

## THE STORY OF YANXI PALACE

Zhou Yun

**T**HE STORY OF YANXI PALACE 延禧攻略 is a historical period drama that gained astonishing popularity in the northern summer of 2018 — with over 14.5 billion online views since its release on the streaming platform iQiyi. The story is set during the reign of the Qing emperor Qianlong (1735–1796), a fictional tale of revenge about one of his concubines, Wei Yingluo 魏璎珞, posthumously known as Empress Xiaoyichun 孝仪纯, and mother of the succeeding Emperor Jiaqing.

This historical reimagining of court intrigue features seemingly authentic, fabulous costumes and elegant hair accessories; some of the craft skills that went into their making are listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage in Jiangsu province. The vivid portrayal of imperial life through fashion,

makeup, and hairstyles distinguished the show from many other imperial palace dramas that spend a huge amount of money on big-name stars but do not put as much effort into visual authenticity.

*The Story of Yanxi Palace* had its critics. Feminists argued that the protagonist is not so much a female fighter against an unbalanced structure of gendered power as a dependent of the authority of the patriarchal system. Social liberals attacked the show for revelling in the brutality of patriarchal power politics, and for depicting the female body as capital in the struggle for power, as well as a means for manipulating power.

Despite these criticisms, the fast-paced, 70-episode serial was well received by mainstream viewers. Its gen-



Promotional poster for  
*The Story of Yanxi Palace*  
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re is one that is an eternal favourite with female viewers in China — power struggles within the imperial inner court. To ascend the power ladder of Qianlong’s inner court, concubines are depicted backstabbing each other and otherwise plotting to win the emperor’s favour. Only by approaching the political throne are the women empowered with any kind of authority. Yet the heroine Wei Yingluo is not a mere passive subject of the patriarchy. Her mindset is more modern in that she consciously negotiates with, and sometimes challenges the existing power structure. Her determination to seek revenge for her sister, who is raped by the emperor’s brother and later killed by the brother’s mother, results in her fighting those in power. In her revenge, she seizes every opportunity to undermine her enemies

and sometimes even denounces their evil deeds to their face, despite their high-ranking positions.

Wei’s story deeply resonated with its predominantly female audience. She enters the court as a maid but eventually defeats all her enemies to become a high-ranking imperial concubine. As evidenced on Weibo and other social media platforms, a large number of urban women who struggle for better work opportunities identified with her solo struggle to climb the socioeconomic ladder and negotiate a society structured around wealth-based status and male power and privilege. Wei’s diligence and ultimate success encourages the serial’s female fans to pursue their dreams.

Although the drama pits Wei against a powerful clique of evil-doers, she is not depicted as an inherently no-

ble moral figure like the empress, who is constrained by feminine virtues of self-sacrifice and disciplined silence. Wei, by contrast, is a hot-tempered woman who stands no nonsense. In the drama, virtues and ideals die along with the empress. Wei replaces them with a powerful sense of individual entitlement.

The competition for survival in the inner court also has echoes for women in today's competitive and insecure workplaces, which are governed by cut-throat capitalist values rather than so-called 'traditional virtues', and many of which are guilty of practices that objectify the female body (see for example the opening paragraph of the 'Girl Power' chapter in this volume). Female viewers may find inspiration in Wei's philosophy of life.

Examples much quoted in social media include her lines: 'People are kind in nature, but they should learn to defend themselves' 人心存良善，更应懂自保; 'Beat the snake where it hurts. To revenge on someone, the best way is to wrest what she wants the most' 打蛇得打七寸，想要报复一个人，最好的办法，就是夺走她最想要的东西; 'Confront soldiers with generals and stem water with earth. One needs to take whatever measures are called for. If one lives under constant worry and fear, what a feeble life it is!' 人生处世无非就是兵来将挡，水来土掩，若是处处担忧，心怀恐惧，那还活个什么劲啊。Wei's continual triumphs clearly inspired the drama's female audience, although one of the show's key aspects — female-to-female competition — is hardly a triumph for feminism.

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