

Chinese Opera – Farewell My Concubine

The Beijing Opera “Farewell My Concubine”, originally named “Chu-Han Contention”. The story is based on “Shiji - Annals of Xiang Yu”, “Romance of the Western Han Dynasty” and Kunqu opera “Qian Jin Ji”. In 1918, it was first performed by Yang Xiaolou and Shang Xiaoyun in Beijing; in 1922, Yang Xiaolou performed with Mei Lanfang. Afterwards, Qi Rushan and Wu Zhenxiu modified “Chu-Han Contention” and renamed it as “Farewell My Concubine”, which became the most common classical play of the Mei School among the Beijing Opera circle. It tells the story about the battle between Chu and Han. Xiang Yu, the Hegemon - King of Western Chu, who is brave but lacks tactics, as well as being stubborn and arrogant. He believes in the suggestion of Li Zuoju who is assigned by Han Xin, the Marshal of Han force, to pretend to surrender. Regardless of the objection from the generals and his favorite concubine, Yu Ji, he sends troops to fight against Han. As a result, he is lured to send the force by Han Xin’s plot; suffering ambush from ten sides and is trapped in Gaixia. At the Han’s military camp, the soldiers are ordered to sing the song of Chu. When the soldiers of Chu hear that, they think that the Han’s force has conquered Chu’s land and become homesick, and many of them leave in despair. Knowing that he is no longer in a better position, Xiang Yu intends to break out of the encirclement with Yu Ji. However, she is afraid of causing trouble and commits suicide with the sword after giving a feast and performing sword dancing. Xiang Yu is defeated and retreats to Wujiang River, since he is too ashamed to return home and face the elders in Jiangdong, he kills himself by slitting his throat with his sword, and Chu is finally conquered by Han.

The stamp issue “Chinese Opera – Farewell My Concubine” is designed by a famous painter in Macao, Chan Wai Fai. It includes a set of four stamps and a souvenir sheet. The figures and plots are created based on “Farewell My Concubine”, the technique of drawing is vivid and lifelike.

“Emperor’s military Expedition” – Han Xin sends his strategist Li Zuoju to Chu’s military camp and pretends to surrender to Xiang Yu, then incites him to send the troops in order to get him into the tight encirclement. Li Zuoju is so persuasive that Xiang Yu believes in him without doubt, arousing his determination in defeating Han. All the generals of Chu urged him to stop, however, since Xiang Yu is so stubborn and arrogant, he ignores their advice and decides to lead his force to the battlefield. On the way there, the flag is torn by the gale, and his warhorse Wu Zhui is skipping and howling. The generals then suggest that it might be the sign of bad omen, yet Xiang Yu insists to command his force to go ahead.

“Clashes between Liu and Xiang” – When Xiang Yu is reported that Han’s force has elite soldiers with ample provision, he realizes that he is tricked by Li Zuoju. Whereas, the battle must go on. As both armies meet at the battlefield, Liu Bang pretends to lose and Xiang Yu keeps on chasing him. Li Zuoju appears at the entrance of the mountain and induces Xiang Yu to get into the mountain. It makes Xiang Yu very angry, so he leads the force to pursue the enemy in order to fight against and capture them. Meanwhile, Han Xin stays at the top of mountain to deploy the troops in the battle. Xiang Yu and the Chu soldiers are induced to get into the trap, failing to break out of the encirclement, they are trapped in Gaixia (presently the southeast of Lingbi County in Anhui).

“Concubine performs the Sword Dance” – Han Xin takes Zhang Liang’s idea and orders the soldiers of Han’s military camp to sing folk song of Chu, while Zhang Liang accompanies it with the flute, and they sing every night around the Chu’s military camp. When Xiang Yu hears the song of Chu, he thinks that Liu Bang has already taken Chu’s land. Knowing that the situation will not be fixed, his concubine Yu Ji prepares the feast and performs a sword dance to comfort Xiang Yu. In order for Xiang Yu to break out of the encirclement with nothing to worry about, she commits suicide for the sake of love, leaving the poem “Ode to Emperor Xiang”: “The Han army has conquered our lands; Surrounded by the Song of Chu on all sides. My emperor’s willpower to continue the battle has come to the end; As a low concubine, I do not want to continue my life in the world.”

“Emperor ends life at Wujiang River” – Xiang Yu is defeated and retreats to the bank of Wujiang River, the magistrate of Wujiang River comes to take him with a boat. Unfortunately, his warhorse, Wu Zhui, drowns itself into the river. The magistrate advises Xiang Yu to cross the river as soon as possible, so as to make a comeback. However, Xiang Yu feels so ashamed to face the elders in Jiangdong, and says: “If the day of my death has come, why should I cross the river? At the beginning, I took 8,000 men from Jiangdong to cross the Wujiang River and headed towards west, but none of them survive, even though the elders in Jiangdong have pity on me, how can I face them? Even though they do not say anything, how can I not feel shameful?”. He then commits suicide by slitting his throat with his sword.

“Ambush on all sides” – Ever since Han Xin was employed by Han’s military, he has been battling with Xiang Yu for many times, and he always think of different strategies to conquer Chu. After inspecting

the topography of Jiuli Mountain, he considers that place can be used. Hence he calls for feudatories from different places, and gathers all the men power to set up the ambush from ten sides. Xiang Yu is induced to get into Jiuli Mountain; eventually he is hopelessly outnumbered, he is defeated by the Han's army and trapped in Gaixia. That night, the clouds break and the sky is clear, with the moon dazzles the eyes. Meanwhile, the folk song of Chu is heard from the Han's military camp, which is in fact Zhang Liang's idea, as the troops in the Han's military camp are ordered to sing the folk song of Chu. Not only the Chu's soldiers are distracted in the battle because of homesick after hearing the song, Xiang Yu also thinks that Liu Bang has occupied Chu's land. Knowing that he is no longer in a better position, Xiang Yu sings a tragic song which depicts the end of a hero's life: "My strength is so great that I can pull out the hills; My might shadows beyond anyone in the world; But the timing is unfavorable to me, and Zhui runs no more; When Zhui runs no more; what then can I do? Ah, Yu, my Yu, how can I do to you?".

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Translation: NTC Communication & Translation Services