, became a "stinking mistress of the landlord and capitalist classes."

After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the film, its crew and cast were "rehabilitated," and the film was shown again in theaters and broadcast regularly on television. In the 1980s, nostalgic film fans began to travel to the Bai minority area of Dali, Yunnan, to visit scenic spots from the film. By the mid-1990s, local officials and entrepreneurs had developed special film tours, where fans are first entertained with a sing-along cruise and then brought to film sites where they may rent costumes and reenact key film scenes. In this present time of China's reform era, what is officially called "socialism with Chinese characteristics," and unofficially called "moving to a market economy," communes have been disbanded and women's liberation no longer holds a high place on the official agenda. For film tourists, character Assistant Commune Head Golden Flower is no longer presented as a strong woman and model worker, but as a romantic, exotic heroine whose image and attributes can be consumed.

Beth Notar is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology. She and Professor Naogan Ma of Modern Languages will be team teaching a spring 2002 course "China through Film."

Woman, Body and Memory: Yuyachkani's Peruvian Antígone

Anne Lambright

For thirty years now, the Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani (Yuyachkani Cultural Group) has been creating and performing popular theater in Peru; the group is by far the longest continually-running and most important popular theater group in Latin America. The group's name, which in Quechua means "I am thinking, I am remembering," or, alternatively, "I am your thoughts, I am your memory," underscores its commitment to both Peru's indigenous cultures and to preserving and performing a collective national memory. Indeed, Yuyachkani's expressed mission is to "think Peru theatrically." Over the course of the past thirty years, Yuyachkani's thinking process, politically, intellectually, and aesthetically, has undergone many changes, at times to the disappointment of those attached to its early avocation of social revolution. Much excellent critical attention has been devoted to Yuyachkani's politics, its commitment to dramatizing the heterogeneity of the Peruvian nation, to giving voice to its marginalized groups, particularly the indigenous peoples, to exposing the trauma of a country riveted by domestic terrorism and state-sponsored violence. What has yet to be explored, and what I will address here, is the role of women in the group's theatrical production--as creators, performers, and characters.

In her insightful article on Yuyachkani's dramatic production in the 90s, Magaly Muguercia comments on the group's move from the more overtly political to an exploration of subjectivity, which, in itself, carried powerful political implications. Muguercia notes how Yuyachkani's new dramatic exploration sought to "incluir en la estrategia de lo liberador la producción de un cuerpo-sujeto capaz de intervenir en la historia" [include in its liberating strategy a body-subject capable of intervening in history] (48). It is that body-subject, performing and intervening in history, that I wish to address here in a brief analysis of one of the group's most recent works, a one-woman version of Antígone (*Antígona*, 2000), performed by one of Yuyachkani's founding members, Teresa Ralli, with script by Peruvian poet José

Watanabe. In this "free version" of Sophocles's tragedy, Ralli, an extraordinarily versatile actress, performs the parts of a female narrator, the newly-crowned Creon, Antigone herself, Creon's son and Antigone's love Haemon, and the blind prophet Teiresias. Role changes are indicated through the actress's voice and gestures, in how she wears a long cape, and, at times, with changes in stage lighting and sound. The only props on stage are a lone wooden chair and a box containing the death mask of Polineices, Antigone's dead and unburied brother.

The play, on the surface, seems a great departure from Yuyachkani's early work, which deals with recognizably Peruvian issues: peasant uprisings in the highlands, internal migration from the country to the city and the highlands to the coast, terrorist violence, urban poverty, cultural heterogeneity. Indeed, there is nothing in the play that overtly evokes the Peruvian experience; the play takes place in Thebes, and its plot and characters correspond directly to those of the original Greek tragedy. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the play is very much in keeping with the Yuyachkani corpus, dealing with issues of the arbitrariness of power, the loss of social, cultural, and historical memory, the responsibility of the citizen, and, I argue, the role of woman in the maintenance of a social conscience. Miguel Rubio, artistic director of Yuyachkani, and Teresa Ralli tell that the inspiration for Antígona came to them while visiting an exhibit of black and white photography chronicling the violence in Peru in the 1980's.¹ They came across one photo of a woman walking in the bright light of high noon, under the arches of the main square in Ayacucho, a major highland town; the woman, dressed in mourning, seemed to be escaping from something. They say, "en ese momento, espontáneamente, esa mujer formó para nosotros una sola frase con Antígona" [at this moment, spontaneously, this woman was for us one and the same with Antigone] (Rubio and Ralli). The image itself is evoked in the play, as the narrator describes Antigone, dressed in mourning, furtively crossing the main square of Thebes under the bright light of the noon sun. Antígona, Rubio and Ralli explain, is about women and the suffering that national violence has inflicted

¹ This decade was marked by the seemingly unstoppable terrorism of radical leftist groups Shining Path, in the highlands, and Tupac Amaru, on the coast.

upon them. Specifically, in preparation for their version of the play, they spoke to many female relatives of the "disappeared" in Peru: "Sus testimonios han alimentado nuestra puesta en escena. ¿Cómo olvidar a tantas mujeres enfrentándose solas al poder para indagar por sus esposos, padres o hijos? Antígona las resume" [Their testimonies have shaped this staging. How can we forget so many women confronting power alone in order to find out what had happened to their husbands, fathers, or children? They are Antigone](Rubio and Ralli).

Yuyachkani's Antígona is, on the one hand, an act of memory, a direct challenge to the call of the female narrator, who at the end of the first scene demands, "empecemos a olvidar" [let's begin to forget] (16). But it is more than that; the fact that the play is centered in and expressed through the body of a single woman is significant. For Ralli, the desire to act alone stemmed from witnessing the extreme solitude of the female relatives as they searched for their family members (the women relatives of the disappeared have not organized on the same level as those of Argentina and Chile, for example). This aspect of the play is thus a reproduction of that loneliness (accentuated by the lack of props and scenery) and a reiteration of the corporeal boundaries imposed by a society traumatized by violence and corruption. But, it must also be seen in a sense as power--woman's body as receptacle of national memory, yes, but also as potentiator of change. In this work, woman's body holds the forces of power (Creon) and bears its transformation (Creon eventually relents and agrees to the burial of Polyneices). Woman's body (as Antigone) confronts power and suffers the consequences (a cruel death). In the end, the audience learns that the narrator, who has been commenting the actions throughout the play, who in the beginning admonished the public to "begin to forget," is actually Ismene, Antigone's sister who in her fear had refused to help her disobey Creon and bury their brother. In her final revelation, we find that it is woman's body that is left with the greatest burden of all: "...la tarea que no hice a tiempo/ porque me acobardó el ceño del poder,.../ ...ya tengo un castigo grande:/ el recordar cada día tu gesto/ que me tortura y me avergüenza" [the task that I did not perform in time/ because I was afraid of power,.../ ...I have now a great punishment/ to remember every

day your deed/ that tortures me and shames me] (64-65). In this woman's body is a nation which must live with the daily reminders of steps not taken, acts left undone, cowardice before power.

Antígona is not the first work in which Yuyachkani uses woman to express criticism of the nation or an alternative national vision. There are many other examples in their repertoire of 21 original works. Among their nine members (seven actors, a director, and a designer), the four women take active roles in the creation and performing of all their plays. Antígona, though, is perhaps where woman's role is most concentrated, most immediately evident, as if, in this instance, Yuyachkani were saying to Peru, "I, woman, am your thoughts; I, my female body, am your memory."

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