

The Influence of the Truth of the Characters on Chinese Films in the 1990s: A Case Study of Farewell My Concubine

Yidan Gao^{1,a,*}

¹*Institute of Communication, School of Television Arts, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310018, China*
a. wsb@cuz.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The 1990s represent a unique period in Chinese history, during which the characters' real-life experiences have a significant impact on both the audience's perception of the characters and their aesthetics, debate and criticism of social reality, and, to some extent, the long-term trajectory of Chinese cinema. This period coincides with the release of *Farewell My Concubine* in this decade. Under the special background of the times, it tells the story of Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi. The story, featuring a diverse cast of characters from various social classes, can be regarded as a compilation of humanistic traditions in the 1990s. It encompasses critiques of feudalism, social turmoil, the struggle for survival, and a compassionate exploration of human nature. Additionally, it establishes a solid cinematic groundwork for future investigations into the social context of this era. This story reveals a concealed crisis of survival within a seemingly peaceful social setting, bringing together protagonists with diverse personalities. This paper employs discourse analysis and audio-visual language analysis research methods to examine the impact of character truths on Chinese films from the 1990s. Using the film *Farewell My Concubine* as an example, the research reveals the personality truths through each person's unique and profound character truth.

Keywords: truth of characters, Chinese film, 1990s, social reality

1. Introduction

Farewell My Concubine, a film released in China during the 1990s, explores several themes such as traditional culture, the cultural revolution, outdated feudal practices, the human condition, and the nature of humanity via the tragic destinies of its diverse characters. The film has exerted a significant impact in China and globally, establishing itself as a seminal work directed by Chen Kaige. During the 1990s, Chinese films, which had evolved in the context of reform and opening up, were no longer confined to a closed cultural milieu. This was particularly significant given the unique circumstances of China and the global community at that time. A large number of Hollywood films were introduced into China to revitalize the Chinese market. The director's attention to the core and characterization of the picture was sparked by the implementation of reform and opening up, as well as the introduction of new ideas. The key to effective characterization and story development lies in the authenticity of the characters. In his work "Story," Robert McGee asserts that the truth lies beneath the surface of characterization. Regardless of his characterization characteristics, who is this person in the depths of his heart? The authenticity of a character can only be shown through a moral or emotional conflict.

The way an individual behaves when faced with pressure is a reflection of their true character. The more intense the pressure, the more significant and genuine their choice becomes, revealing their true nature [1]. The dilemma is the key to promote the development of the story.

Currently, the study advancement in this topic is sluggish, with a greater focus on analyzing classical films and their social context. The impact of character authenticity on the film is given less attention. This paper uses the methods of discourse analysis and audio-visual language analysis to examine the embodiment of the truth of the characters in the two films, such as the speech dialogue of the characters, the use of vocabulary, and the use of audio-visual language, color, composition, and lens language. This paper examines the notion of character truth and offers some insights into this field. It explores the integration of character truth in film and analyses it through discourse and audio-visual language. The study sheds light on various aspects of Chinese film and society in the 1990s, offering valuable reference points for this field.

2. China's social background and film industry in the 1990s

The cultural background of China in the 70s and 80s is closely intertwined with the historical development of the country in the 90s. As one scholar pointed out, the 80s marked a significant shift towards modernization and market reform that laid the foundation for the rise of China in the new century [2]. In the 1970s, China was confronted with the crucial Cold War dynamics and the geopolitical spatial arrangement established worldwide after World War II. In the 1980s, there was a shift away from the “pre-modern” and “revolutionary” era of the 1950s and 1970s, giving rise to a new movement of cultural enlightenment. China entered a new era of reform and opening-up with the third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee. In the 1990s, China experienced a surge of Hollywood films and Western ideas. Chinese cultural criticism during this time aimed to dismantle Western theories and ideological discourses to cultivate critical awareness and knowledge for understanding contemporary Chinese issues in a historical and theoretical context [3]. Therefore, in the 1990s, it became imperative to dismantle numerous outdated concepts, scrutinize Western culture, and undertake the innovation and reformation of ideas and culture.

A major explosion in Chinese literary works occurred in the 1990s, the century that saw the beginning of cinema. These newly developing literary works were shaped by the ideological currents of the New Period in the 1980s. These works of literature and film had a profound influence on society, offering critical perspectives on feudalism and deeply engaging with people's ingrained thoughts. Simultaneously, the rise of the fifth generation directors, like as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who had comparable upbringings and social backgrounds, drew inspiration from literary works. They amalgamated cinematic and literary works and adapted them for the silver screen. In an interview, Peking University professor Chen Pingyuan stated: “The academic literature, arts, and root-seeking literature of the 1980s formed an entirety, including the Fifth Generation directors and cultural fervor. They are all distinct from one another, yet they all have the same spirit and strive for harmony with one another [4].”

3. The truth from *Farewell My Concubine*

Farewell My Concubine, released in 1993, is the first Chinese film to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. It tells the story of Duan Xiaolou, Cheng Dieyi and Juxian, and expresses the discussion of traditional culture, feudal dross, cultural Revolution and human nature.

3.1. Character introduction.

3.1.1. Section of the small building: fake overlord

In his capacity as Cheng Dieyi's senior brother, Duan Xiaolou provided some degree of assistance to Cheng. In addition, Cheng's enamored heart was moved by the portrayal of the dictator in the opera, evoking latent affection. However, in contrast to Cheng Dieyi, he is a "spurious" despot, as his spuriousness arises from his lucidity of thought. During the Cultural Revolution, he publicly renounced his wife and old friend, whom he cherished, but prioritized his interests above everything else. He has a profound comprehension of the actuality of society. Contrary to Cheng's strong sense of pride, he seeks to gain favor with those in power, demonstrating a keen awareness of how to satisfy the wealthy. However, considering the specific period, he also possesses the arrogance of a dictator and takes pleasure in his Chinese identity, making him more genuine overall. In the middle of the intricate circumstances of the times, he sustains himself by engaging in opera shows, representing a strong feeling of patriotism but also displaying self-centered fearfulness as an ordinary person situated at the lowest rung of society.

3.1.2. Cheng Dieyi: the real Yu Ji

Cheng Dieyi was born in a brothel, where his mother amputated his six fingers, and Duan Xiaolou forcefully inserted a pipe into his mouth. The elderly castrated man also caused him injury, resulting in the gradual formation of delusions about his own gender. During his most difficult times, Duan Xiaolou found solace in the support of his older brother, which gradually developed into emotions that went beyond conventional friendship. Being a passionate opera aficionado, both as a performer and a spectator, he strongly embraced the notion of "loyalty to a single lover" akin to Yu Ji. Contrary to Duan Xiaolou, his misfortune stems from his genuineness. He becomes deeply engrossed with Peking opera and the realm of Yu Ji. Within his realm, the boundaries between right and wrong are blurred, leaving just his personal utopia. "Initially, Cheng Dieyi was isolated and bleak, but through fervent commitment, he attained artistic eminence. The artistic achievement is accompanied with the distress and sorrow caused by being in the wrong gender, the feeling of powerlessness and despair of being used by the privileged, and the suffering and isolation resulting from being harmed and insulted [5]." In contrast to the tyrant, he exemplifies integrity, displaying unwavering strength of character and a resolute commitment to maintaining traditional traditions.

3.1.3. Juxian: The true tyrant

Juxian is referred to as the "true tyrant" due to her unwavering resilience, despite her occupation as a prostitute. She demonstrated audacity by leaping from the building in the face of bullying, dedicated her entire existence to the search for Duan Xiaolou, and assisted Cheng Dieyi in overcoming his addiction to smoking. Throughout her entire existence, she engaged in a constant struggle, although the overwhelming forces of societal norms proved insurmountable, and her strength was insufficient to withstand them single-handedly. Despite her efforts to resist the influence of the secular world, she remained unable to avoid her predetermined destiny.

3.2. The shaping and expression of characters

3.2.1. Castration of male characteristics of Cheng Dieyi

Cheng Dieyi's tragic circumstances are largely a result of his feminine attributes, including the traumatic experience of having his fingers amputated by his mother during childhood, the forced alteration of his line "I was born a boy" amidst violent humiliation in the theatre, and the subsequent

degradation inflicted upon him by the elderly eunuch. These are the factual occurrences that transpired throughout Cheng Dieyi's early years. The forsaken infant he discovered by the wayside further contributes to the culmination of the entire situation. In the middle of these external and internal struggles, Cheng Dieyi's perception of his gender becomes unclear and he directs his repressed feelings towards the tyrant.

3.2.2. Truth of characters in audio-visual language

The film commences with a monochromatic sequence that lasts three minutes, and only when someone is reprimanded within the theatre does colour gradually reappear. The utilisation of colour evokes a sense of nostalgia, transporting the spectator to a bygone period. Scenes infused with a perception of the age are both rural and remote, where every scolding is met with suppressed cries of agony, saturating everything with the colours of the historical period.

The character of Little Lai Zi exerts a significant impact on both main characters, compelling them to confront the concepts of life and death for the very first time. In the scene depicting Little Lai Zi's escape, the pursuing master and the bystanders who oppose the protagonists both exemplify the sorrowful manifestation of their desire for freedom, yet find themselves involuntarily bound by societal constraints, rendering their escape impossible. During their secret outing to attend a performance, they frequently engage in conversations about "becoming a master." Subsequently, following their unsuccessful attempt to escape, the director employs an upward camera angle, with Lai Zi positioned in the foreground, capturing the gradual descent of the sticks and exposing Lai Zi's terrified expression. This scene implies the moment when he ultimately succumbs to the overwhelming weight of his struggles and takes his own life, effectively portraying the challenges faced by the underprivileged in the prevailing social conditions of that era. The lower-class individuals, symbolized by Little Lai Zi, were unable to endure the weight of their hardships and turned to suicide, while the remains of the feudal system, symbolized by the elderly eunuch, exploited their privileges. Individuals continued to struggle to maintain an upright posture due to the overwhelming weight of societal expectations and the oppressive nature of feudalism.

3.3. Social reflection

The film does not provide a comprehensive introduction to the historical period. Instead, it focuses on the development of the main characters during the full duration of the movie. Between 1924 and the era of the "Cultural Revolution," the film progressively exposes the detrimental consequences of feudalism and war on the populace. Simultaneously, the film also conveys remorse for the deterioration of conventional culture, such as Peking opera. Peking opera, which was previously revered during the Beiyang administration era, came under scrutiny and faced criticism during the Cultural Revolution, symbolizing the erosion of traditional culture as it was increasingly overwhelmed by the changing times.

4. The influence of *Farewell My Concubine* on film creation and audience aesthetics

"The fundamental values of *Farewell My Concubine* are based on deep humanitarian concern, with a focus on choosing elements that closely mimic actual circumstances. From an artistic standpoint, it encapsulates the emotional expression of the entire nation and delves into the longstanding heritage of national art. Its creation of audiovisual effects meets contemporary requirements [6]." The success of *Farewell My Concubine* in the film industry can be attributed to this reason. This timeless picture has partially shaped the audience's aesthetic sensibilities, redirecting their attention from the present to the past. It enables them to immerse themselves in the challenges faced by individuals of that age, the societal disruptions, and the resilience of traditional culture.

Juxian's presence in the film as one of the few female characters is subject to a significant gender perspective. Throughout a significant portion of history, women have held subordinate positions within cultures that have been predominantly centered upon men. Their own perspectives and experiences have been diminished and suppressed by a patriarchal society. Undoubtedly, in a patriarchal culture, women have consistently been subjected to the male gaze [7]. Both her profession as a prostitute and her rivalry with Cheng Dieyi is only intended to cater to the masculine perspective. Nevertheless, Juxian is indeed a courageous and resourceful woman. She assists Cheng Dieyi in overcoming his smoking addiction and engages in negotiations with Lord Yuan, showcasing her equal competence to men. However, despite her intelligence, she is subjected to physical violence by Duan Xiaolou and experiences public humiliation during the Cultural Revolution battle session. Even a lady of great wisdom struggles to elude the scrutiny of both society and men. Ultimately, she succumbs to death while being observed [1].

5. Conclusion

This study examines the film *Farewell My Concubine* as a case study, focusing on the social context of the 1990s and analysing the portrayal of character truths in the film via the lenses of discourse and reception. The analysis determines that character truths are essential in every film, as they significantly influence the development of characters and the progression of the plot. Furthermore, the character truths can partially mirror society realities by examining the internal and external pressures that protagonists face as a result of the character truths they come across. The decisions made by individuals when faced with intense pressure can expose their genuine character—the more intense the strain, the more profound the revelation, and the more accurately their choices mirror their underlying nature. Nevertheless, this paper is subject to certain research limits due to the scarcity of literature on character truths, resulting in a reduced pool of resources for reference. Moreover, the analysis of the film may be influenced to a certain degree by subjective biases. Subsequent investigations in this domain could go more into the significance of character veracity in films that transcend a particular time period and scrutinise their impact on other genres of films and character dispositions. Additionally, it could explore how the authentic nature of characters influences the development of main characters and their influence on different film genres.

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