

粵劇  
三娘教子

CANTONESE OPERA

**THIRD MOTHER TEACHES HER SON**

English Translation

流傳自清朝

Extant Since the Qing Dynasty

馮欣明2000年英語譯文

Translated by Feng Xin-ming 2000

## 人物 CHARACTERS

王春娥：已故商人薛子羅之第三妻

**Wong Chueun-ngor**, the third wife of deceased merchant Seet Jee-luo

薛倚：薛子羅之子，生於第二妻

**Seet Yee**, son of Seet Jee-luo, born of the second wife

薛保：薛家管家老僕

**Seet Boe**: the Seet family's old butler

### Translator's Note

Why do I like the old Cantonese opera extant since the Qing Dynasty, “Third Mother Teaches Her Son”? This opera is definitely not without controversy: during the Cultural Revolution, “Third Mother” is denounced as a “poisonous weed” and much is written criticizing it for advocating Confucian ideas. During those days the famous diva who has sung the main part, Hong Xian-nu, is denounced and punished for having propagated this poisonous weed, and a criticism of the opera signed by her eventually appears in the Chinese Communist Party theoretical journal, *Hong Qi* (The Red Flag). Some people criticize this opera for “implicitly consenting to polygamy;” others, for “glorifying the stepmother over the birth mother.” Nay, nay, I say, the reason this opera is so worthy of study and understanding is that this opera, like the opera “Wong-fui and Guaeh-ying,” highlights the traditional Chinese emphasis on the relationship-defined cardinal obligations or 倫理 (*lun li*).

Certainly Third Mother is not the boy Seet Yi’s biological mother, but since she has assumed the role of mother and has tirelessly met her obligations towards her, shall we call it, step son, Seet Yi’s true biological mother having abandoned him, therefore to Third Mother is owed by Seet Yi all the obligations of a son. They include respect and obedience (except when parents are morally wrong). For the boy Seet Yi to disrespect her and challenge her motivation in directing and punishing him is the utmost in betrayal of his relationship-defined cardinal obligations. Biological, adopted, or “step”—there being no ready equivalent term for the traditional Chinese idea that all of one’s father’s wives are equally one’s mothers—obligation is due one’s mother. Because Third Mother has met, or has at least tried to meet, her obligations as a mother, biological or no, towards the boy Seet Yi, he owes her all obligations as a son.

As for “implicitly consenting to polygamy,” the story is merely portraying how relationship-defined cardinal obligations play out in a special and complicated situation, and is neither for nor against polygamy. As for “glorifying the stepmother over the birth mother,” that is totally unfounded; this opera is only portraying a special case and not a general case.

Feng Xing-ming, December 17, 2006

(Sung passages in bold print)

## Scene I

Wong Chueun-ngor: After the season turns cold and the trees become barren then one appreciates the evergreens; when the family is poor and the son is young then one sees people's hearts. I, Wong Chuen-Ngor, married Seet Ji-Lo. He went to Jun-gong to do some trading, and unfortunately died there, far away. We owed it to the old Seet Family Butler, who brought the body back. At the time, senior wife Lady Jeung took all the valuables and left. Second wife Lady Lou abandoned her own son; everyone left for elsewhere. It was me who resolved to bring up the former wife's son and to keep the family going. Fortunately the old Seet Family Butler helps me. Everyday he collects firewood and cooks meals. Me, I stay in the weaving room and weave silk to exchange for groceries. Right now my child is still not back from school, and I am just weaving away in the weaving room. My heart is like still water, without waves; running the household and educating the son is a matter of course. **I, Wong Chuen-Ngor, am alone like a lost wild goose, but my heart is content. My only wish is that my child studies hard, and in the future tries to emulate the wise and pure. I put myself in the weaving room and weave; I work hard all day to exchange for food and groceries.**

Seet, Yi: Some classmates laugh at me, saying that I have a mother to give birth to me but no mother to raise me. I can't help but be both ashamed and angry; I am full of frustration. **Hearing gossip and jeers, I find it hard to comprehend anything in the books though they are right in front of my eyes.**

Butler Seet Boe: I see Little Master returning. Little Master, my respects.

S (Seet Yi): Big Brother Butler, my respects.

B (Butler Seet Boe): Respects. Little Master, why are you home from school so early today?

S: The teacher was invited out to dinner, so school was let out early.

B: Oh, that's why. Reasonable enough, reasonable enough. Have you seen Third Mother yet?

S: Not yet.

B: Third Mother is weaving in the weaving room. You must hurry up and go see Third Mother.

S: Right.... I, your child, bow to greet Third Mother.

W (Wong Chueun-ngor):: Child, you have come home?

S: Yes.

W: Why are you back from school so early today?

S: The teacher was invited out to dinner, so school was let out early.

W: Well that is reasonable enough. Oh son, at school have you recited your lesson yet?

S: Not yet.

W: In that case, you must recite your lesson in front of me right away.

S: Here.

W: Oh foolish one, I ask you to recite; yet you throw your books on the ground. Is that proper behavior for an educated person? Pick them up for Mother right away.

S: Here, Third Mother.

W: That's better. Now turn around for Mother. Why don't you start? Why don't you start?

S: Third Mother, oh, Third Mother, I forget the first sentence.

W: Foolish one, oh, foolish one, when people recite they usually forget the ending. You, foolish one, you forget the beginning. Alright, let Mother tell

you the first sentence then, "The Teacher Jung said, 'Everyday I review my conduct thrice.'"

S: "The Teacher Jung said, 'Everyday I review my conduct thrice.'"

W: "'Have I been disloyal in conducting others' affairs?'"

S: "'Have I been disloyal in conducting others' affairs?'"

W: "'Have I been untrustworthy in dealing with friends? Have I lectured but not practiced?'"

S: "'Have I been untrustworthy in dealing with friends? Have I lectured but not practiced?'"

W: Keep on reciting, keep on reciting. Mother says to keep on reciting. Mother says to keep on reciting!

S: Aiya! People haven't even studied it; how can you expect people to recite it? How can you expect people to recite it!

W: I...you foolish one! Oh foolish one! Mother thinks you are studying diligently in school, yet you have just been playing, letting your studies go to rot. That will surely waste your youth. On top of that, you dare to throw such outbursts in front of Mother. You kneel down right now for Mother; you kneel down right now for Mother!

S: So what if I kneel? So what if I kneel?

W: Aiya, oh beast! **You little beast, you throw your studies to the wind; you love loitering and laziness; you don't know enough to love yourself. Little do you know that, if you waste your youth, when you get older you will wail in vain, for time once past never returns. There were ancients who studied while herding cattle and carrying firewood; they didn't let poverty get in the way. Some put fireflies in a bag; some used the moonlight reflected off snow; even when they were so poor as to lack lamplight they succeeded in learning. Those ancients were all borne of parents, not dropped down from heaven. In becoming the extraordinary of their day, who among them didn't achieve it through hard work and determination? I don't dare to make extravagant wishes;**

**I don't dare to ask that you behave like the ancient sages; I only ask that you put your mind to studying oh son, that you neither slacken nor abandon. Never did I expect that you would neglect your studies, or, to add to it all, that you would be so disrespectful. You unruly little foolish one, you deserve to be hit. First, you should not speak in an unkind manner. Second, you should not throw those books on the ground. Third, you should not subject Mother to such simmering anger. Fourth, you should not be unable to recite a single word. I must make you realize your wrongs and want to change. Without some punishment you won't have any warning in the future. I must carry out an educational sentence so that you, beast, will learn remorse and reform.**

S: Don't, Third Mother! Don't, Third Mother! Third Mother oh Third Mother, if you want someone to hit and yell at, why don't you give birth to someone? You are hitting somebody else's son; aren't you embarrassed? Aren't you embarrassed?

W: Aiya, son! The words you just said, who taught you to say them?

S: I know how to eat; I know how to read; shouldn't I know how to say a few words? It's me who say them; it's me who say them!

W: Ai! It's you who say them? Oh son! Those words you just said, luckily you said them now; if you delay any more in saying them, I don't know how much more Mother would hit you in error!

S: Of course, of course! I am growing bigger everyday now; you think I am still like before when I was a little child, when you could manipulate me any way you wanted? When you could manipulate me any way you wanted?

W: Aiya! It's over, my husband sire. Ai! Husband oh husband! Since you died, I should have followed you to the underworld; the only thing that held me back was that I was determined to raise the lonely child. Who realized that human nature would be so capricious? Today matters stand opposite to my wishes: my son doesn't consider me his mother. From now on it will be hard to teach him. Though I cannot forget my obligations to my husband, my son has hurt my heart too much. Oh husband! Mother and child exchange vitriol; I have lost my son's heart; the road ahead is still long; oh husband tell me what to do with myself, oh husband! **Oh husband! My**

**heart has been butchered with a knife; my bitterness who will understand?**

**B (Seet Boe): In the back kitchen tending fire and cooking food, I, the Seets' old Butler, suddenly hear some disturbance in the front hall. Let me put myself in the front hall and have a look. Let me put myself in the front hall and have a look.**

**W: Ai, woe, my husband, who will take pity on my bitter fate? Oh my short-lived husband!**

**B: Oh, it is Mistress Third Mother, in the weaving room, emitting sad sounds. Sadly wailing, wailing sadly; sadly wailing, wailing sadly. But why? Must be Little Master. He must have just wreaked some havoc, causing Mistress Third Mother to overflow with tears. Coming forward, of my Mistress I earnestly ask, I earnestly ask; I ask Third Mother, why are you overflowing with tears?**

**W: I expected to have someone to depend on for the rest of my life; I didn't expect it to be as futile as carrying water with a wicker basket. It's as unexpected as tripping on level ground.**

**B: Little Master is still young. You are the mother--you should educate him; you must not hold onto your anger and quarrel with him.**

**W: You say he is still young, but his heart already keeps a clear account. The words he says torment me unbearably.**

**B: Mistress Third Mother, you should be more tolerant; kind parents get filial sons. If the parent is not kind then the son is not filial. The neighbors will laugh at us.**

**W: Aiya, let's forget it! He even says it is because I am an unkind parent that I have an unfilial son! Ten years and more of bitter toil, today suddenly all thrown away! What is all this weaving of the silk? What is all this teaching of the son? Cut the threads on the loom, and throw the ends apart.**

**B: Seeing Third Mother cutting the loom threads apart, I can't help but become all flustered. Woe, Third Mother, oh Mistress! Remember**



**back when, my good Third Mother, in front of your husband's coffin, you swore that to raise Little Master, the rest of this life you will not shun any hardship? Now today, you cut the loom threads; you refuse to teach your son; on whom are you going to tell Little Master to depend for his upbringing? Good Third Mother, could it be that it's just a momentary lapse in thinking that you watch with folded hands when Little Master needs teaching? It's hard to understand oh Third Mother.**

**W: Ai, Household Manager, my elderly sir! My heart? My heart will never change. What is sad, what is sad is that human affairs change right in front of one's eyes. It's all because when he came home from school today, I asked him to recite his lesson. Who would have guessed that not only was he unable to recite one single word, but also he spoke spitefully to me. When I picked up the Family Law to punish him, I was only trying to make him repent and change for the better.**

B: It was right to hit him.

**W: It was wrong to hit him. Unexpectedly he...he...he...he...he opened his mouth to accuse me. He accused me of not being his birth mother. His accusations I couldn't answer. Oh Household Manager, from now on I don't dare say a word.**

**B: Aiya! After hearing Third Mother's words of sorrow, I turn around to complain to Little Master. Little Master! You really were in the wrong!**

S: How was I in the wrong?

B: When you come back from school today, Third Mother told you to recite your lesson, but you couldn't recite one word. Moreover, you said malevolent words that offended Third Mother. Quick, go up and apologize to Third Mother.

S: I am not going!

B: You must go!

S: I am not going!

B: This old servant will drag you there.

S: Not going, not going.

....

B: Aiya, Little Master you shouldn't have.

S: I shouldn't have what?

B: Look, this old servant is old and weak, like a candle in the wind, frost on the roof tiles. You shouldn't have pushed me down onto the ground. If I should meet with some misfortune, Little Master how can you live with yourself?

S: Big Brother Butler, I know I have been wrong. You don't have to be angry; I will go.

B: You go, you go! Let me teach you how. You put the Family Law on top of your head, go up there, and kneel in front of Third Mother. You say, "Third Mother oh Third Mother! Now the Family Law is here. May Third Mother raise it high, and lightly bring it down. Consider one hit as ten hits, and ten hits as one hundred hits. The hit is on the son's body; the pain is in the mother's heart. May Third Mother teach me!" If you say it like that Third Mother won't hit you; she won't even bear to touch you!

S: Big Brother Butler, Third Mother really won't hit me?

B: She won't hit you.

S: Then I will go.

...

S: (*Kneels in front of Third Mother with the "Family Law" on his head.*)  
Third Mother oh Third Mother! Today when I came home from school I said things that offended you. Now the Family Law is here. May Third Mother raise it high, and lightly bring it down. Consider one hit as ten hits, and ten hits as one hundred hits. The hit is on the son's body; the pain is in the mother's heart. May Third Mother teach me!

B: Third Mother, please teach him!

**W: I address my elderly sir, since my husband sire died, despite untold difficulties we lived through our sad stricken situation. We owed it to you for your sticking through thick and thin to sustain this broken family. My deceased husband down in the underworld undoubtedly appreciates your loyalty highly. The Seet Family's son has already grown up; he will spread his own wings and fly.**

B: Third Mother, you should tell Little Master about how, after Old Master died, the family changed, how the family went through such poverty, and how Third Mother persisted through dire circumstances. Tell Little Master all that in detail, and patiently educate him.

W: Things of the past I do not wish to bring up.

B: If Third Mother doesn't bring up things of the past, I, the Butler, can tell Little Master. Coming from this old servant, however, would not be as close to home as coming from you. It would not move him the same way, so that he would become motivated and would apply himself.

W: If I bring up those things I am afraid it will hurt my son's heart. Maybe it's better to not bring them up.

B: Although for the time being it may hurt Little Master's heart, telling the story will help his future greatly. Third Mother, you must speak.

W: Let's not bring them up.

B: Third Mother, you must speak.

**W: I will speak. Son, you were unfortunate; your father died in Jungong. Your birth mother abandoned you and left the family. Son, you left your mother too early; you had no milk to drink. You were weak and often ill. Mother had been terrified many a time; because of you I had no peace day or night. Often deep into the night you would cry without stop. I would carry you from bed to watch the bright moon. For you Mother went to bed dry and woke up wet. I clung to you as I clung to dear life. My only wish was that you would study diligently, that you would soon mature. Who would know that you would neglect your studies and listen to malicious talk, that you would come back and**

**lash out at Mother, damaging the feelings between mother and child?  
Ai, put yourself in Mother's place; can I help but mourn my bitter fate?**

*S:* Third Mother!

*W:* My child!

*S:* Dear mother!

*W:* Dear child!

***B:* Congratulations! Between mother and child, your feelings are true and your sense of obligation, weighty. Congratulations! You have a kind parent and a filial son; you will be very happy.**

***All:* Together as a family, as long as we can be diligent and thrifty our happiness will be infinite.**

**END**