

**The Queen and the Country:  
A Contextual Study of the Modernization of the British Royal Family  
as Represented by the Film *The Queen***

Shi Tongyun, Beijing Foreign Studies University

Since the 1990s, the British monarchy has responded to the public culture of democratic politics with paying income tax, publicizing expenditure accounts and getting closer to the people. Meanwhile, the media age has led to the commodification of the monarchy, enforcing more openness from the latter and consolidating the monarchy's status as a cultural form of images and representation. The monarchy lost the media war to Princess Diana on her death in 1997, suffering public blame for aloofness and succumbing to public mourning. This paper analyzes the role of the media, the New Labor politics and the public in facilitating modernization toward a more intimate royalty as represented by *The Queen*, an Oscar-winning film made in 2006 about the political event of Princess Diana's death in 1997. This paper not only deals with the film itself, but also looks into the broader media and political context of the historical event reflected in the film. It argues that the film displays two themes: in confirming the media power, the film conveys that royal popularity depends on the media for its projection; and in exploring the conflict between the emotional public and the stoical monarchy, the film cheers the Queen's compromise for continuity and encourages the audience to understand the royal identity.

Monarchy is the oldest institution of government in the United Kingdom. Since the Glorious Revolution of 1649, the system has been legitimized and effectively sustained through becoming a constitutional monarchy and shifting legitimacy from divine sources to popularity with the people. It symbolically represents the national identity through ceremonies, visits, charity, and moral disciplines. In the 1990s, the monarchy experienced drastic changes facilitated by the media of the information society: Princess Diana's death and New Labor's more democratic politics. Diana's death forcefully pushed the monarchy to go beyond tradition and respond to public call for a more intimate royalty. The political negotiation and compromise resulting from the event reflects British pragmatic culture of flexibility and adaptability, which ensures continuity. The term "modernization," a concept popular with Tony Blair to define New Labor's various reforms, is used in this paper to define the changes made by the British monarchy toward a more democratic and intimate royalty.

This paper is a contextual study of the modernization of the British Royal Family in the 1990s as represented by *The Queen*, an Oscar-winning film made in 2006 about the political event of Princess Diana's death in 1997. It analyzes the role of the media, the New Labor politics, and the public in facilitating the royal change. It argues that the film displays two themes: in confirming media power, the film conveys that royal popularity depends on the media for its projection; and in exploring the conflict between the emotional public and the stoical monarchy, the film cheers the Queen's compromise for continuity and encourages the audience to understand the royal identity.

From Tradition to Modernization:  
Towards A More Democratic and Intimate Royalty

The British Royal Family stands for tradition and continuity, typically representing British conservative culture. Yet, the monarchy “has survived largely because it has constantly adapted or been forced to adapt” (Shawcross, 2002, p. 206). Faced with the decline in public support, Queen Elizabeth II and her Royal Family understand clearly that only changes can bring them life and future.

The Royal Family in the 1990s encountered some unprecedented crises such as the big fire at Windsor Castle in 1992, the divorce of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1996, and Diana’s tragic death in a car accident in 1997. Their resulting efforts to improve public image “helped them keep their popularity and validity” (Cook, 1998, p. 35).

*The Royal Family: Paying Tax and Publicizing Expenditure Accounts*

Windsor Castle was burnt one night in November 1992. As it was an uninsured historic building, the Royal Family pleaded for government financial support. But the taxpayers were unwilling to pay for the repairing of the Castle, which is entirely private property. Such public response obviously had its reasons: “Coming as it did on the heels of deepening royal scandal, and public disgust and alienation, with widespread calls for accountability, especially in the area of finance, on the part of the ruling family, there was sure to be resistance to using tax revenues to pay the sixty-million-pound restoration bill” (Erickson, 2004, p. 308).

At that time the fiscal privileges enjoyed by the Royal Family had already been challenged. The Queen’s wealth and tax exemption had been themes widely discussed in the press. When the Heritage Secretary Peter Brooke declared that the Government would pay the repair bill, people roared with anger. Pressed by this, quick response was made by the Royal Family to win back hearts of the Queen’s subjects. So six days after the Windsor fire, the Prime Minister surprised the House of Commons by announcing that the Queen and the Prince of Wales volunteered to pay tax on their private incomes from 1993 and the Civil List payments by public funds to five of Her Majesty’s closest relatives would be ended (Dimbleby, 1994, p. 511). Such a move was a great change for the monarchy, which enjoyed privilege as long as it existed. It showed that the Royal Family attempted to listen to the public call for democratic change. Along with paying tax, the monarchy opened Buckingham Palace for public visits with the ticket fee helping fund the repair work.

Concerning the expenditure of the Royal Family, the public has long felt that the royal members have spent too much and done little. The state finance pays the cost, so people are naturally sensitive and alert. In making a commitment to openness and accountability in its use of taxpayers’ money, the Buckingham Palace press for the first time released its expenditure annual report from the 1990s with the details of the accounts posted in the royal official website. This undoubtedly increased the openness of the use of royal fee and greatly enhanced the reputation of the monarchy.

*Diana—People’s Princess*

In shortening the distance between the Royal Family and the public, Princess Diana was

undoubtedly an accelerator who demonstrated getting close to people to its best. With her easygoing meetings with the public, she acted as a bridge between the monarchy and the public, affecting the Royal Family to be less stuffy, less sacred, and more people-friendly.

Diana changed the Royal Family in her own ways. A deeply loving mother, she raised her little princes in her own style, spending a lot of time playing with them and teaching them to love people and life. In the royal tradition, it is unusual for a princess to educate children in that way. Diana also insisted on walking and shaking hands with strangers during visits, instead of waving hands in carriages as before. She was eager to show people in need her care and love and was open to the public about her happiness and trouble.

What marked Diana in people's hearts was her devotion to charity work, especially the heavy involvement after experiencing great sadness in marriage. She supported quite a number of charity projects. In April 1987, the Princess became the first royal to shake hands, ungloved, with an AIDS patient. Bill Clinton took this as having significant impact in helping "change the world's opinion" and "g[iving] hope to people with AIDS" (Defeating prejudice, 2006, para. 24). She was a supporter of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 and resulted in the signing of the Ottawa Treaty—an international ban on the use of anti-personnel landmines—after her death. She was also a patron of Help the Aged and showed special concern for children. In addition, education, leprosy, mental illness, and drug abuse joined HIV/AIDS on her growing list of the controversial areas that weren't the usual concern of royal patronage. Part of her appeal was her sympathy and natural compassion. She could empathize with people's suffering, having suffered much herself. Her willingness to express her own emotions when communicating with sufferers made her gifted for putting troubled people at ease and leaving them comforted. Mother Teresa praised, "She [Diana] helped me to help the poor and that's the most beautiful thing" (Jephson, 2004, p. 139). Nelson Mandela remarked, "She was undoubtedly one of the best ambassadors for Great Britain" (Jephson, 2004, p. 120).

"Diana evoked more love than any other royal in living memory, in any country" (Walter, 1999, p. 277). Despite negative stories, towards the end of Diana's life, the mass media had already been portraying her as "the People's Princess" with "the common touch, a natural expressiveness and emotionality" to counterpoise "the stiffness, formality and traditionalism" of other members of the Royal Family—an "alternative national character" (Mandler, 2006, p. 236). Due to her marginal status in the Royal Family, she appealed to marginal people in society: the colored minority, women, gay, children, etc. And in identifying with the "other," she "redefined what it means to be British" (Walter, 1999, p. 276).

### *Diana's Death and Public Response*

On August 31st, 1997, Princess Diana was killed in Paris in a car accident caused by a paparazzi car chase. The event led to dramatic public response throughout the UK. Hundreds of thousands visited Kensington Palace in London to place flowers and sign books of remembrance. New Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair was more in tune with the public mood and rightfully called Diana the People's Princess in his "spontaneous" television speech the very next day after the event. Elton John's praise of Diana as "England's rose" in his song "Candle in the Wind" at the funeral was well received.

The public memory of Diana's compassion, caring and love was touchingly recorded in *Daily Mail's* article "Diana: The Legacy of Love." On the one hand, she was respected for her professionalism and her ability to go on working in public, despite personal tragic happenings. On the other hand, she was admired for "the explicit challenge she made to formalities of royal protocol and a perceived failure of royal tradition to connect" (Couldry, 2001, p. 230). To a great extent, her celebrity status helped arouse deep public sympathy.

The Royal Family completely misread the public mood. Their coldness led to unprecedented resentment and outcry among people. The public strongly called for the Queen to return to London from Scotland to "lead the nation's grief" and to "show us you care" (Davies, 1999, p. 8). Many bitter people even called to abolish the monarchy and build a republic since the Royal Family was so indifferent to public opinion and therefore not worthy of public respect and support. People even wanted the Buckingham Palace to fly the Queen's flag at half-mast, which is against the protocol.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Royal Change*

Sensing the risk and persuaded by Tony Blair, the Queen at last came back to London one day earlier than planned and walked around amongst the crowds. She delivered a live television speech to the nation. A public funeral was held. The Union flag was lowered to half-mast on the day of the funeral. British people visibly saw the Royal Family acknowledge both the princess and public opinion.

Despite the criticism of the public outpouring of grief as being irrational "mass hysteria" (Mandler, 2006, p. 237), the mourning for Diana had long-term effect. The millions of people who were clearly attracted by Diana's warmer style wanted a "hugging" monarchy, a style which Diana tried but failed to get through to the royals in life. The speech that the Queen made toward the end of the week of mourning pledged that there were "lessons to be drawn from Diana's life and from the extraordinary and moving reaction to her death" (Walter, 1999, p. 276). Obviously the event shows that the monarch should not ignore public opinions. Power is attained and maintained through public approval. It is just as what Prince Philip told a press conference: "The future of the Monarchy depends on the national community, and if at any stage the community decides it is unacceptable then it is up to that community to change it. It is up to the people themselves" (Pimlott, 2002, p. 392).

According to Maurice Bloch's anthropology, "nature begins with life and ends in death, but culture begins with death and turns it into a life-affirming event" (Davies, 1999, p. 15). The aftermath of Diana's death reveals obvious changes. The media become more responsible, reducing the market for photographs produced by paparazzi. The Royal Family has become less set-apart and try their best to restyle their image. They concentrate more on fulfilling their duties, which the whole family shares. Members of the Royal Family carried out 2,900 official engagements in the year to April 2004, compared to 2,600 in the previous 12 months. The Queen undertook 486 engagements, entertaining around 37,000 people at six garden parties and holding 27 investitures for 2,900 people and 9,000 guests! (Olechnowicz, 2007, p. 311). The Queen tried to make the monarchy seem more open, more accessible and more like ordinary people. She visited a pub and a McDonald's hamburger restaurant in late 1997 and had tea in a Glasgow council house in 1999. All of these events were highly publicized, met with mixed feelings, and won her much sympathy. Perhaps the most popular

of her efforts was the “walkabout” during her dutiful visits. Often she would leave her car or entourage to meet ordinary people who crowded around her, shaking hands and talking with them, leaving an intimate image on her subjects. With the quiet Camilla replacing the noisy Diana, there has been less media exposure and scandals. On November 20th, 2007, the Queen celebrated the 60th wedding anniversary with the Duke of Edinburgh, becoming the first British monarch to have celebrated a Diamond Wedding Anniversary. The British people are proud of such a good relationship and the exemplified life. This ten-year peace and harmony between the Royal Family and the public provides the background for the popularity of the film *The Queen*.

#### The Mediated Monarchy: A Cultural Form of Image and Representation

In the present information society, the image of the Royal Family in the eyes of the public is established by the media, and the influence the Royal Family exerts on the general public is carried out through the media.

In the past, the monarchy retained a fair degree of mystique and was held in reverence. The media regarded anything that was embarrassing to the monarchy as untouchable because of their instinctive respect for rank and authority. But now the media, highly commercialized, stop thinking like that. Murdoch even directed his editors at *The Sun* and *News of the World* to “stop worshipping these people (royalties), stop treating them as gods. They are ordinary human beings and will help sell newspapers” (Levine, 1998, p. 84). The monarchy is harshly exploited to boost sales and profits. The media are preoccupied with royal gossip. On the other hand, there is the decline of royal power and public warmth towards monarchy due to democratic drives. So the monarchy has to rely more on the media for public recognition and positive influence to consolidate its shaky position. In the process, it seems logical that the monarchy is both commodified by the media as well as by the Royal Family itself (Chang, 2006).

With the unique value for marketing, British royals have turned into “international celebrities.” Their fame is displayed in the televisual performance of public duties and rituals. With the emphasis upon the meaning of rituals, the monarchy is treated as “a cultural performance” (Chaney, 2001, p. 210), becoming a cultural form of image and representation or even “a staple of popular cultural entertainment” (Chaney, 2001, p. 207).

#### *The Royal Family: Positive Image Marketing for Public Support*

For Queen Elizabeth II, actively exposing through media the uniqueness and extraordinariness of the monarchy helps inspire people’s interest and support and thus helps the monarchy achieve its universal popularity. It also helps to strengthen the sense of universal participation and the identification of the British with the monarchy. The Queen from an early stage showed interest and skill in the use of the broadcast media, notably in her annual Christmas television speeches, royally sanctioned documentaries such as *The Royal Palaces of Britain* (1966) and *The Royal Family* (1969), television broadcasts of Prince Charles’ investiture as Prince of Wales, and of the royal weddings. As she actively promoted the royal image representation to buy popularity, “there was a view that the Queen needed to sell herself a bit” (Pimlott, 2002, p. 380). Some programs involved camera men’s work over a

year accompanying the family.

On June 21, 1969, the highly professionally designed documentary *The Royal Family* was shown by BBC and eight days later by ITV. About 68% of the population watched it. This was the first time that ordinary people watched the real daily life of their Queen and her family. The sacred veil of the monarchy was lifted as its members were treated as real personalities. The propaganda was very well received. The film made people feel that the monarchy was less sacred and closer to ordinary people.

In the 1990s, when it was sensed that the reign was being challenged, the 1992 BBC documentary *Elizabeth R.* was made for the 40th anniversary of the Queen, presenting the Queen as a dutiful public servant. In 1993, Camillagate severely damaged Prince Charles' public image. In order to make up, the Prince appeared in a special ITV documentary program on his life *Charles: The Private Man, The Public Role*, which was widely watched and conciliated the angered people. In 1997, the Queen was severely criticized for aloofness toward Diana's death. So her golden jubilee of 2002 came as a good chance. It was given full coverage, lasting 4 days. The Queen's celebration of her Diamond Wedding Anniversary in 2007 was also fully represented by the media. All cultivated respect and warm, close feelings from the public.

#### The Media: The Commodification of the Royal Family as Celebrities

With media becoming a competitive market and audience as consumers, media products benefit greatly from making monarchy a commodity. In April 1983, *Woman Magazine* named Diana the world's No. 1 cover girl. Media analysts reported that sales of magazines with Diana on the cover leaped by as much as 40% (Levine, 1998, p. 108). In 1995, BBC Panorama's interview of Diana on her marriage, her life with the Royal Family, and problems between her and Charles was a great financial success. Diana's death led to more newsprint and her funeral to a bigger global television audience than any previous event had achieved. So, Diana was "princess of the image, and, most especially, princess of the moving image" (Kitzinger, 1999, p. 65).

In a positive sense, British media have been essential for the dramatization and popularization of royal spectacles. Events such as births, deaths, weddings, and anniversaries, together with institutional celebrations such as honoring war dead and opening new sessions of the Parliament, "project the royal family as somehow enshrining national identity" (Chaney, 2001, p. 212). On the other hand, Diana's influence on the Royal Family could be drawn from the reports of media. Enormous reports on Diana's dress style, tours, and love affairs further consolidated her glamorous celebrity status, of which she took full advantage for her charity work. Through media coverage of her concern about those suffering, she impressed people and taught the royals a good lesson of how to connect with the subjects.

However, in commodifying the Royal Family, the media became more intrusive on the monarchy's privacy. For example, they exposed the Camillagate Tape which greatly humiliated Charles. And the media fervently followed every move of Charles and Diana. At the same time they became more meddlesome on the conduct of the monarchy. When Princess Diana's car accident became a national tragedy, the media began to blame the monarchy as remote and uncaring. As the flagpole stood insensitively bare, the tabloids led the attack on the monarch with such remarks like: "Let her flag fly at half-mast." "The Final

Insult,” “Show us you care.” *The Daily Mirror* sensationally begged: “Speak to us, ma’am, please speak” (Pimlott, 2002, p. 614). The harshness of headlines and the sensational tone of reporting cumulated into an exaggerated grief. Under great media pressure, the Queen finally made concessions. The Union Jack was put to half-mast at Buckingham Palace, and most importantly the Queen spoke on television to her people and the world. To monarchy, the media has changed from a defender and servant to an exploiter and judge.

The Diana incident was a media event which involved the active and practical participation of millions of people. This was inconceivable in the past, when discussions on the conduct of the monarchy were not advocated and therefore rare, and much more inconceivable that the monarch adopted public suggestions at last. The reflections on royalty are important because they involve “the incorporation of emotional claims previously excluded from notions of politics” (Couldry, 2001, p. 231).

### Evaluation

The “modernizers” argued that popular affection for the new monarch (Elizabeth II) could best be ensured by humanizing the monarch and national ritual; that is, broadening public interest in the Royal Family by presenting them in the media as “ordinary folks” and “ordinary” family much like the mass audience themselves. Thus emerged a “mediated form of royal populism: a regular performance of ‘ordinariness’” (Couldry, 2001, p. 231); and the media established the Royal Family as “a narrative resource, almost a genre,” seeming to “inaugurate a successful adaptation of a traditional institution to the conditions of late modernity” (Chaney, 2001, p. 214). The tensions reached a climax in the 1990s with Princess Diana claiming to be more “ordinary” than the rest of the Royal Family. This public familiarization with the royals has “blur[red] public and private distinctions” (Chaney, 2001, p. 217). The price for this is that the royals have become secular celebrities no longer entitled to automatic deference and therefore no longer shielded from the intrusive gaze of the public. The trend that monarchy has become a cultural form led to the coining of British Royal Family as “soap monarchy” (Olechnowicz, 2007, p. 32) with greater appeal among women and with Diana the undoubted star of the supersoap.

In assessing the mediated and commodified monarchy, some disapproving views are worth taking into consideration. Firstly, Walter Bagehot, the Victorian author of *The English Constitution*, believed that mystery was the “life” for monarchy and “daylight” must not be “let in” “upon magic” (Bagehot, 2003, p. 50). Secondly, the commodification of the monarchy belittles the institution and therefore undermines its majesty and sublime. With the cheapening effect of television on solemn royal occasions, public deference is replaced by addictive and insatiable curiosity. Thirdly, being a commodity in the media is not really the essence of the monarchical function. What it is expected to do is to accomplish its duties and to set a moral example for the British. Dedication and duty should be the religion of the monarchy; media should give priority to public responsibility over circulation.

However, society is changing. The postmodern information age does not seem to be that sensible. The failure of the monarchy to adequately dramatize an appropriate grief at Diana’s death, or failure to conform to “the sentimental codes of soap opera” (Chaney, 2001, p. 216), seriously threatened the viability of the monarchy itself. Jeffrey Richards, in his study of the history of British film representation of monarchy, argues that instead of destroying the

magic, the letting in of daylight has actually helped by replacing the “magic of distance” with the “magic of familiarity” (Richards, 2007, p. 258). So, the royal members have a lot to learn to adapt: every royal personage must appear “both royal and yet ordinary, almost divine yet almost human” (Billig, 1992, p. 205).

### The New Labor and New Britain

#### *A Reform-oriented New Labor*

At the time of Diana’s death, Britain was under the leadership of Tony Blair and his New Labor, which had just come into power 3 months earlier. In the mid-1990s, faced with domestic and global challenges, Blair named the Party “New Labor” and the country “New Britain,” targeting change. He promised a series of constitutional as well as social reforms in the election manifesto. In its initial period in office, New Labor responded with a campaign of “rebranding Britain” as “Cool Britannia”—the creation of a “New Britain” which is democratic, modern, creative and plural. The strength of Blairism was its willingness to confront and keep pace with the changing times. In Tony Blair’s words, the Labor Party had to “modernize or die” (Driver & Martell, 2002, p. 223).

The most notable aspect of the Labor modernization program is its constitutional reforms which derive from a liberal pluralist tradition not shared by the previous Conservative governments. Blair argued in his Britain Speech on March 28, 2000, “[t]rue Britishness lies in our values not unchanging institutions” and “it is not parliamentary sovereignty but parliamentary democracy that is central to British identity” (Blair, 2000, para. 2). Labor’s major constitutional reforms involve devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It was thought to be the most radical constitutional change since the *Great Reform Act 1832*, House of Lords reform, which removes the automatic membership of hereditary peers for the purpose of more democratic representation, and active participation in European integration. Added by the incorporation of *European Convention of Human Rights* into British law, it greatly empowers the judiciary and challenges the parliamentary sovereignty. With the introduction of a written constitution and proportional representation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, Britain is now moving from a top-down centralized country, to a devolved and more democratic state.

In regards to social reforms, New Labor introduced a national minimum wage system to protect the basic interests of low-incomers and promoted reforms in social welfare and education. This led to considerable increases in health service funds and in the education budget. It promoted populism, claiming to be a “People’s party” (whose budget was named the “People’s budget”). It also tried hard to cultivate a young, creative, and multicultural national image.

Though it is arguable to what extent, Blair kept his promise to the people. From the above facts, we can conclude that New Labor at the time of Diana’s death was very much reform-oriented. The surprising event of the emotional national mourning was quickly responded by New Labor to promote a new sense of national identity. Diana’s death did for Tony Blair what the Falklands War did for Margaret Thatcher: “turned them from Prime Ministers into Presidents, giving them the authority to dominate their own parties and thus the national polity” (Walter, 1999, p. 275). Tony Blair, in forcefully persuading the Queen to

follow the people's will through numerous negotiations over the phone, facilitated the modernization toward a more people-friendly Royal Family.

#### *A New Britain of New National Character?*

Blair promised that Diana's legacy would be a "more compassionate Britain" (Walter, 1999, p. 275). In the first week of September, tabloid papers were already talking of "the 'new British spirit' with 'none of that old British reserve' (*Daily Mirror*), 'a new sense of Britishness' in which the people were 'visibly renegotiating their contract with their rulers'" (*Daily Express*); an article in *The Observer* just after Christmas claimed that in the new "Cool Britannia," "we have ceased to become a nation known for its stiff upper lip...and become a nation intoxicated by pain and compassion" (Mandler, 2006, p. 236). The intense public grief "merged this characterization of the princess with the characterization of the nation" and Tony Blair succeeded in "merg[ing] this characterization of the nation with his own 'New Britain'" (Mandler, 2006, p. 236). The populist emotion for Diana was linked with the populism of the New Labor government.

However, it should be noted that Princess Diana was not everyone's icon. There were still a large number of Britons who remained calm at this public display of grief. They "speculated bemusedly on the spiritual bankruptcy" (Storry & Childs, 2002, p. 23) of those who hero-worshipped public figures so fanatically. They found this very unBritish way of public expression of emotion quite hard to accept, yet their voices at that time were much turned down by the media. A year later, polls suggested that "half the public felt the other half had overreacted to the whole episode, and over three-quarters that the media had made too much of it" (Mandler, 2006, p. 237).

But still we cannot ignore the subtle shift in the public mood. As the *Guardian* royal poll of September 14, 1997 shows, the percentage of people who wanted the monarchy to remain as it was went down from 85% in 1969 to only 15% in 1997; and at the time of Diana's death, 71% (81% in October 1997) wanted the Monarchy to "exist but [become] more democratic and approachable" (statistics qtd. in Olechnowicz, 2007, p. 295). The British seemed to be awakened from passive conservatism. They had elected New Labor for the Party's ethos of reform for a fairer society. In highly honoring Diana and advising the Queen to return to London, the New Labor was on the one hand fulfilling its constitutional duty and on the other hand largely compromising to the changing public feeling.

#### The Queen and the Country: Understanding the Royal Family through *The Queen*

The film *The Queen*, written by Peter Morgan, directed by Stephen Frears, and starring Helen Mirren, is a 2006 British film. It is a documentary drama with a semi-fictional account of both the immediate events following the death of Diana in 1997, and life Elizabeth II lives. It starts with a sentence from Henry IV: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." The film makes a great effort to convince people that being a queen is not easy.

The Queen stands for tradition, dignity, and superiority. This is displayed by rituals in the comedic beginning when the newly elected Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair (Michael Sheen) and his wife Cherie (Helen McCrory) pay an obligatory visit to the Queen to be invited to form a government. When Blair meets the Queen, he behaves like a "schoolboy

trying to impress his teacher” (Brooke, 2006, para. 3). Due to nervousness and over-eagerness, he commits several errors of protocol, which are observed by the Queen with kind amusement. The meeting reveals his uneasiness in her presence and her disdain of young idealists. Elizabeth has witnessed the coming and going of ten prime ministers since Winston Churchill, so she remains in control of the meeting. Blair goes away with respect for her long history, but his wife, who is skeptical and anti-monarchy, feels the whole thing about bowing and groveling in the Queen’s presence rather foolish. The meeting is short, but sets the tone for the relationship between Blair and the Queen.

Yet tradition quickly comes into collision with people’s desire for royal modernization when news of Diana’s death shocks the world. At that time, the whole royal family is having vacation in Balmoral in Scotland. Since Diana no longer carries the Princess title after her divorce and hence is no longer officially a member of the Royal Family, the Queen refuses to come back to London to show her grief in public. She thinks that Diana is not eligible for a royal funeral. The Queen, her husband and mother all think that the appropriate response is “restrained grief and sober, private mourning” (*The Queen*, 2006 film). Making any sort of public address or acknowledgement and holding an official funeral are “not within tradition or protocol” (Joseph, 2007, para. 6). The Queen’s Mother (Sylvia Syms) is astonished by the thought that the Royal Family should bow to what the public demand. The Queen bets the public would become quiet soon since British people are admired by the rest of the world for self-control. Besides, the Queen wants to remain in Scotland to protect her grieving grandsons, William and Henry, away from the massive news coverage about the death.

The Queen’s decision to mourn in private leads to public suspicion of the sincerity of the Royal Family and wide criticism for their coldness and insensitivity. The overwhelming hysterical public grief presses for the Queen’s presence in London and for an official funeral. Prince Charles (Alex Jennings) is upset by the Royal Family’s chilly lack of response and feels that they should modernize and keep in step with the times. He believes that the Royal Family should arrange the funeral because the public would like an official expression of grief. Tony Blair is sensible enough to realize the uniqueness of the situation: Diana’s celebrity status makes the world feel an especially deep personal connection with her. His forceful persuasion by using the future of the monarchy finally works.

In the film, there are many close-ups showing the transformation of the Queen’s attitude. The Queen lives in isolation, and it is her confrontation with a stag while she is out alone in the woods which proves to be a turning point. After she sees the death of the deer she loves and then feels the beauty of life, the Queen takes a hard journey to get in touch with her heart. Afterwards, she compromises and comes back to deliver her speech on television to mourn for Diana.

In essence, the film stands for a trial of strength of politics, media, and public opinion. Firstly, the film focuses on the relationship between the new Prime Minister Tony Blair, a firm believer in modernization, and the monarchy, or Queen Elizabeth II, who believes in tradition and duty. In the event of Diana’s sudden death, the Royal Family is unable or unwilling to understand the unexpected national outpouring of grief. But Tony Blair, fresh in office and eager to please the nation and the press, trumps the royalty more skillfully by showing his grief to comfort the public immediately. Alastair Campbell (Mark Bazeley) contributes enormously with the speech he writes for Blair in which Diana is saluted as the “People’s Princess.” At the same time, Blair correctly senses that the popular mood is turning

rapidly against the monarchy, so he does everything he can to sway the Queen to ditch protocol. He is actually attempting to reconnect the Queen with her people when the situation seems highly critical. In this sense, it is right to more appropriately entitle the film as “How Tony Blair saved the Royal Family’s reputation” (Joseph, 2007, para. 1). After much struggle and soul searching, the Queen makes numerous concessions over the next few days, agreeing to a public statement, an official funeral, and lowering the Union flag over Buckingham Palace. Over the course of the event, Blair comes to understand that it may not be that the Queen is a cold individual, but rather a bit out of touch with the more modern socio-political climate. And although Blair succeeds in swaying the Queen to show some flexibility, he finds himself defending her from the cynical criticisms of his wife and many other republicans: “That woman has given her whole life in service to her people...[f]ifty years doing a job she never wanted!” (*The Queen*, 2006 film) Elizabeth cautions Blair that in the future he might find himself the target of a vicious media attack: “One day, quite suddenly without warning, the same thing will happen to you” (*The Queen*, 2006 film).

Secondly, the film exhibits a panoramic view of the crash between royal rules and public feelings. It vividly portrays a contrast between the emotional public and the traditional and stoical monarch. People in the thick of grief believe that the Queen’s insensitive aloofness is damaging the monarchy and the Royal Family is not standing on the public’s side. The Queen does not outpour her grief for she thinks what she does is reasonable according to the royal rules. She is being the way she was raised to be, keeping things to herself and refusing to give open expression of personal sentiments. She is taking tradition and professionalism very seriously. But the Queen soon realizes she misjudges the public mood: “I’ve never been hated like that before” (*The Queen*, 2006 film). The British people have changed in the Queen’s lifetime. They are more sentimental and less stoical than before. They do not approve that Diana’s funeral is a “private, family matter.” They urgently want a statement, a word of comfort, and the Queen’s presence in London. The lack of the Queen’s emotional display signifies the Royal Family’s alienation from the public, who desperately call for an intimate royalty against the background of Tony Blair’s modernization ethos. That’s why they prefer the easygoing Diana’s style rather than the traditional, calm and reserved one. The rigid royal rules finally bend over the overwhelming sadness and dissatisfactions among the public. The Queen keeps her vows to the whole nation: duty first, self second. The film suggests that realization of an intimate royalty is rather feasible; and British royalty has to be not only the way as it is, but also more public-oriented.

Thirdly, a major motif in the film is the power of the press to set in motion events and complications. Their meanings are even too broad and unpredictable for political old hands to decipher. Here, the media and the public are bound together, with the media as the speaker of public opinions. The press reports vividly about the public mourning, conducts opinion polls about public feelings concerning the monarchy, scolds royal aloofness with harsh headlines and most seriously, presses the monarchy by threatening its future sustainability. Media coverage prioritizes people mourning in the street, leading to the impression of a nation in strong dissatisfaction—even hatred—and creating the idea that national mourning can only be adequately expressed through the Royal Family. The Queen sees the public mood as “stirred up by the press” (*The Queen*, 2006 film). Prince Philip (James Cromwell) loathes the media’s adulation of Diana. In the urgent phone call to the Queen, Tony Blair asks if the Queen has seen the press headlines of the day, informs her that “the situation has become quite critical”

due to a poll saying “one in four are now in favor of abolishing the monarchy altogether” (*The Queen*, 2006 film), and offers his persuasion for royal compromise. So, it is largely due to the intense media pressure that Blair strengthens his force in persuasion. And it is largely due to the risk of its future sustainability that the Queen breaks so many traditions. With the press “swell[ing] the anti-Winsor chorus” (Kemp, 2006, para. 11), Blair begins to feel that it is his constitutional duty to preserve the Royal Family from its self-destructive stubbornness towards traditions. The public uproar, the political compromise, and the positive acceptance of royal change (exemplified by the little girl presenting flowers), all affirm that “attitudes towards royalty are a central part of the ideological production of the British media” (Blain & O’Donnell, 2003, p. 22).

Fourthly, the film enhances public understanding of the monarch. Blair’s praise of the Queen is from the bottom of his heart. Besides, the Queen’s coldness to Diana seems well-based. According to Blair’s remark when defending the Queen, Diana “threw everything [the Queen] offered back in [the Queen’s] face” and “seemed committed to destroying everything [the Queen] holds most dear” (*The Queen*, 2006 film). What’s more, the Queen’s weeping, which is very unusual in media representation, is really moving. Helen Mirren is superb in “finding those telling moments where the royal mask drops to real the flesh-and-blood woman” (Honeycutt, 2006, para. 1). People see the more human side of the Queen: In a lonely windy valley, an elderly grey-haired woman climbs out of her broken-down car. We watch as she leans down, inspects the damage, whispers “Bugger,” and calls for help on a mobile phone. While waiting patiently, she starts to silently weep, with her back facing us. Recovering herself, she turns to see an imperial stag standing, watching her. The two gaze at each other. Sensing the coming danger, she earnestly encourages the animal to flee to escape from being hunted—“Shoo! Shoo!” When it is suddenly gone, she smiles to herself heartily with those solitary tears still on her face.

Though the royals are portrayed as “a pitiable clan, locked into patterns of right emotional repression” (Kemp, 2006, para. 13) with the central dilemma being the conflict between the duty and self (Brooke, 2006, para. 4), the real mood of the film is to cultivate positive images of the monarchy. The Queen, with her unyielding sense of duty-before-self, is at the centre of the film (Whittle, 2006, para. 4). When she ultimately delivers her speech, what is appreciated is her commitment to her duty. She was brought up have self-control and not to give frank disclosure of personal feelings. Her inward humanity is dignified and controlled so as not to be revealed. She is not wrong, for the world changes and people change. So there should not be blame for the Queen, who devotes her whole life selflessly to the service of the people, always putting her country before anything else. Alienating as it seems to be, this film is not going to disparage the present monarchy. In the film, there is a scene which shows the people’s love: when Elizabeth II returns to London and views the overwhelming show of affection for Diana, a little girl gives the Queen a bouquet of flowers with the words, “They are for you.” Thus, the film successfully presents positive national images of Britain to the international audience, enabling them to have an idea of the possible meanings of Britishness, especially the self-adapting ability for continuity.

Depiction of the monarchy has been an important part in the history/heritage genre of British film tradition. Compared with other media forms such as press and TV, the film form has been more serious and positive. It has tried to “strengthen and entrench” the monarchy through “mythologiz[ing] and humaniz[ing] the institution” (Richards, 2007, p. 273),

although recently increasing interest is shifting to the private life of monarchs.

By depicting a living queen, *The Queen* dares to break the biggest royal taboo, but it follows the film tradition and takes her seriously. With the celebrations for her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Queen is now really a grandmother figure and national matriarch. Many people's respect has shifted to real affection, which is shared by the film-makers. Peter Morgan started out writing the film as a republican and seems to have a more ambivalent attitude now:

It feels to me like criticism of the Queen has become, as recently possibly as the last couple of years, treasonable...She's reached an age when to kick an old lady is completely undignified. I think there's a sense of national shame in doing it. There's an acknowledgement too that here is a person, and I hope that's what's moving about the film, who has given her life [to the country]. (Whittle, 2006, para. 15)

In short, *The Queen* helps present positive national images. With explicit British characteristics, it marks one more commercial and critical success for British national cinema.

### Conclusion

In the 1990s, there was growing bitterness, with people against the monarchy because of over-extravagance, misbehavior, and even scandals. The monarchy coped with the demand of democratic politics with deeper modernization and more intimacy with people. It was a great deal for the Queen to endure, because it was the sacred that kept the royals different from ordinary people. Diana was of great importance in helping the royals to be closer with the general public. She was devoted wholeheartedly to charity work, for which she won people's respect.

Under such context, Diana's death and Queen's cold response triggered hatred and calls for abolishing the monarchy. Yet, through the hard persuasion of the New Labor government and the sensible adaptation of the Royal Family, the crisis was overcome. The process was what was recorded by *The Queen*. The film is significant in vividly portraying the mediated monarchy and mediated politics, revealing that "the media have altered, perhaps, distorted, the very basis of royalty and politics" (Couldry, 2001, p. 221) and royal popularity depends on the media for its projection. In exploring the conflict between the emotional public and the traditional and stoical monarchy, the film cheers the Queen's compromise for continuity and encourages the audience to understand the royal identity.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> By tradition the Royal Standard flies above the palace only when the Monarch is in residence. When she is not in residence, no flag flies. The Royal Standard is not taken down at the death of a monarch, or even flown at half-mast, for the next monarch lives. At Diana's death, the Buckingham Palace finally lowered the Union Jack to half-mast on the day of the funeral as a compromise.

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