



"Farewell My Concubine": History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema

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**Farewell My Concubine: History, Melodrama, and  
Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema**

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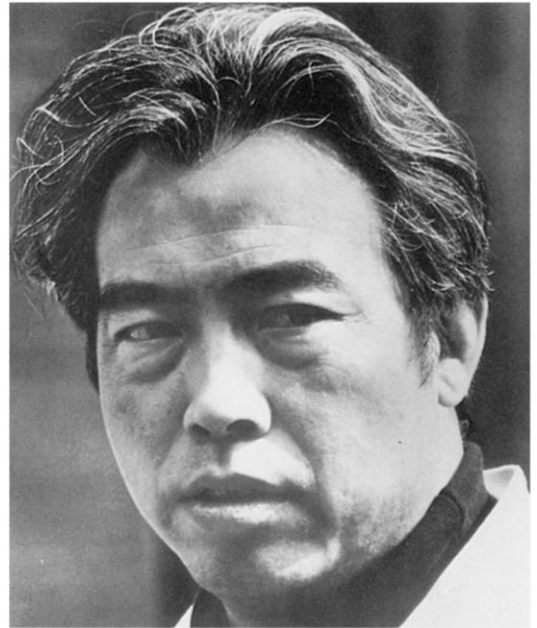


Leslie Cheung, Zhang Fengyi, and Gong-li  
in *Farewell My Concubine* (above);  
director Chen Kaige (opposite)

Chinese directors Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou are “in.” Europeans have honored them with prestigious prizes while in the United States critics and scholars have responded with voluminous commentary, over a hundred articles in the past two years alone. Most critics acknowledge these two talented directors as superbly refined representatives of Chinese cinema. Chen’s latest piece, *Farewell My Concubine*, was crowned with the Palme d’Or in the 1993 Cannes Film Festival. The film was also a hot candidate for the Best Foreign Language Film Award in the 1993 Oscar ceremony but surprisingly failed to win the prize.<sup>1</sup> Similar to events around other recent films such as *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, the Mainland government’s repeated banning and later screening of *Concubine* stirred further attention to and celebration of the film.

Jenny Kwok Wah Lau

# *Farewell My Concubine*



## History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema

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Judging from the general response in the West, *Concubine* is considered Chen's masterpiece. In fact, it seems that a trend of acceptance of Chen's films, where criticism lapses into a celebration of excellent art, is well on its way. I, however, view Chen's works with mixed feelings; *Concubine* may well be the decisive film of his career but for reasons that are beyond artistic considerations.

With the release of *Concubine* the moment has come to reassess the achievement of Chen so far, to sort out his strengths and weaknesses and to suggest how his works might properly be read. To tackle these questions one must put *Concubine* in a larger context, that of several significant film movements occurring within contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema, which shaped the conception of the production, distribution, and the exhibition of the film itself.<sup>2</sup> In the rest of this

essay I will delineate the different currents, namely the heated intellectual debate concerning film theory and practice that took place in Mainland China during the eighties, the commercialization of the Mainland Chinese cinema which ran parallel to this debate, the commercial takeover of the Mainland and Taiwan screens by Hong Kong cinema during the same period, and the Hong Kong-Taiwan commercial alliance that capitalized on exporting Chinese "art" cinema in the nineties. Having situated *Concubine* at the crossroad of national and international production, I will argue that symbolic productions such as film can be viewed as a site of negotiation for different cultural traditions, and that the reading of *Concubine* necessitates a consideration of both Western and Chinese conventions of symbolic production and interpretation.

## Ideology and Form

In early 1985, a small team representing the Ninth Hong Kong International Film Festival discovered the film *Yellow Earth* in Beijing and persuaded the authorities, who at that time considered the film a relatively insignificant “experimental” production, to permit its screening in the Film Festival—and the face of Mainland Chinese cinema changed forever.<sup>3</sup> During the ensuing decade the Western world came to be awed by a creative and artistic cinema that was not easily evaluated through European critical norms. Curiously, while the rest of the world began to identify China (Mainland and Taiwan) as one of the major “art” film producers, in the Mainland itself, almost simultaneously with the international recognition of *Yellow Earth*, a fierce debate raged pitting “experimental” film versus “entertainment” film. But the continuous outpouring of “art” films from Mainland China rendered this struggle invisible outside of the Mainland.

The re-introduction of entertainment films in the Mainland is a consequence of several forces, but most significantly the 1979 economic restructuring into a socialist market economy. For almost the first time since 1949, box-office returns, or the popularity of a film, became an open concern for all studios. This shift in economic practice was not without serious consequence. To take entertainment as a major function of a film posits an ideological challenge to the traditional socialist requirement of cinema—that a film must be first and foremost didactic.

The debate on entertainment film resulted in some important film conferences being held in the mid and late 1980s which involved theorists, film-makers, and critics.<sup>4</sup> From their discussions, various lines of thought can be traced. First, most film-makers and theorists agreed that entertainment films are products of a market economy and that many of the current entertainment films made in the Mainland are of low quality. From this point on opinions diverged into two major camps. One camp believed that, unlike “experimental” film, which serves only a minority of intellectuals, entertainment film is oriented towards the mass and hence is more in tune with the socialist ideal of mass appeal. Entertainment films constitute a “genre” that facilitates a “healthy catharsis of emotion (desire)” and should be encouraged. Furthermore, some film-maker/theorists, such as Shao Mujun and Hao

Dazheng, held that classical Hollywood cinema, due to its immense success in the past, could serve as a model for the structure and the aesthetics of entertainment film in China.<sup>5</sup>

Another camp, however, maintained that recent entertainment films are ideologically problematic. As a product of capitalism, such films prioritize the individual’s (versus collective) desire and are an expression of bourgeois individualism. Entertainment film in the Mainland should not follow the Hollywood tradition of catharsis but should adhere to the Chinese tradition of “moral elevation and emotional purification.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the eighties the spirit of discussion was liberal and dialogical. Although no one can construct a perfect formula for attractive entertainment films, most critics agreed that the “ideal” entertainment film should satisfy the principal of *yia xu kuo xian* (appreciation from both the simple and the refined audience). After the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, however, hardliners within the second group denounced the market (audience) base of entertainment film and re-instated the central role of ideological didacticism, *zhu xuan ying pian* (film should follow mainstream ideology).

While the theorists were attempting to define a direction for the Mainland cinema, some film-makers, influenced by Hong Kong entertainment films, were already testing the potential of the “Hollywood” form.<sup>7</sup> By 1988, the year which Mainland theorist Ni Zhen has marked as the end of the Fifth Generation New Wave, Mainland Chinese cinema was totally flooded with commercial entertainment films. Even the celebrated art film director Zhang Yimou tried his hand at a Hollywood style thriller titled *Code Name Cougar* (1989), starring the now renowned movie star Gong-li. The film was a miserable failure.

Another experience of “Hollywood” style production for Zhang occurred in the film *A Terra Cotta Warrior* (1990), in which he played the protagonist. It was a big-budget film directed by Hong Kong’s first line director Cheng Siu Tong. Although the film was a commercial success Zhang was not too impressed by the process. In later interviews he courteously commented that the Hong Kong way was not his style. In his following films, *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, we see Zhang revert to his former poetic approach (that of *Yellow Earth*, on which he was the cinematographer, and *Red Sorghum*).

Even though almost all of the Fifth Generation films made before 1988 were intellectually driven and

yielded low box-office returns, Zhang, as a latecomer in the director group, had no intention of making films for a small audience. Even though the Hollywood form did not attract him he was dedicated to making films that could reach the Chinese mass.<sup>8</sup> While Western critics may classify Zhang as an art-film director (which in the Western sense almost always means making films for a small or specialized audience, domestic or foreign) with a refined Chinese style, critical and formalistic, his films, unlike so-called art films, are immensely popular in and outside of Mainland China. Even with his recent stylistic change from symbolism to realism, as seen in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the fundamental concern for making a popular film has not diminished. It seems that in Zhang's films there is no oppositional dichotomy in the art between intellectual and mass appeal. Indeed, with Zhang, entertainment/popular films, whether intentionally or not, usually turn into powerful subversive tools, critical towards "mainstream (official) ideology."<sup>9</sup> Yet, the popularity of his films renders them important to the State in economic terms. The evidence now shows that the government was forced to exhibit Zhang's films despite their radical nature.<sup>10</sup>

While Zhang has chosen to avoid the Hollywood form and experiment with different cinematic strategies to create a popular cinema in the Chinese style, Chen Kaige has taken a different route. Before directing *Concubine*, Chen had not made a film that was nearly as popular in China as Zhang's, and none of his first four films won any major international awards. *Yellow Earth*, the landmark film of the Fifth Generation New Wave and well known in the West, generated a great deal of admiration. *The Big Parade*, which was stylistically similar to *Yellow Earth*, had a strong cinematographic input from Zhang Yimou and *Life On a String* was an unsuccessful mix of Fifth Generation symbolism and Western experimental style. None of these films carried much mass appeal. It is fair to say that before *Concubine*, Chen had not found a popular form that would communicate with a broad audience.

In an interview after *Concubine* he indicated that he considered his first four films to be "personal, direct, and primitive." They were merely preparatory for his future films (such as *Concubine*) which "will involve the consideration of the audience and commercialism."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, commercialism is a major concern for *Concubine* from both the producer's and the director's side, the former being interested in the business potential and the latter in popular recognition.

## The Hong Kong/ Mainland Alliance

Before one can proceed further in contextualizing *Concubine* one has to understand the broader picture, particularly how the Hong Kong motion picture empire has continued to encroach into the Mainland market throughout the 1980s and finally, despite the disruptions brought about by the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, has become the financial base for major Mainland art films.

The role of Hong Kong cinema in building and reinforcing the entertainment film business in Mainland China can never be over-emphasized. In the early 1980s, soon after China opened her door to the rest of the world, Hong Kong film-makers started to move north in search of new historical and scenic resources which they utilized in films such as *Boat People*, *Home Coming*, *Romance of Book and Sword*, and *The Shaolin* series (a kung-fu series). Meanwhile some Hong Kong films, TV programs, and popular songs were also imported into the Mainland, many of which gained immediate popularity. Along with these material imports from Hong Kong came the notion of "contemporary entertainment/commercial/popular mass media," which was relatively new to China at that point. By the mid-1980s many of the highly popular films in the Mainland were from Hong Kong, starring such Hong Kong icons as Chow Yun-fatt, who is still adored by the Mainland audience.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout this same period, the Mainland film industry was faced with a precipitous decline in the movie audience due to the appearance of new forms of entertainment such as TV and video. The industry soon realized that without some expertise in commercialism, without the high-tech support or the cinematic skill especially evident in action films, and without the immense financial backing that Hong Kong had, it was not possible to compete with Hong Kong films. For the sake of survival, a policy of co-production was adopted, in which the Mainland provided artists, facilities, and minimal production fees, thus reducing financial risks on the part of China. Throughout the mid- to late 1980s there were about ten to twenty co-productions with Hong Kong every year. More significantly these co-productions usually turned out to be major financial successes for the Mainland, for example *Shanghai Beach*, *Shaolin Temple*, *A Man at Forty*, and *New Dragon Gate Inn*.



The two male leads of *Concubine* dressed for their Beijing Opera performance

In addition to the vast geographical and historical resources that China has to offer, co-production is important for the Hong Kong film industry for other reasons. First, co-production with the Mainland almost guarantees distribution and exhibition in the huge market of China. Second, because of the upcoming transition of 1997, a significant number of media talents have migrated overseas, resulting in a continuous weakening in the supply of personnel. Mainland China, with her state-supported film training program, can provide the extra hands that Hong Kong needs.

While the Hong Kong entertainment films captivated the audience of socialist China they also took control of the Taiwan market. This domination was caused by several factors. Following the decline of mandarin *Kung-fu* and *wu-xia* films in the late 1970s, the Taiwan film industry came to a halt. Production dropped from about 200 films per year to 50–80 films in the 1980s. This was barely enough to feed the de-

mands of the theaters, which needed about 100–150 films a year. In the midst of this disintegration a small number of young local film-makers, encouraged by the Hong Kong New Wave directors, tested out the waters. The result was the birth of the now well-known Taiwan New Wave (1981–85), which generated such world-class directors as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang. Between 1981 and 1983, Taiwan was able to recapture some of her own audience with the New Wave films. For example, in 1983 eleven New Wave films were made out of which seven made a substantial profit.<sup>13</sup> But on the larger commercial front Hong Kong films, as early as the mid-1980s, completely dominated the Taiwan market with such films as *Aces Go Places*, *Project A*, *Long Arms of the Law*, and *Mr. Vampire*.

Political changes in the 1980s in Taiwan did not always help that country's film industry either. In 1986 Taiwan lifted its quota for the import of foreign films.

Hong Kong films were then able to compete directly for the Taiwan market. By December, 1987 six out of the seven major theater chains in Taiwan were showing Hong Kong films. Just as in the Mainland, political interference, inexperience in contemporary marketing techniques, and inadequate high-tech support all contributed to the failure of Taiwan films in her own market. Consequently, co-production with Hong Kong became a way out for such major studios as the Central Motion Picture Corporation. Even Edward Young, a leading figure in the Taiwan New Wave, tried at one point to work with Hong Kong.

Another significant political change in Taiwan occurred in 1987, when the government finally lifted 50 years of rule by martial law. This meant that basic citizens' rights such as freedom of political association, freedom of publication, and the freedom to travel (e.g., visits to the Mainland) were re-instated. Together with these new liberties came a freeing-up of the foreign-exchange market. All of these elements were essential for facilitating the investment of Taiwan money in "foreign" (first Hong Kong and later Mainland China) film productions. By the same year two of the major investors, Tomson (the company that produced *Concubine*) and Hung Tai, expanded their investments in Hong Kong, forming a powerful, Taiwan-financed, Hong Kong-based business alliance.

At the same time that the Mainland was making Hong Kong/Hollywood style entertainment films for profit, Taiwan began to see the market potential of the Chinese art films. In 1988, Taiwan New Wave director Hou Hsiao-hsien won the First Prize in the Venice Film Festival for his film *City of Sadness*.<sup>14</sup> This first major international recognition of a Chinese film created intense pride and curiosity among the Chinese audiences. Even though the film was highly sophisticated in its cinematic language and was well over three hours long, it nevertheless resulted in a tremendous success at the box office in Taiwan. For investors this was an indication of the strong market potential for art films.

Ever since then almost all major art films, such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Story of Qiu Ju*, *To Live*, *The Puppet Master*, and others from Taiwan or the Mainland that have had the potential of winning international awards, have attracted sponsorship from the Hong Kong/Taiwan alliance. *Concubine* was one of these recent endeavors. The Oscar nomination of *Concubine* was very important in boosting its box-office success, especially in the Mainland and Taiwan. (Hong Kong audiences are not as keen about the Oscars.)

Because of the government regulations in Tai-

wan, which restricted the screening of films shot in the Mainland of films in which Mainland artists had a substantial participation, the Taiwan-China co-production needed Hong Kong as a middleperson. While Taiwan put out the money and the Mainland contributed its artists, Hong Kong used its experience in marketing and its neutral status both for entrance to international competitions and for screenings in Taiwan. Thus the Taiwan-Hong Kong-Mainland China triangle formed a perfect team to work around the bureaucracy and the political taboos of all three societies.<sup>15</sup>

*Concubine* is one of the products of this new coalition. Being aware of the fact that the Hong Kong audience is not too attracted by melodrama, one of the film's marketing strategies is to use Leslie Chang, the local pop music superstar whose suspected homosexuality has titillated fans for some time, as a selling point for the Chinese audience.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Gong-li, an international superstar, is attractive to Western audiences.

In the film *Concubine*, Chen has utilized the star system and the melodramatic epic genre. The classical structure of melodrama and the directorial ability of Chen work side by side with the Hong Kong style of marketing. Even though some Cannes critics complained about a "sell out" of Chen's former style,<sup>17</sup> Chen consciously made an effort to popularize his work.

## Reading *Concubine* at the National/Cultural Conjuncture

Given the context of the film's popularization via the traditional Hollywood form, my reading of *Concubine* will not be a dissection of the text so as to evaluate its artistic quality or to reconstruct its so called "cultural/national meaning." The idea of the national as a combination of cultural aspirations and state limitation is simply not sufficient for the reading of this particular film. This brings to mind the globalists' questioning or even denial of the relevance of the notion of nationhood as a viable category in contemporary cultural studies. Many globalists believe that due to the combined results of the First World's economic expansion and recent technological advances (such as the Internet, etc.) an uncontrollable surge of information and entertainment into the Second and Third Worlds renders the notion of cultural boundaries, a major element in the definition of



nationhood, obsolete. In other words, the Third World is so infiltrated with First World images and narratives that it is not possible to identify a Third World “national” symbolic product anymore.

I contend, however, that this argument, which is based on the Western European technological and cultural connection with the U.S., has over-simplified the process of cultural production and underestimated the kind of cultural screening (in Gramsci’s sense) that indigenous populations undertake in expressing their own experience. This is particularly true in the case of China, which, in addition to her complicated process of cultural production, is confined by its technological condition. The availability of high-tech devices to the public for the reception of foreign cultural products such as video, the Internet, etc., is nowhere comparable to Western Europe. The cultural boundary established between China and the rest of the world through the barriers of language as well as technology is still significantly strong. Thus, instead of erasing the notion of national boundaries I believe that the cultural/national is a persistent presence not only for political reasons but also for the inevitable existence of the frames of reference, which even if mixed and difficult to discern at times, nevertheless distinguish one culture from another.

The Althusserian idea of historical conjuncture is useful here. A historical conjuncture is a moment in the process of social transition when contradictory forces working within the society are in a state of balance. That is, there is no single force which can play an over-determining role in directing the development of history. I suggest that this idea of conjuncture can be extended to the cultural arena of Chinese cinema, which at this point is undergoing a tension in redefining nationalization and internationalization. For that reason, in an investigation of a transnational media product such as *Concubine*, which attempts to reach both the domestic (Pan-Chinese) and the international audience, it is necessary to consult, rather than conceal, the different tropes, both cultural and cross-cultural, that constitute its making and its reading(s). By re-scanning the film for what is present and absent I attempt to discover how the economic-cultural context of the film expands and limits what can be said and what remains unsaid, thus illuminating our understanding of a major international work.

Critics generally have praised *Concubine* as a visually interesting, stylized, and frequently beautiful film. As a commercial product it utilizes Beijing Opera and homosexuality as two of its selling points, making it attractive both to Chinese and Western audi-

ences for reasons of nostalgia and curiosity. With Beijing Opera in the foreground, the film raises issues concerning homosexuality, thus engaging in an unusual public negotiation of the taboo question of sexuality in Chinese society. Even though homosexuality is not generally accepted among Chinese it is common knowledge that homosexual practices did take place in Beijing Opera troupes, rendering its discussion (within *Concubine*) more acceptable. Given the strong market potential of these basic ingredients the challenge to the director is whether or not he is able to: 1) mobilize the inherent drama associated with Beijing Opera, namely its acrobatic vitality, color, sense of history, and even nationalism, to create a powerful story for an international audience without appearing to be orientalist, and 2) to make use of this unusual opportunity to reflect on Chinese sexuality in general and/or homosexuality in particular.

## Beijing Opera

Three major elements intertwine and structure the film—Beijing Opera, a love story, and a series of historical events occurring in modern China. The film is not a documentary account of Beijing Opera. It is a love story of three people (Dieyi, Xiaolou, and Juixian) that spans thirty years during the early 1900s in China. But Beijing Opera is the major experience shared by the characters and it functions as the agent that shapes their relationship. Structurally speaking, Beijing Opera is not simply the backdrop for a romantic drama. Rather, it is the object of pursuit (or rejection) of the protagonists and has a history and a “character” of its own. The very attraction/repulsion of this particular “character” powerfully determines the course of events in the film. Dieyi’s (and the Japanese) attraction to art, Xiaolou’s ambivalence, Juixian’s disinterest, and the communists’ rebellion against art are the precipitating forces of the most decisive episodes.

As definitive as these relationships should be, the film, which focuses on the more universal narrative of romance, has projected a rather one-dimensional treatment of Beijing Opera and its love/hate exchanges with its characters. Although in the film Dieyi is a nationally acclaimed artist, one does not see how he interacts with his art. Nor does the film make any attempt to dig deeply into the specific “character” of the art. Rather, the first part of the film is an excessive display of torture and the second part a detached depiction of what are supposedly glamorous performances. It is true that in the past the training of opera

actors was notoriously harsh or even abusive. But since the protagonist is willing to die for his art one would expect to see where the art intermingles with life.

By suppressing the meaning of the art to the artist himself the film also denies its audience the appreciation of the depth of affection that the older generation of Beijing Chinese felt for this popular art. Only the surface of Beijing Opera, the colorful and the exotic, is shown, with the display of sex, drugs, and violence becoming an uncritical exhibition of “oriental savageness.”<sup>18</sup> At best, it only reflects a peculiar disinterest in or complaint about this particular national heritage. (Although there is nothing wrong in not subscribing to one’s traditional art.)

On the other hand, according to a biographical account of Mei Lanfang,<sup>19</sup> the twentieth-century master of Beijing Opera female impersonation to whom the film’s protagonist Dieyi is an obvious parallel,<sup>20</sup> Beijing Opera was an art that he existentially embodied. It was an art that involved not only memorization and imitation but also the creative imagination and innovation of the individual artist. For example, one of Mei’s contributions to the stage was to abolish the conventional separation of the four female roles in traditional Beijing Opera and to create a new, lively, multi-female model. He wrote numerous scripts for this kind of new opera and performed in his own works.

Although Dieyi’s total identification with his female role is the major cause of the drama in the film, in general, the transvestite role in Beijing Opera does not copy the woman but signifies her. In this sense, Mei believes it is possible for an impersonator to be more “feminine” than a female. For femininity in Beijing Opera is a translation, not necessarily a transgression. Mei was known for his obsession with perfecting even minor details of this system of signification, such as his famous *lanhua shou* (orchid’s hand), a hand gesture that expresses the nuanced differences of the delicate emotions of a female. Mei was learned in other arts such as painting, dancing, and poetry. At one point, he was a student of one of the greatest Chinese painters, Qi Baishi. In short, Mei was a perfectionist who immersed himself in his art and his dedication could be seen in the details of his daily life.

Despite the lack of involvement with the art, the film does present Beijing Opera as a colorful oriental spectacle, however superficially it may do so. It seems that a sign of an uneasy marriage of the Mainland Fifth Generation critical spirit with the capitalist commer-

cial demand of non-radicality has appeared here. This indecisiveness is too afraid to critique (the Chinese tradition) and too eager to display for the sake of pleasing the Other’s curious gaze.

## The Love Story

The story is a triangular relationship. Two boys who grow up in a torturous Beijing Opera training house turn out to be celebrated partners on stage and intimate friends offstage. As one (Shitou, later stage named Xiaolou) is trained to play the hero and the other (Douzi, later stage named Dieyi) his lover, the latter falls in love with his friend. When Xiaolou marries the prostitute Juixian (played by Gong-li) a life-long emotional struggle among the three begins. Soon their lives are rocked by tumultuous political waves, from the war of resistance against Japan to the Cultural Revolution. In the end Dieyi and Juixian commit suicide, leaving behind a bewildered Xiaolou.

To cut through the complexity of the plot one can look at the story as an interplay of several major binaries: art (dream/unreality) versus life (material/reality), loyalty versus betrayal, female versus male. Although the director himself takes the loyalty/betrayal theme as central to the film, the heavy overtone of eroticism, love, and sexuality renders these notions just as significant.

The Freudian fable here has been recognized by most Western critics.<sup>21</sup> Freudian interpretation of femininity, which defines female as the non-male and the female body as a body with a “genital deficiency” (it lacks the penis), is followed almost in a literal sense. Dieyi’s (symbolic) lack is first created by his symbolic castration—signified by the removal of his supernumerary finger in the beginning of the film. Then there is the symbolic rape when Xiaolou forces a smoking pipe (a symbolic penis) into Douzi’s mouth after he refuses to play the female role during the initial stage of his opera training. (The process is grotesquely exaggerated with blood.) For the rest of his life, Dieyi’s femininity is dependent on the acceptance or refusal of him as a love object of the male (Xiaolou).

By the same token, the “insertion” in sexual intercourse, which is the reciprocal expression of the “lack,” is used to highlight Juixian’s femininity. A love-making scene, overheard by Dieyi and resulting in Juixian’s pregnancy, does not express the emotional attachment of the couple. Rather, it foregrounds a fixation on the genitals in the film’s definition of

sexual identity. Both episodes of Dieyi's "demasculinization" function as an account of the construction of a "problematic" female gender in Douzi. A critic protested that these episodes perpetuate the definition of female as "created by pain and deprivation, maintained by substitute satisfactions."<sup>22</sup> While I agree with the comment, I believe that it is the structure of the relationship between the three major characters that has to be examined in order to unveil the patriarchal fantasy embedded in the film.

There are two females, one real (Juixian) and the other unreal (Dieyi). The real female first appears in a brothel, a market of bodies and sex. As the supreme prostitute in the brothel, Juixian is already defined by the institution—woman as the quintessential sex object. Although Juixian does not have the passivity of a traditional woman and actively seeks to be with Xiaolou, her aspiration hardly goes beyond that of being Xiaolou's wife. In her engagement with Xiaolou, when the audience first sees them meet, the shot/reverse shot of them toasting conforms with the cinematic tradition of casting the woman as the bearer of the male's look even when, in this particular episode, she is looking back. The determined look of the latter does not relinquish her position of being the erotic object of the male gaze.

In the rest of the film Juixian actively pursues her man. This is in contrast with many traditional Hollywood melodramas of the fifties in which the female object is much more passive. The image of a sexually aggressive female, epitomized in the stardom of actress Gong-li, is commonly found in Fifth Generation films. It is easy to misunderstand the character to be a sign of women's liberation in China. But if one compares this image with the one projected in the past 30 years in socialist China, the "Gong-Li image" is but an amalgam of the traditional socialist strong woman, who fearlessly pursues her (revolutionary) goal within the pre-socialist feudalistic male fantasy of a female dedicating herself to a single male. The two kinds of "strong woman" in fact represent very little structural difference. The only change between the heroines of the two cinemas is a change of their masters, from the state back to the old patriarchal man.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time the patriarchal definition of femininity, which hardly goes beyond the notion of "the lack," is supplemented by the classical Chinese practice of gender-based social roles. In the process of self-actualization the male is the subject of the enabling process and the center of the sacrifice while the females are the (domineering) enablers and the sacrificed. The real female protects and promotes

Xiaolou's material life by actively engaging him in a profit-making business and discouraging him from harmful political confrontations. The unreal female promotes the male's artistic/spiritual/unreal world by insisting the latter do that which the real female opposes. The aggressiveness of both females in enforcing their ideals on the male thus reaches a point of domination which is not uncommon in Chinese cinema. On the surface there is a dichotomy between what the two "females" represent, yet their structural relations to the male are in fact similar. Both are obsessed with promoting the life of the male. Both consider their femininity and therefore their lives incomplete, if not non-existent, without the male. Since both cannot get the male both kill themselves in the end.

The suicide of Dieyi was calculated to be climactic and heroic. Similar to many other *Lie nu*<sup>24</sup> stories of the past in which the woman commits suicide for the unattainable man, because of his death or otherwise, Dieyi's indulgence is sanctified, just as the *Zhen Lie nuzi* (chaste women) were, through her/his death. Interestingly enough, in the original novel, written by a woman, there is no heroic death of any kind. For both characters life simply goes on in banality. It seems that the male fantasy, ideologized through thousands of years of popular Confucianism, still grips the imagination of a contemporary post-socialist artist.<sup>25</sup>

## Hong Kong Escapist Suppression and Chinese Centrism

Lilian Lee was a wise choice for a scriptwriter. Although Lee's work is generally not recognized for its depth (as compared to other Hong Kong writers such as Chuang Aui-ling), nevertheless she is one of the most popular novelist/scriptwriters in Hong Kong. The film *Concubine* builds on Lee's original novel, and thus carries both the strengths and the weaknesses of its author.

Lee's novels, such as *The Reincarnation of the Golden Lotus*, and *Rouge* (filmed by leading Second Wave directors Clara Law and Stanley Kwan respectively), are characterized by a strong melo-dramatization of personal experiences placed within intense historical moments of the larger society. As these moments are usually contemporary incidents in China, Lee's stories carry a kind of realism or a sense

Leslie Cheung: the male performer as female spectacle



of imminence. Unfortunately, the weakness of her scripts lies exactly in her characters' superficial relation to history.

In *Concubine* there is not much to show the emotional dynamics of the protagonists when facing significant historical changes. The night that the Japanese enter Beijing is also the night that Dieyi accepts a patron's advances and decides to tell Xiaolou that they will never perform together again. The incident seems to occur suddenly and response from the characters is minimal. Similar incidents such as the Cultural Revolution are also portrayed without a concern for the psychological tension of the characters.

A critic has observed a similar pattern and comments that in "the process of political turmoil we (the audience) lose contact with the characters. . . . Human motives disappear, to be replaced with ideology."<sup>26</sup> But more importantly, Lee's attitude also reflects a Hong Kong mentality of escape from history, or what is commonly known in Hong Kong as "political coldness." Given the colonial status of Hong Kong, not

until the 1980s, after the Declaration of the Sino-British Agreement on 1997, did the local Chinese have much say about their society. The result has been an attitude of resignation or suppression. Somehow, a fantasy was generated that, for over a hundred years, history (the ceding of Hong Kong to the British, the Japanese Occupation during World War II, the 1997 return of Hong Kong to China, etc.) was simply thrust upon the Hong Kong Chinese, and the way to handle these impositions was to deny any emotional response and simply seek survival.

Interestingly enough, this attitude of noninterference with history overlaps to a certain extent with director Chen's post-Cultural Revolution mentality, although for a reason totally different from Lee's. The over-politicized environment of the Cultural Revolution, which rendered private personal life impossible and minimized national productivity, has caused the Mainland Chinese to resent the overt interference of politics in daily life. The episode in which Dieyi rescues his friend Xiaolou and ignores the political implication of his performing for the Japanese is the film's

pragmatic rhetorical response to the spirit of the Cultural Revolution, which had called for a life of sacrifice in accord with a pure patriotic ideology.

Some Western critics may be correct to complain about the Mainland government's narrow nationalism in faulting the film's negative portrayal of the Cultural Revolution. Yet, the film's muffled depiction of art and politics as experienced by the Chinese during the War of Resistance Against the Japanese, a point largely unnoticed by Western critics, cannot simply be ignored. In refusing to acknowledge the kind of nationalism that Beijing Opera represents, and hence the implication of sanctifying a hero who performed for the invading Japanese, the film trivializes one of the most horrific wars of resistance that the Chinese have fought against invaders. This total dissociation of politics from daily life is further problematized by the fact that Dieyi clearly parallels the historical actor Mei Lanfang, who in reality did keep his dignity and that of Beijing Opera by refusing to perform for the invading Japanese. In fact, he grew a mustache to let his intentions be known.

Although the mimetic nature of film need not be over-emphasized here, one can still compare how, in the case of Western cinema, (Western) critics have always responded negatively to German artists who worked for Nazi Germany during World War II. The case of Leni Riefenstahl is a good example. Many would be offended if a screen hero ignored the evil of Nazi Germany. However, in the case of *Concubine* the narrative is evasive, since Dieyi is a hero only in an ambiguous way and he performs for the Japanese in order to save a life. Yet, when he comes out of the Japanese camp he expresses no resentment. Instead, he appreciates the Japanese interest in the opera.

Lee and Chen may share a similar perspective on the suppression of history in their characters' lives but their attitudes towards Hong Kong are strikingly different. As a result, the film, as interpreted by Chen, is critically different from Lee's story. The alteration seems small but the implication is significant. In the original novel Dieyi does not commit suicide. Both actors leave Mainland China after the Cultural Revolution and reside in Hong Kong. Xiaolou, who was once the great warrior hero on stage, lives as a tram driver in the city. The novel presents a strong sense of Hong Kong as a concrete reality, a space of new order. Chen chose to change this original ending into a suicide scene. The effect may be more melodramatic, but the meaning is drastically different.

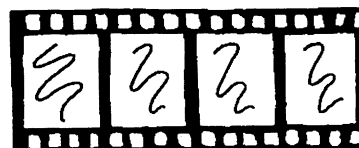
Historically speaking, the Mainland's claim of sovereignty over Hong Kong has always resulted in its

denial of the subject position of Hong Kong, her right of self-determination. In *Concubine* the elimination of Hong Kong from the text is only consistent with the Mainland mentality of marginalization. The fact that Hong Kong has the historical significance of being the alternative society for many Chinese during every period of political turmoil occurring on the Mainland in the past century, which the ending of the novel *Concubine* reflects, is totally silenced in the film. As a result of this sabotage of the diegetic space of Hong Kong, the latter is made invisible and nonexistent. This attitude of Mainland centrism is once again *natural* from the impending (colonial) master's point of view but quite problematic from that of the subalterns. No wonder a Hong Kong critic/scholar termed this movie "*Bawang Dianying*" (The Empire's Movie).<sup>27</sup>

The American trade newspaper *Variety* has reported that Chen's *Concubine* indicates that he has "learned to tell a story more comprehensible to Westerners."<sup>28</sup> Without ignoring the condescending tone of such a statement, my concern is not with Chen's Hollywood story structure but with the limitation that Chen has imposed (or been forced to impose) on himself, in his attempt to create a transnational popular text: the issues he chooses to address, the tropes that are instrumental to him, and the aesthetics that he is willing to commit to in the process.

A unique characteristic of the Hong Kong-Taiwan production alliance is that it deliberately capitalizes on the art film and is willing to allow (established) artists to "do their art."<sup>29</sup> Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Zhang Yimou, and others have uncompromisingly taken their opportunities and succeeded. I watch Chen Kaige with expectation and anxiety.

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## Notes

1. According to the Hong Kong newspaper *South China Morning Post* (March 24, 1994, "Missing Link to an Academy Award"), one reason for the failure of *Concubine* to win the Oscar was because the veteran Hollywood director Billy Wilder, who was on the voting committee for the Oscar, had lobbied actively for his old friend Fernando Trueba, who later indeed took the prize for *Belle Époque*.
2. Pan-Chinese is used to refer to the combined society of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China.
3. In Mainland China "experimental film" is sometimes also referred to as "cultural film," which is similar to the label of "art film" in the West.
4. A translation of some of these discussion can be found in *Film in Contemporary China: Critical Debates, 1979–89*, ed. George Semsel, Chen Xihe, and Xia Hong (New York: Praeger, 1993).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 121–134.
6. The so-called "Hollywood form" here is used in a broad sense, pointing more to the practice of mass production and commercial calculation.
7. Ni Zhen, "Has the Fifth Generation of Chinese Film Ended?" *China Screen*, no. 1, 1989, pp. 14–15.
8. See a book-length interview of Zhang Yimou, *Red Sorghum and Zhang Yimou*, by Lor (Beijing: China Film Publisher, 1988).
9. An example can be found in the reading of the film *Judou* in "Judou: A Hermeneutic Reading of Cross-Cultural Cinema" by Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Winter 1991–92), pp. 2–10.
10. A retrospective of Zhang's work was held in Mainland China in 1992.
11. See Interview in *Film Biweekly* (Hong Kong) no. 359, (Jan. 8–18, 1993), pp. 45–50.
12. Mainland China has its own quality popular films such as *Samsara* and *Trouble Shooters* as well as crude imitations of Hong Kong films.
13. *China Film Year Book 1988* (Beijing: China Film Publisher, 1988), pp. 13–19.
14. As one of the oldest and most prestigious film festivals in Europe, the Venice Film Festival has been instrumental in introducing Asian films to world cinema. *City of Sadness* was the second Asian film that won the prize. The first one was *Rashomon*, by Akira Kurosawa. In 1988, the New York Film Festival World Critics Poll voted Hou one of the three directors who will lead world cinema in the coming decades.
15. By 1992 there were 90 co-produced/assisted feature films made in China, of which 81 were made in association with Hong Kong and Taiwan. See *China Screen*, no. 3, 1993, pp. 34–35.
16. See *Fai Piao* (Hong Kong Newspaper), October 22, 1993, p. 23.
17. Mary Corliss, "Cannes '93: Counting Blessings," *Film Comment*, vol. 29, no. 4 (July/Aug. 1993), pp. 70–73.
18. To portray Chinese as unclean drug addicts who engage in "perverted" sex is not uncommon in Hollywood's history of film-making. See *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, by Gina Marchetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
19. Wu Zuguang, Huang Zuolin, and Mee Shaowu, *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang* (Beijing: New World Press, 1981).
20. Given the historical background, Dieyi as the most popular male female impersonator in Beijing Opera strongly parallels the real life Mei Lanfang, a well-known Beijing Opera artist. Mei in fact wrote the script of *Concubine* (a story based on a recorded historical event that happened about two thousand years ago) and played the concubine himself while his male counterpart, the emperor, was played by a man named Xiaolou. See *Secrets of the Chinese Drama*, by Cecilia S. L. Zung (London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1937), pp. 155, 184. The film *Concubine* goes so far as to name the corresponding character who played the emperor with the same name, Xiaolou.
21. I am not suggesting here that Freudian psychology can be applied to interpret Chinese films without modification. But the narrative here parallels Freud's fable quite directly.
22. *China New Digest*, Jan. 30, 1994, p. 125.
23. Notice how Gong-li's role is stereotyped by the Fifth Generation male directors as being either minimally related to or competitive with other women. Her role is different under the female director Huang Shuqin in the film *Soul of a Painter* (1993, Mainland-Taiwan co-production).
24. *Lie nu* is a term describing a woman's sexual loyalty even to the degree of martyrdom. The term was first used in the book *Lie Nu Zhuan* (Biographies of Women), which came out sometime around the first century.
25. The film reflects a sexist view of femininity as well as offering a homophobic explanation of gay sexuality which presumably results from abuse and ends up with drugs, confusion, and perversion.
26. *China News Digest*, Jan. 30, 1994, p. 125.
27. Yar See, "Bawang Yu Ji" (The Emperor and the Concubine), and "Bawang Dianying" (The Empire's Movie), *Sing Tao Evening News* (Hong Kong Newspaper), Nov. 11, 1993, and Dec. 1, 1993, respectively.
28. *Variety*, May 24, 1993, p. 46.
29. See an interview of Zhang Yimou by Robert Sklar in *Cineaste*, vol. XX, no. 1, pp. 28–29.

