

# Farewell my concubine: self- identification in context

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Directed by Chen Kaige, a highly acclaimed fifth-generation Chinese film director, Farewell My Concubine has received many international film awards and nominations; among them are the Best Foreign Film and the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1993. In the film, Cheng Dieyi, a Peking Opera actor playing the leading female characters, becomes obsessed with his role as the concubine of the King of Chu and blurs his stage role with the real life he leads. The circumstances in which one grows up in are critical factors in shaping his or her sense of self-identity.

This paper attempts to explore the gender identity troubles that Cheng Dieyi has undergone in his self-identification and sexuality in the context of the environment of his upbringing. The story begins when Cheng's mother takes her son to Master Guan and begs him to take Dieyi (whose nickname was Douzi at the time) into his opera troupe. In order to be a performer in the Peking opera, one must not have any features that are abnormal or that may frighten the audience. Unfortunately, Douzi fails this test because he was born with a sixth finger on one of his hands. His mother was desperate to sell him off and thus cuts off her son's finger with a cleaver. At this point, Master Guan agrees to accept Douzi as a disciple in his opera troupe. Master Guan notices that Douzi's "features were surprisingly delicate; he was almost pretty", which are perfect for playing female roles.

Thus, Douzi is chosen as a dan, or the female lead of the opera troupe. He will play the female roles alongside his best friend, Xiaolou who was chosen to be his sheng, or male lead. Starting from even the earliest scenes of the film, Dieyi's self-identity has been slowly ripped away from him. Dieyi's abrupt transition from living in a brothel as a prostitute's son to becoming a  
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well-disciplined opera singer in the troupe is marked by his mother's brutal amputation of his sixth finger. This symbolic castration implies that one must abandon his inherited past in order to seek a new social identity. "The root of biological determinism has been severed and the subject freed to pursue a place in a symbolic world of gender fluidity" Dieyi's finger is not the only thing that has been emasculated, but his self-identity has been castrated as well. The film hints at this in the beginning by including the character of Master Ni, a unuch who was physically castrated, losing his male reproductive organs.

While Master Ni was physically castrated of his male reproductive organs, Dieyi becomes mentally and emotionally castrated through his harsh upbringing in the opera troupe. Whereas the symbolic castration signifies the possibility of Dieyi's transition from a biological male to a stereotypical female, the harsh corporal punishment he receives during his training in the opera troupe enforces that transition. Corporal punishment is often used in schools to reinforce the relation between master and student. It instills in students a sense of the power of the social hierarchy and their place within it. Dieyi's designated "place" on that hierarchy, sadly, requires that he learns to abandon his male identity. While corporal punishment remakes Dieyi mentally, costume and make up remakes Dieyi physically. As he performs in the long dresses and fancy headdresses, he sees himself capable of reflecting signs of beauty and femininity.

He is forced to sing "I am by nature a girl, not a boy", and his full transition to femininity went into full motion the moment he mastered this line and

accepted it as the truth, that he is by nature a girl, not a boy. Like most of the male dans in the Peking Opera theatre, Cheng Dieyi must be able to create the illusion of a real female that appeals to the male audience, but Cheng's femininity is apparent not only on stage, but off stage as well. Clearly, Cheng has fully adapted his female roles into his life off stage. He speaks in a low soft voice, his movements are graceful, maintains the delicate hand pose of the Lan huazhi (the artificial feminine hand pose of the male dan), and wears a seductive look that would often be considered a feminine gaze. Most male dans merely imitate these feminine acts on stage, but Cheng Dieyi gradually transforms these "acts" into an unconscious habit of his. "The repetition of the stylized female acts embedded in female impersonation and the rigid and violent regulation of these acts eventually bring about Cheng Dieyi's unconscious identification with Yuji, concubine of the Chu King, constructing in him a feminine sexuality and identity." Opera performers at the time were expected to play their stage roles for life.

Dieyi's most notable performance is an epic opera named Farewell My Concubine; it tells the story of the King of Chu (Xiang Yu) and his faithful concubine Yuji. Xiang Yu knows that he has lost to his enemy and drinks with Yuji on the last night. Yuji performs a sword dance for him and then cuts her own throat with his sword to express her faithfulness to him. As Dieyi continues to play the role of Yuji into this professional career, he begins to blur the life of Yuji's character and his own. This becomes very obvious when Dieyi begins to show signs of affection towards his stage partner, Xiaolou, who plays the King of Chu. In multiple times throughout the movie, Dieyi can be seen looking at Xiaolou with a tender, almost romantic gaze and is

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especially gentle when he helps Xiaolou apply makeup and dress in costume. His romantic feelings for his “stage brother” are translucent to the audience as he is overcome by jealousy at the news that Xiaolou was getting married to Juxian.

He believes that Juxian is robbing him of what was rightfully his. As in the opera when Yu Ji and Xiang Yu swear their love to each other, what Dieyi sees is actually he and his stage brother declaring their loyalty to one another. While Cheng Dieyi wholly embodies the female roles he impersonates, the Peking opera stage is essentially the world in which he bases his identity on. As he enters his professional career and makes a name for himself, he thinks that he will always be able to hide behind his feminine charms, and that art will always transcend any situation. For a while, he is proven right. On one occasion, he sings for a Japanese official to help Xiaolou out of jail; in another, he sings for a Chinese official to bail himself out of jail. Duan Xiaolou reminds Dieyi again and again that life is not the stage and he must learn to adjust to the values of the changing times.

The film covers a story that spans across 50 years of Chinese history: the rise and fall of the Nationalist Party, the Sino-Japanese War, the rise of the Communist Party, and the Cultural Revolution. As the nation goes through a turbulent historical period, Cheng simply views it as a backdrop that would never affect his performances. He was never concerned about any of the political upheavals that occurred or the change in regimes. He felt that as long as his art is being appreciated, it does not matter who the political leaders are. When he was put on trial for being a traitor when the

Communist Party was in power, he exclaims, " If the Japanese were still here, Peking Opera would have spread into Japan already," with no regard to the consequences. The art of Peking opera has always been Cheng's way of escaping reality, and it is this illusion that he identifies with. However, when the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, the identity he has found for himself has been robbed from him once again.

The Cultural Revolution is one that advocates extreme reality, and thus traditional art becomes a target of exploitation for distracting people from reality. When Dieyi and Xiaolou are taken out onto the streets to be reprimanded, his previous illusion that he and Xiaolou would never betray one another, just as Yu Ji and Xiang Yu would never do so, is shattered. Under the humiliation and physical abuse of the Red Guards, Xiaolou calls Dieyi a traitor to the Chinese and a homosexual. Cheng and Duan then turn on each other and expose incriminating details about each other's past to the Red Guards. This political movement is in a sense, a rude awakening for Cheng. For the first time, it forces him to abandon the identity that he forged for himself on the opera stage, and accept that he lives in a world where loyalty is not always indestructible. It is because of this revolution that causes Dieyi's blurred lines between opera and reality to slowly reappear.

These lines, however, did not have a lasting effect. When Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou reunite on the stage many years after the Cultural Revolution, they make their final Farewell My Concubine performance. At the last scene, Dieyi, playing Yuji, takes the sword and slits his throat. Dieyi wanted so desperately to be Yuji his entire life, and he finally fulfilled that wish, or so he

thinks, by boldly committing suicide just as Yuji has done so: for his love, and in a dramatic manner, like a stage opera should be. Cheng Dieyi had grown up with violence and abuse, in a society with constant political turmoil and turbulent changes. As a boy who was already an introvert to begin with, the unsettling changes that revolved around him became too overwhelming. He had no choice but to retreat into a world that he knows best: the opera stage.

Though the opera stage is but a fictional world, it is the only place in which he is always the hero(ine). Works Cited Cui, Shuqin. " Engendering Identity: Female Impersonation in Farewell My Concubine . From Poetic Realm to Fictional World: Chinese Theory of Fictional Ontology (1999) Farewell My Concubine. Dir. Chen Kaige. 1993.

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