

粵劇：三娘教子

CANTONESE OPERA: THIRD MOTHER TEACHES HER SON English Translation

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, stepson, 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