

A Microcosm of Modern Chinese History from the Film 'Farewell My Concubine'

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Abstract. The film *Farewell My Concubine* holds significant artistic and historical value within the realm of Chinese cinema. It transcends being a mere portrayal of love and the art of Peking Opera, serving instead as a lens through which the tumultuous history of China is viewed through the personal stories of its characters. This essay examines how *Farewell My Concubine* encapsulates the life experiences of two Peking Opera actors, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, against the backdrop of China's transition from the turbulent Beiyang government era to the chaotic Cultural Revolution following the establishment of New China. The film chronicles the evolution of Peking Opera, illustrating its journey from flourishing to decline, and mirrors the intricate social transformations and cultural conflicts that marked China's modern history. It highlights the profound and enduring effects of historical upheavals on the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens, thereby offering a rich commentary on the intersection of personal and national histories.

Keywords: Chinese cinema, modern history of China, social change, Chinese Peking Opera

1. Introduction

The film *Farewell My Concubine* is directed by the renowned Chinese filmmaker Chen Kaige, with its screenplay adapted from the novel of the same name by the esteemed Chinese writer Li Bihua. The film garnered international acclaim, winning the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, marking the first time a Chinese film received this highest honor. Additionally, it secured the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, making it the only Chinese film to have achieved both the Palme d'Or and the Golden Globe in this category.

The title *Farewell My Concubine* originates from the historical account of Xiang Yu in Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian (circa 104 BCE). The story recounts the tragic farewell between Xiang Yu and his beloved consort Yu Ji before his eventual defeat by Liu Bang's forces. Over time, the phrase "Farewell My Concubine" has become synonymous with the poignant and inevitable demise of a hero. This theme was further immortalized through the Peking Opera of the same name, which has since become a classic of the genre.

The film narrates the lives of two Peking Opera performers, spanning over half a century, and delves into profound reflections on traditional culture, human existence, and the complexities of human nature. Through its depiction, *Farewell My Concubine* offers a subtle yet powerful portrayal of China's tumultuous modern history, encapsulating significant eras such as the Beiyang government, the Anti-Japanese War, the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, and the Cultural Revolution. The film serves not only as a microcosm of modern Chinese history but also as a poignant commentary on the decline of Peking Opera, a venerable art form deeply rooted in Chinese tradition.

2. "The Film 'Farewell My Concubine': A Microcosm of Modern Chinese History"

The opening sequence of *Farewell My Concubine* serves as a pivotal moment that establishes the film's narrative structure and thematic undertones. The film employs a flashback technique, a narrative strategy that immediately introduces the audience to the two protagonists while setting the temporal framework of the story. As noted by American film scholar Turim(2013), flashbacks are a crucial device in historical biographical films, as they not only help to establish a clear timeline and engage the audience emotionally, but also provide a sense of the expansive temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative from the very outset. In the film's opening scene, the two protagonists are shown walking through a dilapidated corridor before emerging onto a basketball

court, rather than a theater stage, with their figures backlit. According to Liu (2000), a distinguished Chinese cinematographer, the use of backlighting in dark environments often symbolizes the characters' fate and predicament, subtly suggesting their misalignment with their surroundings. This dissonance reflects the historical context—set shortly after the Cultural Revolution, a period widely regarded as the darkest era in the history of the People's Republic of China. This bleak atmosphere starkly contrasts with the nostalgic recollections of the protagonists' Peking Opera master, who reminisces about the golden age of Peking Opera during their youth. As the protagonists rehearse a scene from *Farewell My Concubine* on the basketball court, the audience learns that Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, once celebrated Peking Opera performers, have been estranged for eleven years due to the Cultural Revolution's persecution, and have not performed their renowned opera for twenty-two years.

By initiating the narrative with a flashback, the film transports the audience back to the original historical setting, a period marked by profound chaos in modern Chinese history. As Chinese historian Chen (1964) documents, the late Qing Dynasty was characterized by governmental incompetence, resulting in military defeats in the First Sino-Japanese War and the Second Opium War. These failures eroded public confidence in the Qing government, leading to the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in 1850, a peasant uprising inspired by both traditional Chinese ideals and Christian teachings. Faced with both internal and external crises, the Qing government relied heavily on local warlords to suppress the rebellion, a strategy that eventually contributed to the rise of regional military power and the fragmentation of the nation. Despite this turbulent backdrop, the period witnessed the zenith of Peking Opera's popularity, encapsulated in the saying, "Everyone in the world must listen to opera." It was within this context that Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, both orphaned, were taken in by a Peking Opera troupe. Under the harsh discipline of their master, who believed in the maxim "Strict teachers produce excellent students," the two protagonists formed a deep bond, relying on each other for survival. The film contrasts this rigorous traditional education with the more lenient practices of the new society, as illustrated by a scene in which Chen Dieyi, now a master himself, is resisted by his apprentice, who invokes the concept of human rights—a notion foreign to Chen Dieyi's understanding of discipline.

The narrative progresses to 1932, during the Beiyang government period, where the audience is introduced to a significant character, Zhang Gonggong, a eunuch from the late Qing Dynasty. When Zhang Gonggong asks Cheng Dieyi what year it is, Cheng Dieyi replies that it is the 21st year of the Republic of China, only to be reprimanded by Zhang, who insists it is the 24th year of the Xuantong Emperor's reign. This interaction underscores Zhang's refusal to accept the Qing Dynasty's demise. The film vividly portrays Zhang's corrupt and lascivious nature, as evidenced by the opulent decor of his residence—a stark contrast to the widespread poverty of the era. Zhang's predatory behavior towards Cheng Dieyi, whom he finds more alluring than the women present, marks a significant turning point for Cheng Dieyi. This encounter leads Cheng Dieyi to utter the pivotal line, "I am a girl, not a man," signifying a profound shift in his identity and self-perception.

As the narrative progresses and the protagonists mature, they both rise to prominence as renowned Peking Opera actors. The director skillfully employs spatial design and a non-linear timeline across four key stages to juxtapose the four distinct regimes depicted in the film. This technique also creates a parallel with the film's opening scene, which represents the cultural aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. At this juncture in the story, the two characters are at the height of their careers. Peking Opera has reached unprecedented popularity, drawing audiences from all walks of life, from commoners to nobility, regardless of age or gender. This era of cultural flourishing is illustrated through a conversation between Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, in which Cheng Dieyi asks where they first performed *Farewell My Concubine*. Duan Xiaolou recalls that their initial performance took place at Zhang Gonggong's residence, which has since been converted into a coffin shop. This transformation signals the complete overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and the full emergence of the Beiyang government. According to modern historian Tao (1983), the 1911 Revolution marked the end of the Qing Dynasty, leading to a period of intense political instability. The Beiyang Army, under the leadership of Yuan Shikai and others, emerged as a dominant military force, eventually establishing the Beiyang government. However, the Beiyang regime was plagued by persistent social issues, ethnic conflicts, and foreign interference. Unable to effectively address these challenges, the Beiyang government was ultimately overthrown in 1928 by the Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek. Against this backdrop of political upheaval, the relationship between the two protagonists begins to fracture, coinciding with the introduction of Yuan Shiqing, a character symbolizing the warlords of the era. Yuan Shiqing, who shares Cheng Dieyi's passion for Peking Opera, is portrayed as living in opulence despite the widespread turmoil, reflecting the internal decay and disarray of the Beiyang government.

The film then shifts to the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War during World War II, focusing on the events surrounding the July 7th Incident of 1937, which historian Guo (2002) identifies as a critical turning point. The incident, also known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, marked the beginning of full-scale hostilities between Japan and China, leading to the occupation of Beijing (then Beiping) by Japanese forces on July 29, 1937. This period is depicted in the film as the second stage, during which a significant new character, Chief Aoki, is introduced. Unlike other Japanese officers, Aoki is portrayed as an art connoisseur who deeply appreciates Cheng Dieyi's talent and the cultural significance of Peking Opera, arguably more so than the Nationalist government. Upon first encountering Cheng Dieyi's performance, Aoki is captivated and later uses his influence to have Cheng Dieyi perform for him in a military camp under the pretext of rescuing Duan Xiaolou. After securing Duan's release, Cheng Dieyi acknowledges Aoki's understanding of the art by stating, "There is a man named Aoki who knows how to appreciate opera." Even after Japan's defeat in World War II and Aoki's subsequent death, Cheng Dieyi remains steadfast in his belief that his performances for Aoki were acts of cultural preservation, not betrayal. Despite their limited interaction, Aoki serves as a brief yet profound confidant to Cheng Dieyi, as he does not seek to obliterate China's cultural essence through conquest but instead seeks to appreciate

and preserve it. This appreciation is poignantly depicted in the film's "second stage," where the Japanese audience, including Aoki, is visibly moved and applauds Cheng Dieyi's performance of the classic Peking Opera piece *The Drunken Concubine*.

In 1945, the film transitions to a pivotal moment in history. As noted by British historian Weinberg, the Japanese surrender marked the conclusion of World War II. On August 15, 1945, the Emperor of Japan announced Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Proclamation, issued by China, the United States, and Britain, and thereby declared an unconditional surrender. With this, the Second World War officially ended. In the aftermath, China entered a period of political deadlock between the Kuomintang (KMT) government and the Communist Party. The film's setting, Beiping (present-day Beijing), remained under Kuomintang control during this "third" stage. The two protagonists, once again performing together under the direction of their troupe master, encounter harassment from the KMT soldiers during their first scene.

According to Chinese historians Yu and Zhu (2001), the KMT government, in an attempt to salvage its failing economy, introduced the Gold Yuan Certificates as a replacement for the hyperinflated fiat currency. However, this only exacerbated the economic crisis, leading to catastrophic inflation. Within six months of issuing the Gold Yuan Certificates, real prices had surged by 3.9 million times, housing costs had increased 770,000 times, and clothing prices had soared 6.52 million times. By 1949, six kilograms of rice cost 400 million Gold Yuan Certificates. With such rampant inflation, ordinary citizens could no longer afford theater tickets, leaving only the military to attend performances. The film captures this dire situation, showing that even after the Anti-Japanese War, the populace remained impoverished and destitute. During one performance, KMT soldiers disrupt Cheng Dieyi's act by shining flashlights in his face and heckling him. When Duan Xiaolou intervenes, the soldiers violently storm the stage, leading to a miscarriage for Duan's wife. The soldiers' hostility stems from Cheng Dieyi's past performances for the Japanese. This scene vividly portrays the KMT's violent suppression of culture and its disregard for artistic expression. The KMT viewed art as a potential threat to its authority, reflecting the political despotism and authoritarianism of the era, which stifled democracy and free thought. The regime's intolerance for dissent is evident in its use of violence against those who did not conform to its ideology. Amid this oppression, Cheng Dieyi's unwavering dedication to his art stands out. Despite being beaten and obstructed, he persists in his performance. When the KMT court later attempts to prosecute Cheng Dieyi for his wartime performances, the KMT commander dismisses the charges after hearing his Peking Opera, highlighting how powerless an individual artist was in determining their own fate.

The film's "fourth" stage coincides with the end of the Chinese Civil War, as the Communist Party triumphed over the Kuomintang. According to the Central Academy of Party History and Documentation (2021), the civil war between the KMT and the Communist Party, which lasted from June 1946 to September 1949, is also known as the Third Civil Revolutionary War. This conflict culminated in a decisive victory for the Communist Party, leading to the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, as declared during the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Beiping on September 21, 1949. The KMT retreated to Taiwan, marking the end of its rule over mainland China. In the film, the Communist Party's arrival in Beiping is depicted through their immediate distribution of food, symbolizing a tangible improvement in the lives of ordinary people. The "fourth" stage audience, now composed of Communist soldiers, contrasts sharply with previous audiences. When Cheng Dieyi apologizes for being unable to sing due to opium use, the troupe manager fears another confrontation. However, the disciplined Communist soldiers respond with applause and song, refraining from any violence, underscoring the strict order of the Communist Party. Yet, this scene also hints at a broader societal shift—the new regime, largely composed of workers and peasants, lacks an understanding of or appreciation for the nuances of Peking Opera, signaling its impending decline.

Cheng Dieyi, who is deeply committed to the purity of Peking Opera, finds himself increasingly alienated in this changing world. His rigid adherence to the traditional aesthetics of costumes, voice, and stagecraft clashes with the new generation's desire to modernize and adapt the art form. This tension ultimately leads to Cheng's psychological unraveling. As historian Xi and Jin recount, the Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong from 1966 to 1976, aimed to prevent capitalist restoration, maintain the purity of the Communist Party, and chart China's path to socialism. However, Mao's misjudgment of the political landscape led to severe political mistakes, civil strife, and widespread persecution that inflicted devastating harm on the nation, its people, and its intellectuals. Artists, in particular, were subjected to brutal repression, and the country's education and scientific progress were severely set back.

In 1966, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, like many prominent artists, were labeled as reactionaries and subjected to public criticism by the Red Guards. The film depicts this harrowing ordeal with a powerful visual metaphor: the two characters, bound and separated by flames, are forced to denounce each other. The suffocating atmosphere and intense imagery convey the dehumanizing pressure exerted by the Red Guards, leading to Duan Xiaolou's betrayal of Cheng Dieyi. As Duan later admits, he was never the true "Overlord" of the opera, while Cheng Dieyi was the real "Concubine Yu." This betrayal results in a 22-year estrangement between the two, during which they never perform *Farewell My Concubine* again. When they finally reunite on stage, Cheng Dieyi, unable to reconcile with the changes wrought by time and history, takes his own life, dying amidst the remnants of the world he cherished.

3. Conclusion

The film *Farewell My Concubine* was selected by *Time Magazine* as one of "The 100 Best Films of All Time." Within the canon of Chinese cinema, *Farewell My Concubine* stands alongside other significant works such as *The Last Emperor*, *The Last Eunuch*

of *China*, and *To Live*, all of which explore the profound effects of historical and social changes on the lives of Chinese people. However, *Farewell My Concubine* distinguishes itself as the most historically resonant of these films. While *To Live*, *The Last Eunuch of China*, and *The Last Emperor* focus on specific aspects of Chinese history—the fate of rural families, the decline of the Qing court and Manchu culture, and the life of Puyi, China's last emperor, respectively—*Farewell My Concubine* offers a more multifaceted narrative. It not only provides a deeply reflective and emotionally complex portrayal of the beauty and spiritual depth of traditional Chinese opera but also explores the evolution of Peking Opera from its peak to its decline. Furthermore, the film delves into themes of love between men within the context of traditional Chinese society.

More importantly, *Farewell My Concubine* presents a comprehensive and objective view of China's modern history during its darkest, most tumultuous periods. The film exemplifies the unique ability of cinema to not only depict historical truths but also to shape collective consciousness and encourage social dialogue. As such, *Farewell My Concubine* transcends its narrative to become a work of art that engages with the historical realities of its time, offering viewers a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between culture, history, and society.

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