



ON WHY HEALTH INEQUALITIES PERSIST: ANALYZING THE *LEGEND OF ZHENHUAN* (2011) THROUGH FREIRE

SOBRE POR QUE PERSISTEM AS DESIGUALDADES EM SAÚDE: ANALISANDO A *LENDA DE ZHENHUAN* (2011) POR MEIO DE FREIRE

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ABSTRACT – This paper analyzes the *Legend of Zhenhuan* (2011) through the writings of Freire to discuss persistent health inequalities. With the increasing use of drama and film in medical school education, the *Legend of ZhenHuan* presents acute commentary on classism and inequality by breaking a host of harem romance stereotypes. It first places emphasis on the lives of a cast of slave characters, challenging the marginalized and invisibilized status of the oppressed class as humanized characters in media representation. Beyond a discussion of human rights and disability issues, it further questions the purpose of following rules when the existing system of rules permits health inequalities to persist. Transgression of rules is not simplistically encouraged in its in-depth analysis. The narrative presents multiple tiers of privileged individuals acting as oppressors, with lower tiers of oppressors revealed to be living in oppression

themselves. With this, it challenges a binary between the privileged and the oppressed to pose the question of who and what exactly society should be fighting against in a quest for human equality. The conclusion of the narrative does not follow a reductionist approach to solving inequality but outlines the importance of countering two important strategies the privileged have designed to perpetuate inequality. First, the divide-and-conquer mechanism of fostering a fight among the oppressed requires acute awareness and a dedication to solidarity - a painful state requiring sacrifice, which Freire describes as a “radical posture”. Second, a collective refusal to participate in inequitable systems is needed, as it counters the strategy of the elite in educating new generations of leaders who are ready to help lead and maintain inequitable systems, as the education system is designed to “inoculate a bourgeois appetite for personal success”, inequitable



hierarchies may be challenged, but quickly rebuilt by young generations as illustrated in the concluding episode.

KEYWORDS: *Legend of ZhenHuan*; health; digital media; oppression; inequalities

RESUMO – Este artigo analisa a **Lenda de Zhenhuan** (2011) por meio dos escritos de Freire para discutir as persistentes desigualdades em termos de saúde. Com o uso crescente de drama e cinema na educação médica, a **Lenda de ZhenHuan** apresenta comentários agudos sobre o classismo e a desigualdade, quebrando uma série de estereótipos de romance de harém. Em primeiro lugar, coloca ênfase na vida de um elenco de personagens escravas, desafiando o estatuto marginalizado e invisibilizado da classe oprimida como personagens humanizadas na representação mediática. Para além de uma discussão sobre questões de direitos humanos e deficiência, questiona ainda o objetivo de seguir regras quando o sistema de regras existente permite a persistência de desigualdades na saúde. A transgressão de regras não é encorajada de forma simplista na sua análise aprofundada. A narrativa apresenta vários níveis de indivíduos privilegiados agindo como opressores, com os níveis mais

baixos de opressores revelando que eles próprios vivem em opressão. Com isto, desafia um binário entre os privilegiados e os oprimidos para colocar a questão de quem e contra o que exatamente a sociedade deveria lutar na busca pela igualdade humana. A conclusão da narrativa não segue uma abordagem reducionista para resolver a desigualdade, mas descreve a importância de contrariar duas estratégias importantes que os privilegiados conceberam para perpetuar a desigualdade. Em primeiro lugar, o mecanismo de dividir para conquistar que promove uma luta entre os oprimidos requer uma consciência aguda e uma dedicação à solidariedade – um estado doloroso que exige sacrifício, que Freire descreve como uma “postura radical”. Em segundo lugar, é necessária uma recusa coletiva de participar em sistemas injustos, uma vez que contraria a estratégia da elite na educação de novas gerações de líderes que estão prontos para ajudar a liderar e manter sistemas injustos, uma vez que o sistema educativo é concebido para “inocular um apetite burguês para o sucesso pessoal”, hierarquias injustas podem ser desafiadas, mas rapidamente reconstruídas pelas gerações mais jovens, como ilustrado no episódio final.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – **Lenda de ZhenHuan**; saúde; mídia digital; opressão; desigualdades

Lived Experience and Class in Digital Humanities

The **Legend of Zhen Huan** presents a cultural narrative rooted in historical China, nonetheless with modern international appeal as indicated by its Netflix release in the English-speaking world and multiple studies on its English translation (JING &

XIAOZHEN, 2020; WEI & DU, 2019; ZHANG & PERDIKAKI, 2017). As a unique work in the digital humanities (BERRY, 2012), what started as a serialized story circulating on the internet (FREEDMAN, 2017) was adapted to the medium of drama, then single-handedly revived the harem palace genre within China for cultural export



beyond its borders (CAI, 2016). Analyzing the *Legend of ZhenHuan* through Freire's **Pedagogy of the Oppressed** (1970) reveals that its harem narrative is less concerned with a romance between the elites, but instead follows a structure of the oppressed gaining liberation from classism that is institutionalized by the privileged.

After Freire's pedagogical writings, Tracey Nicholls' explicitly states in her **Pedagogy of the Privileged** that "[j]ust as class is treated as a secret shame when it is an attribute of one's personal identity, it is treated as a trivial element of academic study" (2011). Classism may be understood in localized or historicized forms, for example, within the Indian caste system or during the Second World War (CARNEVALE et al., 2023). Health research, however, would suggest that classism continues to permeate all facets of modern society with multiple related concepts in research, such as the social gradient in health (CLOUGHERTY et al., 2010), socioeconomic status (ADLER & OSTROVE, 1999), and social determinants of health (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2008) among others.

Following the narrative in the **Legend of ZhenHuan**, the very first episode declares its intentional focus on inequality and classism: Parents are shown to dictate the life of their protagonist's daughter, sending her against her will to be selected for polygamy with the emperor. Immediately upon the protagonist's selection as a concubine, parents are shown kneeling before the daughter until they are granted the right to stand up in front of their daughter - who is no longer in a class within their reach. The cultural context of this is significant, as the concept of filial piety not only requires respect for one's parents but has also established a social norm captured in the phrase 百

善孝為先 ("of all moral acts, respect to parents comes first"). Here, the persistent characteristic of classism is highlighted, as classism is not only capable of reverting social norms but also reverting pre-established moral codes. The justified and institutionalized natures of classism would be further explored throughout the **Legend of ZhenHuan**, serving as a platform to consider ways to challenge persistent inequality.

Drama is increasingly used in the education of health professionals (MATHARU et al., 2011; McCullough, 2012; Williams et al., 2015). With the rise of arts-based methods (PERRY et al., 2011) and emphasis on patient-oriented research (FRISCH et al., 2020), drama can be considered a method of encapsulating patient experiences toward greater dissemination and understanding of patient perspectives (SINDING et al., 2006). A key characteristic of the fiction in the **Legend of ZhenHuan** is its portrayal of past, real-world social structures as a piece of historical fiction (WHITE, 2005). The following sections discuss how the **Legend of ZhenHuan** not only draws upon the lived experience of the historically oppressed but also goes beyond to provide a rationale for behaviors that continue to institutionalize classism to this day.

On Invisiblized Disability & Human Rights

The concepts of marginalized, underprivileged, or disadvantaged populations within health research suggest increasing emphasis on acknowledging diversity. Similarly, the research terminology is slowly expanding to the concept of *invisiblized* populations (BARONGO-MUWEKE, 2016; BORDERON et al., 2021; LANGEGER & KOESTER, 2016; SOROKA et al., 2003). The **Legend of ZhenHuan** reinforces its discussions



on classism by detailing a cast of characters living in slavery, including the historical population of eunuchs. Existing across the Roman Empire, (HOPKINS, 1963) Ottoman Empire (WILSON & ROEHRBORN, 1999), and beyond, eunuchs are rarely acknowledged as “subjects of serious scholarship” (PRESTON, 1987). While other historical crimes against humanity may be brought to attention in modern times through advocacy, the crimes committed against these individuals - often young children - are rare due to the simple fact that no descendants exist to bring forward the cause of the eunuch. Nonetheless, the fact that multiple cultures have performed violation of the reproductive rights of the oppressed class suggests that the health burdens of the oppressed can often become invisibilized. The invisibilization is strategically designed to last into the future, as the termination of the ancestral lineage of oppressed boys and men has effectively produced minimal visibility of their lived experience.

Visibility itself is a significant point of Nicholl’s discussion, suggesting that the privileged demand the oppressed to pay a cost to co-exist in the same space. Nicholls discusses the typical strategies of “blending in, ‘passing,’ and adopting the values of the privileged class” (2011); essentially, in order to co-exist, the oppressed must voluntarily give up their visibility by pretending to be the privileged. The plight of the eunuchs echoes one in which the privileged preemptively strip away this option from the oppressed. By emasculation and removing the right to develop secondary sex characteristics, the eunuchs represent an existence that could be described by Macedo’s discussion on the visibility of the oppressed: “[an existence] that is almost culturally schizophrenic: being present and yet not visible, being visible and yet not present” (2000, p. 11).

Here, the stories of slaves, as represented in the **Legend of ZhenHuan** show their value. A brief overview of the protagonist ZhenHuan’s core unit in the palace illustrates the dedication to de-invisibilizing the oppressed. ZhenHuan is serviced by three female slaves, two from her own family since childhood and one bestowed as a commodity after she enters the palace. Of the three slave women, the lowest status is LiuZhu (or “flowing scarlet”), who passes away from injury at a young age to protect her master. This rationale behind such dedication to one’s master, or the dedication of the oppressed towards the privileged, would later be fully explored by the narrative.

The second slave-woman who served the protagonist from their childhoods is HuanBi (“cleansing celadon”). Despite her parallel naming to the other slave, she is revealed to be ZhenHuan’s half-sister, whose maternal lineage includes a politician who has fallen out of favor. Wishing to remove all association with the maternal family, her father raises her in secrecy, side-by-side with her privileged half-sister - the protagonist of the series - on the condition that she serves as her own half-sister’s slave. Political favor is directly indicated through a rigid system of nine to eighteen hierarchical ranks in the historical Qing Dynasty and a binary demarcation of those who become legally condemned for their political stance as *ZuiChen* (罪臣, or “criminal servant”). Again, the narrative shows a dedicated effort to invisibilize not just the lower class but also - via the acts of ZhenHuan’s father - to invisibilize all associations with the lower class at all costs.

The third slave woman is the only one to survive the end of the series. In order to regain ZhenHuan’s political status, she establishes an alliance by agreeing to marry the Emperor’s



personal slave - a eunuch. Marriage to a eunuch, or, male-female companionship between servants and eunuchs is explored as not a novelty plot point but rather a historical, population-level phenomenon. Here, the narrative shows its relevance to contemporary society as it ties together not only historical lived experiences of the oppressed but also progressive perspectives that border on radical. Making the linguistic assumption that the violation of reproductive rights alters the ability of one to carry out specific bodily functions, the sexual needs and sexual rights of the differently-abled and those living with disabilities (EARLE, 1999) is a public health issue that is arguably invisibilized to this day. Whether or not castration can be discussed as a form or a disability or difference-of-sex-development (CROCETTI et al., 2021) is beyond the scope of this discussion. Still, all individuals, regardless of diversity, regardless of self-identification, and regardless of social labels, should have the right to access companionship if they so choose. As explicitly discussed in the **Legend of ZhenHuan**, this companionship may be sexual but does not always have to be sexual, and having access to lifelong commitment together with another individual effectively allows slaves to engage with other human beings beyond the slave-master hierarchy which defines their lives.

If castration cannot effectively represent the dedication of the **Legend of ZhenHuan** to discussing disabilities as an intersectional issue with oppression and health inequalities, a number of other character arcs would. Within the first day of life in the palace for the new cohort of concubines, one concubine is “bestowed” or “gifted,” a form of royal correctional disciplining involving the maiming of both of her legs toward a lifelong inability to walk. This disciplinary action is not performed for disobedience or crime against the

emperor or state but simply against a higher-ranking concubine. The exceptional cruelty, authorized by law, is not fiction but rooted in the historical reality noted in the scholarship (MOORE, 2001). The protagonist herself, after gaining the attention of the Emperor, would be poisoned by her peers with the goal of inducing a form of early-onset dementia. A Lingrong, a concubine serving the emperor with her musical skills, is poisoned with a substance that damages her vocal cords. Without their knowledge, multiple queens and concubines throughout the drama would be sterilized by substances passing as medicine or incense. These seemingly fictional elements, in actuality, create a realistic representation of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as a system which is distinct from Western medicine: In TCM, almost all substances are noted not just for their medicinal use but also for their toxic properties via arduous documentation of potential harms. Whereas Western medicine linguistically labels harms as *side* effects of a primary medicinal function, the pharmacological philosophy behind TCM does not use a binary system to identify substances as medicines or toxins but rather highlights the integrated nature of medicine as toxins. Applying this philosophy of medicine is proven to create health solutions with comparable effectiveness to Western medicine, with even arsenic being used for treatments approved by the West (CHEN et al., 2011; SOIGNET et al., 1998).

The representation of disability in the **Legend of ZhenHuan** is diverse. There is no binary demarcation of the disabled versus the non-disabled. Disability is shown to affect all classes and ranks in the palace. Disability is often shown to be forced upon others, usually, as a tool for a higher class to exert control over the lower class. As



privileged and elite as the royal concubines appear, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** explicitly explains that all high-ranking statesmen and politicians are required to submit their daughters for the Emperor's consideration of concubinage. The act of placing daughters in the esteemed position of a concubine is not meant to reward politicians, but rather, as a check-and-balance measure to constrain the power of influential houses with their daughters as hostages. This hostageship is only overcome if the daughter gains favor, with the utmost favor granted to those who can bear children for the royal family. Therefore, the daughters of high-ranking statesmen, once entering the palace, must play at least one of two roles: hostage, or, "child-bearers" (STABILE, 2015).

With polygamy being highly normalized among historical emperors, it is debatable whether there is true marriage between the emperor and the concubines. Instead, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** highlights the historical Chinese binary of 庶 (concubines) versus 嫡 (official/legal wife): only one legal wife is permitted to exist at all times. While marriage may exist between a man and his legal wife, all other concubines, at most, can be considered as playing the role of child-bearers in the historical harem. If indeed a concubine has gained significant favor towards an authentic marriage-like relationship with the man, she would no longer be concubine. Instead, she would be promoted to the unique position of the singular 嫡, with the previous legal wife demoted to concubine. In this race to become the legal wife of the emperor as means to escape the functions of hostage and child-bearing, outcompeting other concubines is most easily done by removing the reproductive abilities of others. Whereas

sterilization is no longer a prominent subject in modern disability studies, it is important to note that from the perspective of occupational health, child-bearing is often forced upon historical women as their occupation, since the privileged class often leave women with no other means to attain value, status, nor livelihood in society.

In the **Legend of ZhenHuan**, two concubines of lower ranks willingly consent to have their reproductive abilities removed. Although one allows this due to her lack of interest in serving as a concubine while another allows this to gain favor and climb the ranks in her workplace, both use their sterilization as an open declaration, assuring the privileged class that they will pose no competition and therefore no threat to the existing hierarchy. Therefore, although the right to one's own body is arguably absent for all women in the harem context, the oppressed class is more often tasked with surrendering this right to their bodies.

Whereas the traditional drama involving palaces and other royal themes may attract viewership based on lavish romance, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** is intent on not just depicting the lived experience of the elite but rather the lived experience of slaves living under the oppression of the elites. Romance is not just de-emphasized but completely reverted, as all concubines eventually become conscious of their situation as hostages or child-bearers.

Both Bell Hooks and Freire discuss media or popular culture representations of the oppressed, with Hooks suggesting that media representation is designed to "internalize fear and contempt for those who are poor" (2006: 168-169). What the *Legend of ZhenHuan* achieves regarding media representation is two-fold. First, it provides visibility to invisibilized populations - individuals living in slavery and those living with disabilities,



including forced disabilities. If traditional palace-themed dramas espouse in the viewers a longing to be royal along with a self-identification with only characters from the privileged class, the detailed and grounded storylines of slave characters in the **Legend of ZhenHuan** allow space for potential self-identification with the oppressed. Second, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** goes beyond making invisible populations visible as it further challenges the perspectives on oppression itself: the elite love interests of royalty as glamorous female figures, too, are living in their own enslavement as political and reproductive tools. This subversive representation, in the words of Nicholls, may serve as an example of “introducing powerful narratives of film and literature into the classroom...to develop a capacity for empathy that is otherwise stunted by the culture that directs [students] to become [media] consumers instead of citizens” (2011).

Rules: Microaggression and Enforcement

The aforementioned details in the narratives appear to depict a chaotic context of no law and order. However, the exact opposite is true as the historical palace is under a strict set of rules that govern even minute details. In the very first scene introducing the two highest-ranking wives - the empress and a prized concubine - a strange interaction is depicted. The legal wife as the superior, offers to reward the concubine a delicacy: the **牡丹卷** (“peony roll”), which the concubine orders her slave to handle for her. The slave instead drops and shatters the entire plate on the floor. The concubine proceeds to chastise her slave for this mistake but ultimately leaves the destroyed delicacy for the legal wife’s servant to clean up. This interaction cannot be interpreted without

understanding the complex set of rules at play. The peony serves as a cultural symbol that only the emperor's legal wife can access, whether it be in her jewelry, interior decor, or even in the shape and naming of what she chooses to eat. This is comparable to an oriental version of *antecedent law* (DILLARD, 2009), in which history and literature accumulate over time to establish a massive matrix of regulations. Four dynasties ago, the peony would be positioned as the symbol of the emperor’s legal wife through the poet Liu Yuxi in his line “唯有牡丹真国色”, or, “only the peony is true national-aesthetic”. Here, “national aesthetic” refers to feminine beauty who sits at the top of the entire empire: the one legal empress herself. The aforementioned interaction, therefore, is not one of an empress rewarding food to a concubine but rather an empress reminding the concubine of her superiority as the only legal wife. The queen grants the symbol of the peony not only to showcase what she has unique access to via her status but rather to imply that if the seat of the empress ends up in the hands of the concubine, it would not be through the concubine’s prowess but rather at the grace of the empress. The concubine’s response, which is ordering her slave to destroy this peony, then makes logical sense. Under the rules of the palace, the concubine cannot respectfully decline the offer of a delicacy from an empress. However, she can mask her passionate refusal as a careless mistake of her slave. Eventually, the concubine-slave pair leave the empress with the peony on the floor in shambles, communicating without words the concubine’s intent to dismantle the peony and dethrone the empress. Palace rules do not prohibit the intricate exchange and exertion of power through the unspoken, but rather facilitated by the rules.



Here, the *Legend of ZhenHuan* offers sharp commentary on the ineffectiveness of rules in maintaining equal rights and equal treatment of human beings. In the **Legend of ZhenHuan** rules, once established, do not necessarily protect but rather inspire novel ways to oppress. This directly mirrors modern research on microaggressions (Ogunyemi et al., 2020), which permeate the interactions between the oppressed and privileged class within a domain authorized by existing rules. Rule-breaking is not a prerequisite for oppression, as there exist multiple ways to oppress others under what is permitted by the existing system. **The Legend of ZhenHuan** further declares the futility of establishing additional rules as a solution to eliminating microaggressions; as the previous interaction on a simple symbol would suggest, rules essentially create a parallel language of subtexts and connotations to exert power - a language that only expands and compounds with the addition of new rules.

A further discussion on rules offered by the **Legend of ZhenHuan** also conveniently answers two questions from the commentary on invisibility. First, can the royal concubines be pragmatically considered as the oppressed in spite of their privilege, and, second, what is the rationale behind a slave's total dedication towards their masters, a dedication that can be seen as the oppressed committing their lives to their oppressors? **The Legend of ZhenHuan** paints a grounded picture of life in the palace in response to these inquiries. Given the fact that the royal concubines lack even the rights to their own bodies, their access to essential resources such as food, clean water, healthcare, and coal to heat the winter months are all governed by a strict set of rules. If classism is not yet apparent in the **Legend of ZhenHuan**, the narrative also highlights a political ranking system

of concubines, documenting various female characters and their journeys of promotion (and demotion) in the hierarchy from an attendant to lady, to consort, to queen, to high queen, to empress. Rules govern how one is promoted, where one lives among the many palace buildings, and ultimately, the monthly rations of essential commodities. In more than one instance, a royal concubine is denied access to food, water, healthcare, or heat mandated by her rank due to a lack of favor from the emperor or oppression from a higher-ranking individual. This denial of essential resources does not arise from the lack of protective rules but rather the lack of enforcement of rules. In a few simple lines of dialogue, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** further adds the detail of the rations denied to the oppressed class being collected by other slaves, who accumulate these extra sources as bribes offered to the privileged.

This illustrates the fundamental difference between establishing rules versus enforcing rules: just as classism is seen to revert the rules of morality and the rule of respecting one's parents, the lack of enforcement of rules can effectively nullify the purpose of rules. **The Legend of ZhenHuan** further underscores that protective rules are less likely to be enforced the lower one's position is in the class system. Revealing and advocating against this lack of enforcement requires gaining the attention of a higher supervisory authority. When there exists no connection between the lower class and this higher supervisory class (in the case of the narrative, the lack of means to communicate with the Emperor as a concubine falling out of favor), essential human rights are easily violated despite a myriad of rules.

The motivations of the slave characters, then, are also explained. As the concubines gain access to her monthly ration based on what the rules offer



her, her slaves gain access to their necessities based on the concubine's distribution of what she receives. As a narrative dedicated to humanizing slave characters and the oppressed class, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** has no lack of morally-superior slave characters who are sacrificial in protecting their masters. In the case of the protagonist, she owes her life to two slaves who make tremendous sacrifices. LiuZhu dies when the protagonist is placed under house-arrest with no access to essential resources - including access to a *TaiYi* ("royal physician") - and in a state of a medical emergency with no other leverage points, LiuZhu calls upon much-needed healthcare by self-inflicted injury that cost her life. Within the historical context, poor children may be raised alongside a privileged child, serving as their lifelong slaves based on a foundation of a relationship formed by growing up together. LiuZhu's sacrifice is then, less likely motivated by her personal interest, but rather her unwillingness to watch another human being pass away in her presence - especially since the other human being is a gracious master and simultaneous childhood friend. As mentioned in addition to LiuZhu, the third slave woman to serve the protagonist makes a long-term sacrifice when she enters into marriage with a eunuch for political favor that would save the protagonist from criminal execution. These details are emphasized by the director not only to humanize slave characters, but also highlight an important reality. Throughout history, the health and wellbeing of the master comes at the willing or unwilling sacrifice of the slave.

Despite these honorable representations of the oppressed, the narrative is not overly idealistic and rejects romanticized portrayal. A host of other slave characters make their appearances, and not all share the characteristic of selflessness. The **Legend of**

ZhenHuan proceeds to detail interclass oppression: among the multiple slave characters in the palace, they are also shown to be forced into perpetual competition with one another. The microaggressions and direct aggression from other slaves can only be prevented if the oppressed help their masters achieve a higher position in the class system for a simple reason: enforcing punitive rules requires one to belong in a higher class than the offender.

The **Legend of ZhenHuan** thus details why the oppressed choose to engage in competition or complete commitment to the privileged class. Elimination of inequalities cannot be possible when the essential livelihood of the oppressed is held in the hands of the privileged, nor when oppression from peers can only be prevented by an arduous fight for upward mobility towards a higher class. These grave realities co-exist alongside a massive set of existing rules aimed at fair and equal treatment of all human beings, calling to question the purpose of following rules when these rules permit inequitable conditions to exist. On Freire's pedagogy, Bell Hooks notes the value of transgressing and teaching to transgress (2014). With rules incapable of preventing classism due to lack of enforcement and reinforcing classism through expanding the silent, parallel vocabulary of exerting power, Nicholls describes the role of the modern youth as entering "induction into conformity" through the education system. This conformity is simultaneously pondered as a "deform[ity]" of youth as modern classism continues to forcefully mold humans by pressing them into the rigidity of rules. Although oppressed individuals in modernity live with differing rules depending on their geographical and cultural contexts, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** summarizes the rules at play. In the narrative, all rules can be



summed up towards the singular purpose of maintaining the power and total control of the emperor as a symbol of the elite.

“Liberation from what?” - the Critical Question

Freire’s philosophical writings on oppression place the ultimate goal not towards the elimination of classism, but rather what he describes as “increasing liberation of humankind” (2000, p. 176). This liberation, according to Freire, is not just required of the oppressed but “of all people” (2000, p. 54). Specifically on the privileged, Freire believes that the privileged should also be freed from their oppressive tendencies, viewing their intent to oppress others as their invisible confinement. In conjunction with discussions on rules, non-conformity, and transgression, young generations who live in oppression – and privilege - may gravitate naturally towards rule-breaking towards no specific cause, believing that this rebellion can somehow lead to freedom. Freire’s discussion of *critical consciousness* (2000) thus becomes important, as being able to perceive the system of inequality and taking action against said system can free the oppressed from fighting against a futile enemies.

As mentioned, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** documents the journey of an oppressed individual - a young girl married off against her will - towards her eventual liberation. This stepwise progression illustrates the woes of investing one’s powers to fight against the wrong enemies in the system of inequality. Upon her entry into the palace, the protagonist faces the haughty and prized HuaFei (literally, “queen of glory”), the same female lead who destroyed the peony offering and maimed the legs of a new concubine. Second only to the legal empress, HuaFei attracts tremendous attention from the emperor for her youth, her beauty, and

her status as the younger sister of the emperor’s most valued military leader. Her ascent to the position of the legal empress is implied to be a matter of time once the legal empress falls out of favor (aging alone can produce that outcome), or, once she gives birth to a royal heir. Based on the military prowess of her family, HuaFei is openly oppressive against other concubines as the emperor himself is reluctant to punish; he himself is reliant on a solid political alliance with her house. The only other higher power capable of constraining HuaFei is the *TaiHou* (empress-dowager or Grand Empress, the mother of the emperor). The Grand Empress, also, seemingly understands the value of the military alliance. Instead of punishment, the Grand Empress goes beyond to honor HuaFei with a unique incense, a reward that the empress has no access to despite being the legal wife.

This sets the context of the first enemy standing in front of the protagonist’s way towards a life of humanity in the palace. The protagonist loses a number of friends and allies to the oppression of HuaFei, who sometimes directly resorts to assassination with limited consequence. HuaFei represents the privileged class who dedicate their power towards oppressing lower classes as means of eliminating competition. The protagonist bears significant costs in order to demote this particular oppressor, as she even loses her first child to stillbirth under HuaFei’s reign of terror. The oppressed, in their struggle, eventually discover that all of their labor is essentially futile, as two important revelations are then made through the narrative.

First, HuaFei’s oppressive acts, though documented, espouse no punitive rules enforced against her until her military-leader sibling loses political favor from the emperor. In other words, no amount of struggle from the oppressed would

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be able to match the efficacy of HuaFei losing her military value. Second, HuaFei dies, but life after the end of her reign remains oppressive and inhumane. The narrative goes on to reveal that HuaFei is but a pawn manipulated by the enemy she saw as no threat: the legal empress. For years, the legal empress has allowed HuaFei to continue her oppressive acts against new cohorts of concubines for the simple reason that this elimination of competition, too, is what the legal empress intends, but she can keep her hands clean by allowing HuaFei to do what HuaFei naturally does. Just as HuaFei climbed the ranks based on her military-leader sibling, the empress is shown to be niece to the emperor's mother, the Grand Empress.

Here, the narrative explicates the taboo discussion of familial relationships within classism. Familial relationship can often be seen as matter which infringes upon personal privacy, and diminished as mere conflict-of-interest. Regardless, the incessant intent of the privileged class to control the reproductive rights of the oppressed would confirm that familial relationships play a more significant role than they may wish to admit, and that the defining feature of dynastic rule is intergenerational familial power. The termination of dynastic political systems in modern society has not eliminated the role of familial relationship in classism; rather, research documents a resurgence of familial dynasties within modern democracies (DAL BÓ et al., 2009). Essentially, the shift to democracy has not eliminated the role of family relationships in classism, but rather assisted in downplaying and concealing this significant contributing factor to inequality.

In the narrative, the legal empress has mastered the art of rule-following, to an extent in which she can completely secure her power by a few simple

acts permitted by the rules that bind her. Her first action is to tolerate HuaFei, who eliminates all competition for her from new concubines. Further, this tolerance of a haughty inferior is presented to the emperor as the empress's expression of grace and utter understanding of the emperor's difficult position. Aside from tolerating HuaFei, the empress's only action to take for power security is following any orders from the Grand Empress as her aunt. The privileged are tasked with fewer steps to secure their privilege, and more often than not, all these steps would be permissible by rules. In contrast, the oppressed would need to commit to incessant struggle just to access basic human rights; more often than not, this struggle would entail actions prohibited by law. The ease at which power comes to the empress is further highlighted by the fact that her masterminding of oppressive classism in the harem actually becomes more challenging after the disrespectful HuaFei passes away. Still, the empress is elegant in her orchestration: she does not need to take up on the oppressive acts that HuaFei used to perform for her, as she simply can raise any oppressed concubine of her choosing to play the role of HuaFei.

Indeed, the oppressed, longing for freedom, may choose to gain upward mobility by compromising their ethical standards. The *Legend of ZhenHuan* provides a very human reason behind this decision. Some characters are shown to compromise their ethical standards but without successfully producing any upward mobility as a result. Thus, when the privileged hand them the opportunity to be ethically compromised with guaranteed upward mobility as a reward, the offer can be difficult to refuse. The legal empress understands that new cohorts of concubines are not just competition but commodities. Every one of the new concubines can become her oppressive



hand while she maintains moral superiority alongside her position of privilege. Commodifying human beings as instruments of power emerges as another significant theme in the **Legend of ZhenHuan**. Whereas commodification is not rare given the societal normalization of slavery in the historical context, the narrative presents a realistic view of how commodification is, essentially, universal in an inequitable system. In fact, members of the royal families themselves are depicted as commodified.

Firstly, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** presents the historically-accurate practice of transferring children among different concubines. Multiple children in the narrative are “bestowed” like items to a concubine who is not their biological mother. Sometimes, this is performed out of benevolence, as the status of the emperor’s children determines their chances to the throne, and this status is often associated with the ranking of their mothers. In other words, children of lower-status concubines may be gifted to a higher-status concubine to upgrade the status of the children, which in turn provides greater opportunities for their future. The protagonist herself utilizes this rule, however, for selfless reasons: she offers to be the official mother of the emperor’s fourth son, who was born out of the emperor’s drunken affair with a slave woman.

Of course, the ascent to the throne is only made available to male heirs. The tragic fate of living as the daughter of an emperor is discussed, as it is strongly implied that royal daughters serve no other role than hostages to foreign threats via political marriage. In one scene, the emperor dismissed, but nonetheless discussed sending a daughter under the age of ten for political marriage. These requests for female-hostages from foreign powers may quickly outnumber the daughters of the emperor, and

therefore, political marriages may also be forced upon the emperor’s sisters or his concubines.

The Legend of ZhenHuan as a story about women written by a woman, is analytical in its discussion of gender but also balanced in the realism of universal commodification of human beings in history. The fate of an emperor’s son falls into two categories: outcompete all other sons for the throne or diminish one’s presence for a lifetime in order to convey no threat. By the end of the series, all but one eighteen royal sons of the previous emperor have either died or are serving lifelong sentences.

The implication is highlighted when the mastermind enemy, the empress who covertly oppresses the protagonist, is ultimately revealed to have caused many stillbirths among royal heirs. As royal heirs are commodities even in their adulthood, it is not surprising that royal heirs in their vulnerable early stages of life are likewise only objects in the greater scheme of maintaining power.

The protagonist understands this commodification and, once again, reverts the rule towards her anti-classist mission. During the last pregnancy of her life, the protagonist is told after diagnosis by a royal physician that her past stillbirths will likely terminate this older-age pregnancy of hers. She confirms that her child will not survive beyond half a year in the womb and then commodifies the child as her pawn. In a meticulously crafted interaction with the empress, the protagonist intentionally enters into a physical altercation, resulting in her child's stillbirth. Pinning the crime on the empress, the protagonist can finally convince the emperor of the past criminal orchestrations of the empress. This would be the cost to dethrone the second enemy in her path towards fighting oppression.



The house-arrest of the empress reveals that the previous dedication to fighting HuaFei is, at its core, futile. The privileged are gifted with the social influence and access to resources that permit them to erect multiple enemies in the paths of the oppressed. This would hold true to the very end of the series, as the protagonist discovers yet again that oppression has not ceased with the elimination of the empress as a superior female figure in the palace. Implied throughout the entire seventy-six episodes, and ultimately confirmed near the end of the series, the protagonist and other oppressed concubines eventually discover that the emperor - together with his mother - has been aware of almost all the oppressive acts all along.

Every assassination, poisoning towards sterilization, and commodification of the emperor's own children has been permitted by the emperor and his mother as the two elite figures. The reasoning is simple: all this fighting is permitted and even encouraged as part of their divide-and-conquer strategy, to ensure no political house would ever upset their power. The unique incense bestowed upon HuaFei as royal favor is revealed to be concocted with the objective of chemically sterilizing her. As the protagonist would explain to HuaFei eventually, HuaFei belongs to a house which already holds military prowess, and her additional holding of a royal heir would result in a level of power that is not permitted by the emperor and his mother.

This existence of the third-tier mastermind who orchestrates oppression in the life of the protagonist challenges existing views of individuals living in oppression today. What is it that the oppressed should seek liberation from? Throughout the narrative, the oppressed face multiple inequalities in their lives that they wish to be freed from. The slave characters wish to be freed

from aggression and competition from other slave characters. The slave characters along with their concubine-masters wish to be freed from having no access to essential livelihood. The concubines wish to be freed from the risk of death and stillbirth orchestrated or directly imposed by their superiors.

The **Legend of ZhenHuan** does not suggest a simplistic view of overcoming inequalities by targeting the highest-level oppressors. It reveals multiple tiers of oppression at play, many of which are entirely hidden from the eyes and worldviews of the oppressed. Likewise, it challenges the oppressed to reflect on their chosen battles and the targets of their activism. However, ultimately, it fully acknowledges that all lower-tier oppressors are still oppressors: without the protagonist successfully removing HuaFei as a threat, she may have died of hunger years before discovering the truth about the masterminding of the emperor and his mother. Freire's writing implies the invisible adversaries represented in the protagonist's tiered journey as strategically designed, as he describes oppressors as individuals "who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (2000). The narrative would suggest that seeing oppression revealed is a crucial first step to any attempt at transformation. A multi-tiered system of oppression conceals true power-holders, protects them from targeted action from the oppressed, and, as Hooks would suggest, traps the oppressed in a manipulated "perspective of reality" (2014).

The **Legend of ZhenHuan** further highlights one persistent enemy that should be taken down at all points of a journey toward liberation and equality: the divide-and-conquer strategy. At all points, a guaranteed way to unintentionally reinforce inequality and classism is to fight with those who would be allies. These sentiments echo Freire's discussion on the significance of



“solidarity”, which he describes as a selfless, sacrificial, “radical posture” (2000:49). In the practical terms of expressing this solidarity amidst modern inequalities, the **Legend of ZhenHuan** highlights the value of eliminating unnecessary confinements which conceal the true confinement: by providing access to essential livelihood, and protecting the oppressed from peer-aggressions, these acts support the oppressed towards being able to dismantle inequalities at a systemic level.

One Day When We All Have Power

Towards the conclusion of the **Legend of ZhenHuan**, the protagonist forms alliance with a number of oppressed concubines. They gain a critical revelation of the emperor and his mother which help them understand the futility of competing amongst themselves for their favor. These concubines see the emperor’s mother pass away from old age, then turn their focus to stripping the emperor of his power that institutionalized their oppression. In a symbolic gesture of overthrowing the patriarchy, concubines turn the emperor's strategies against him towards his demise: for years, the emperor has exerted a level of control over the royal physicians, who in turn help him gaslight concubines into preventable illness, disability, and death. The identification of the emperor as the ultimate figure behind the divide-and-conquer strategy provided a platform for solidarity - or at least some unity - among the oppressed.

After orchestrating the fatal illness of the emperor, the oppressed concubines get to see what happens after dismantling the leader of a hierarchical system of oppression. The fourth son who is born to a slave woman, but ultimately adopted by the protagonist, is placed by the protagonist on the throne over her own biological

son. She explicitly explains her reasoning via dialogue: having seen the manipulation an emperor needs to surround him with to secure power, she is not interested in that life for her biological son.

Nevertheless, the protagonist has a third option beyond placing her adopted son or biological son on the throne. It is strongly suggested that as both sons were highly young when the emperor passed, the protagonist herself can make a case to claim the throne herself as a female leader of the empire. Still, just as she rejected this power for her biological son, she rejects this power for herself.

The attitude expressed by the protagonist and her allies is evident. As members of the oppressed class, they are no longer interested in participating in a structure that oppresses others. Regardless of their final positions at the top of the hierarchy, refusing to participate in maintaining the hierarchy is the critically conscious decision they make by the end of their journey.

Within hours of his ascent to the throne, the biological son of the protagonist, now the new dynastic emperor, comes to the protagonist with a request. He hides the request behind the facade of asking the protagonist an academic question. However, by that point in her life, the protagonist is well aware of the unspoken vocabulary hidden amidst the literature. Her biological son, whom she raised out of good-will, would ask her to remove her biological son from future competition for his throne. She readily agrees, smiling, and commodifies her biological son - bestowing the biological son to a different family that can never claim royal lineage over the new emperor.

As the final episode plays the exact scenes from the first episode, the director illustrates the beginning of a new cycle of oppression. The final episodes of the narrative present a paradoxical commentary on power. The oppressed,

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represented by the protagonist, is ultimately powerless in her attempts to dismantle inequitable systems of oppression. After overcoming multiple oppressors in her life, from HuaFei, to the legal empress, to the emperor and his mother, her own child would rise up as the new head of the oppressive system. Additionally, this child's first target of oppression would be his own sibling, the biological son of his adoptive mother who has saved his life and handed him the throne. The narrative never borders on simplistic nor idealized, and its final statement on inequalities is equally acute: there is no value in removing the leader of inequitable systems, because too many individuals - both privileged and oppressed - would be interested in filling that vacancy of a leadership role. As suggested by Freire, the journey towards eliminating oppression indeed requires a liberation of *all* people. Without this liberation, any individual can rise up to continue the cycle of oppression if they so choose, and the reward is often great for that choice.

The otherside of the paradox is that, as powerless as individuals are in dismantling inequitable systems, all of us hold within ourselves the power to continue - or discontinue - our participation in said systems. Not a single individual holds the power to eliminate classism, but all of us hold the power to choose refusal. Our collective refusal of neither leading a hierarchical system nor participating in a hierarchical system is what could lead to a possible solution. The power to dismantle

exists in the hands of all, yet this power already exists now.

This could be perceived as "an empty cliché of the dialogical method" (MACEDO, 2000), reduced to a simple call to collaborate in our solutions against classism. Alternatively, it is an intentional counter-assault on a strategy from the privileged: Freire would describe that "[o]ne of the methods of manipulation [used by the oppressors] is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success" (2000). In other words, the education system established by the privileged is designed to raise new generations towards a desire for upward mobility. With this desire established across society, the hierarchical system will always survive - because the privileged have already prepared for themselves, new leaders ready to maintain the hierarchy at any given opportunity. On these contentions, Freire explicitly states that "the oppressors do not favor promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders". Placing power that otherwise belongs to all humanity in the hands of a selected group of individuals builds the foundation of persistent inequality. Towards the end of **Legend of ZhenHuan**, the protagonist's ultimate refusal of leadership is thus a necessary "interven[ti]on in existing systems of representation [of the oppressed]" (HOOKS, 2006). The oppressed may be oppressed because they *choose* to be, not because they are jealous or powerless, but conscious in their decision to refuse participation in inequitable systems.



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