

A synopsis of the movie farewell my concubine

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Shuo Zhang Writing 1 05/6/2011 A new look on homosexuality-analysis of Farewell My Concubine Although homosexuality exists in social reality, the lack of its own “truthful” representation in terms of books or films creates numerous misunderstandings that prevent the development of a positive homosexual sensibility in Chinese culture. Therefore, the most impressive and controversial part of the movie Farewell My Concubine (Kaige Chen, 1993) is its effort to break the language-less silence in search of an appropriate voice to express homosexual experience and anxiety.

By showing Dieyi Cheng's painful life against the historical backdrop of extreme turbulence in China (from 1924 to 1977), the movie critiques the homophobic phenomenon in traditional Chinese culture, and summons the establishment and development of a more liberal society. Dieyi's tragic life begins with his designation to play Dan's roles because of his delicate appearance. At first, this idea strongly bothers him. When the famous theatrical agent, Nakun, visited the troupe, Dieyi was brought to recite his bravura role; but instead of saying the correct line “I am naturally a girl, not a boy”, he insisted in saying ‘I am by nature a boy.. (17: 57). With the future of the troupe at risk, such a mistake was not tolerable in the highly-standard traditional Peking Opera, Xiaolou twisted a tobacco pipe in Dieyi's mouth until Dieyi whimpered the correct lines with his mouth full of blood. Dieyi tried to escape from the opera house with another apprentice Laizi, but came back after seeing a performance by an opera master that impressed and made both of them long for the life of opera stars. After their return, Xiaolou was brutally beaten for allowing their escape, and seeing this scene, Laizi hanged himself so as to be free from the pain of punishment.

This heartbreaking experience forced Dieyi to accept his female role, and made him submissive to the headmaster. To become a professional Dan, Dieyi must have gone through highly intensive training process. Although the movie leaves out this part, we can imagine that he was taught to speak and act like women even in his daily life. According to Min Tian's essay "Male Dan: the Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre", "identification, given the strict stylization and codification in traditional Beijing Opera, is one of the cornerstones of performance and it is stressed even more in the art of female impersonation precisely because of the 'prescribed necessity of dissolving the disparity between the actor and his female role'". (Tian, 84) Hence, it is necessary for Dieyi to constantly imagine himself as a woman so as to reach the standard of performance and be accepted by the censorious audience. Dieyi succeeded in playing the role Concubine Yu in his debut performance. He was so effeminate and attractive on stage that Eunuch Zhang became crazy for him and secretly raped him afterwards.

In return for Dieyi's sacrifice, Eunuch Zhang made the opera house the most popular one in Beijing, and Dieyi, the most promising "actress" among his peers. However, Dieyi was crushed after this grueling experience, as shown in the movie: he remained silent for days, tucked away from his fellow apprentices, and even indulged himself more into his fantasy, into his role of Concubine Yu: In the middle of a performance, the Japanese troop broke into the theatre and started to rob the audience. The stir became a huge riot when a woman was shot to death so that the actors and workers stopped performing and fought back against the soldiers.

Only Dieyi remained on stage, continued singing and dancing, as if the shot, the fight, the impending anti-Japanese war were none of his business. This shows Dieyi's complete dedication and focus on stage and within his constructed fantasy as Concubine Yu. Also, it is from this incident that Dieyi's sexual orientation became deviated from the "norm", that he relied more and more on Xiaolou, his robust friend, who played the King as Dieyi's counterpart, because Xiaolou always protected Dieyi when he encountered unfair treatment.

To analyze Dieyi's psychological development of homosexuality, we may refer to Metzger, Sean's essay "Farewell My Fantasy", which offers an insightful interpretation in terms of Freud's psychological analysis. Sean suggests that Dieyi's childhood experience is close to "Freud's trajectory of the female beating fantasy" (Sean, 233) and several scenes in the movie are particularly attached to this theory is that Xiaolou was cruelly beaten after helping Dieyi cheat with a torturous training process.

Xiaolou was nearly beaten to death, but remained smiling to Dieyi till the end in order to relieve Dieyi's panic and guilt, which made Dieyi feel, subconsciously, like a female protected by a male, Xiaolou. They were learning, performing and hanging out with each other every day. Xiaolou joked that if one day he becomes the King of the world, he would make Dieyi the queen, just like the story of Farewell, My Concubine. Dieyi, however, took that seriously as he faithfully believed that he could not live without Xiaolou.

The highly standard rules for Dan's performance and the horrible childhood experiences all contribute to Dieyi's development of homosexuality. He became so in love with Xiaolou, that upon hearing the news of Xiaolou's

marriage with Juxian, a beautiful prostitute, he screamed to Xiaolou in a trembling voice: ‘ I want to stay together with you forever, not an hour, a minute or a second less. ’(50: 11) Of course, Dieyi’ s wish could never be fulfilled because Xiaolou is not a gay; moreover, Xiaolou strays away from Dieyi probably due to his fear of Dieyi’s abnormal behavior which could imperil his relationship with Juxian.

Being Dieyi’s only friend, Xiaolou’s alienation left Dieyi with nothing but pain. Although he enjoyed tremendous fame and fortune as the best Dan in Beijing, he relieved his loneliness and grief by smoking opium. To Dieyi, opium had the magic effect of trapping him in his fantasies, where he is the real Concubine Yu, and the King never left him. For most part of the movie, Dieyi remained in female costume and concubine makeup, because the transvestite stage of Peking opera offers a place, an imaginative capaciousness, where he could represent and masquerade his genuine sensibility.

However the more he did so, the more he drifted apart from reality, and the more he suffered. He had a grueling time giving up opium, because it consumed too much of his energy and mentality that he passed out during a performance. Locked in a room, he could not help but to smash all the stuff, crying for assistance and cursing the world. Next follows one of the most heartbreaking scene in the movie: among a mess of broken glass and ripped clothes, Dieyi leans on Juxian’s lap, pale and frail, murmuring that he misses his mother.

Juxian, with her eyes full of tears, answered: “ Mom is here, don’t be afraid”(90: 37). Even Juxian, Dieyi’s rival in love, can understand his pain and

helplessness at this moment. She pretended to be his mother, giving him temporary love and support in order to help him overcome the great difficulty. And due to his loneliness, Dieyi also developed a relationship with Patron Yuan, a bureaucrat, a wealthy admirer, and a crazy theatergoer, not because of love, but because of the absence of Xiaolou. Yuan encouraged, and even indulged himself in the fantasy of Farewell My Concubine with Dieyi: he bought exquisite decorations and costumes for Dieyi, saying that they would make his Concubine Yu more glamorous; he dressed like the King, sang and danced with Dieyi in his lavish courtyard, turning a deaf ear to the chaotic world outside. Dieyi was so isolated from the world that he even performed for Japanese invaders during the anti-Japanese war, innocently thinking that they would appreciate and even spread Peking Opera in their country; instead, he was tortured and imprisoned for his treason by the Chinese government at the end of the war.

His failed relationship with Yuan even affected him during the Cultural Revolution, because having any relation with a senior bureaucrat from the Qing Dynasty, the enemy of communism, was considered to be a formidable crime at that time; and, being a gay, which was considered to be a scandal in traditional Chinese culture, further aggravated his accusation. Hence, Dieyi was punished and humiliated in front of the public in his most beautiful costume of Concubine Yu.

Dieyi's tragic experiences must have something to do with his homosexual identity, as Benzi Zhang observes in "Figures of Violence and Tropes of Homophobia, Reading Farewell My Concubine between East and West": "although the dominating powers were constantly shifting in China from 1924

to 1977, the discourse of peremptory heterosexuality and patriarchy has never been changed or challenged. Similar to the victims of rape, homosexual men meet the worst injustice and violence during that terrifying period of history”(104).

Refusing to be settled in either the category of heterosexuality or patriarchy, Dieyi is a “ nomad” with inappropriate identity; he threatens and challenges the heterosexual cultural value, and thus becomes the enemy of the whole feudal society. Therefore, Dieyi’s loneliness can be interpreted as being marginalized by the mainstream society, and his susceptibility to violence can be seen as a general characteristic among the homosexual minority. To further interpret this movie, we need to analyze the Beijing Opera Farewell, My Concubine, which dominated the professional life of Dieyi.

It is a love story circulated in Chinese society for thousands of years. In this tragic tale, Concubine Yu is so loyal and true that rather than abandoning her king as he faces military defeat, she chooses to dance for him one last time and then to cut her throat with his sword. From the perspective of modern people, this story obviously reflects “ a cultural discourse invested with male dominated values”(Zhang, 103), because the death of the young and beautiful Concubine Yu shows her loyalty to her husband, which is valued as a virtue, or even a standard of conduct for women for thousands of years. The binary model of the King (dominant masculinity)-Concubine Yu (subservient femininity), which serves well the patriarchal, heterosexual orthodoxy, has been the dominating ideology in Chinese culture, which has an oppressive and suffocating consequences for homosexual discourse”(Zhang, 103). To echo with this story and to provide a heart-rending frame for the movie,

Dieyi killed himself in the same pattern as Concubine Yu. At the end of this movie, Dieyi and Xiaolou were reunited on the stage, practicing Farewell, My Concubine again.

Xiaolou began with the line “ I am naturally a girl, not a boy”, which gave Dieyi trouble forty years ago. Accidentally, Dieyi made the same error of finishing the line with he is not a girl. Then all of a sudden, Dieyi swiftly pulled out the sword and killed himself in front of his “ king”. Why did Dieyi commitsuicide? Was it because he could no longer withstand the agony of living? I don’t think so, because 1977 was the dawn of Chinese modernization, a signal of a brand-new and peaceful era. With the hope of a bright future, Dieyi would not expect to repeat his heartbreaking experiences.

Was it because he lose faith in mending his relationship with Xiaolou? Definitely not, as seen in the movie, Xiaolou and Dieyi talked and smiled like old friends at their reunion. The most reasonable answer is that he killed himself to assert his homosexual identity and to demonstrate his unyieldingness to the ugly world he lived through. According to Zhang, “ Deviance such as homosexuality has long been regarded in Chinese culture as a sign of “ transgression” that demands a different order of social normality”. (Zhang, 101) Therefore, to maintain this order, anything that subverts the orthodox morality should be exterminated.

In this sense, Dieyi’s death is an inevitable consequence, is a powerful highlight of this movie, which strikes the hearts of the audience. Overall, the movie can be seen as a modern version of the old tragic Farewell My Concubine: they both happen in troubled times, and both the heroines died

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in the end. However, instead of eulogizing the heroine's loyalty and purity, the modern version summons a hope, a pressing demand for a liberal society. If Dieyi were born in a liberal society, where homosexuality is not a shame, where gay men have equal rights to pursue love and live a normal life, he wouldn't be abused in the opera house; he wouldn't be alienated by his best friend; he wouldn't indulge himself in his fantasy by smoking opium; he wouldn't be humiliated during the Cultural Revolution, and he wouldn't kill himself in the end. In a word, it is the huge pressure from the conservative society that leads to Dieyi's death. Therefore, the tragic ending is not designed to break our hearts, but to make them stronger, so that we are determined enough to fight for liberty and equity.

With the fascinating story being told, what are the general messages that the movie conveys? First, Farewell My Concubine is a great attempt to break the language-less silence on the issue of homosexuality, and due to its controversial topic, it was once banned in Chinese mainland theatre. However, it still succeeds in arousing people's attention on this issue. Second, it criticizes the unfair treatment and the general despise of gays or lesbians in traditional Chinese culture. Third, it suggests a suppressed consciousness of "modernity" through the issue of homosexuality.

With all the blood and tears from the painful history, the movie calls for a liberal and comprehensive society, in which people's freedom and desire can be satisfied to the utmost. Finally, it instills hope and courage to us-that we should stop complaining about lives and cherish what we own now, because we are lucky enough to live in a peaceful and prosperous society. Meta-analysis I had a hard time picking out thesis, because Farewell My Concubine

is so rich in context that it addresses several significant binaries about the world: love and betray, public and private, freewill and predestination, homosexual and heterosexual.

I chose the binaries: public and private, freewill and predestination for my close reading essay, trying very hard to make correlations between them. It didn't work well, however, for it lacks a focus, a lens, through which I can analyze this film in depth; moreover, I could not find useful secondary sources illustrating any relation between public life and fatalism. Therefore, I turned my attention to a more specific and well-expressed topic of this movie: homosexuality. In my lens essay, I let my analysis evolve with the progression of the story.

I firstly identify the causes to Dieyi's homosexuality by illustrating several important details in his childhood with the explanations from Metzger Sean and Min Tian's studies. It shows that the strict training process of Dan, and some childhood violent accidents such as raping and beating all contribute to his homosexual development. Secondly, I explore the relationship between his torment life and his homosexual identity. After watching this movie several times, I found out that most of his misfortune comes from his "abnormal" sexual preference.

For example, although he is well recognized as a distinguished artist on stage, nobody really cares about his feeling in real life; instead, even Xiaolou alienates him. He is discarded from the mainstream society, and therefore, he seeks consolidation from smoking opium and completely dedicating in his role Concubine Yu on stage. Over time, he is isolated by the community, and suffers from his innocence during social movement. Then, with the help of

Benzi Zhang's study on homophobia in traditional Chinese culture, I investigate the causes of this relationship.

As Zhang pointed out, "Deviance such as homosexuality has long been regarded in Chinese culture as a sign of "transgression" that demands a different order of social normality"(103). Therefore, I conclude that Dieyi's tragedy is an inevitable consequence given the general homophobic culture he lives in, and his death in the end can be interpreted as the successful extermination of "nomad", or a sort of threat, of the orthodox feudal society. Finally, I tried to reveal the implicit message this film conveys to the public.

I discovered that this movie can be seen as a modern version of the well-known tale Farewell My Concubine, but with a new meaning, a new expectation to our modern world. By bring up homosexuality, a sensitive issue that has been suppressed for thousands of years, the movie suggests an urgent need for China's modernization, a call for a liberal society, in which minorities such as homosexuals can seek for happiness like anyone else.

Reference Min Tian, "Male Dan: the Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre", Asian Theatre Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1(Spring, 2000), pp. 78-97, University of Hawai'i Press.

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