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**The Onstage and Offstage Gender Identity in
*Farewell, My Concubine***

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The Onstage and Offstage Gender Identity in *Farewell, My Concubine*

Introduction

Farewell, My Concubine (1993), directed by Kaige Chen, is a Chinese historical drama film set in the 20th century from the beginning of the Republic of China to the end of the Cultural Revolution. The film shares the same name as the well-known Peking opera *Farewell, My Concubine* which tells the story of Xiang Yu, the King of Chu, who battled for the unification of China. In the play, the King of Chu is surrounded by the enemy's forces and is about to be defeated. At that moment, his favorite concubine Yu Ji realizes the situation that is befalling them; thus, she begs to die with him, but she is rejected. During her final sword dance for the King of Chu, she kills herself with his sword when the King of Chu is distracted. The film tells the story of the opera in the context of an opera troupe. The Peking opera *Farewell, My Concubine* is the signature work of the two protagonists, opera stars Chen Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou. At the end of the film, when Chen Dieyi is performing Yu Ji, he kills himself with a metal sword, which he has substituted for a wooden one. Unlike other Peking opera performers who perform as other characters, Chen Dieyi's self-identity is merged with the character he plays. Growing up in the troupe, he has been living with the Peking opera for many years, and thus, he cannot separate himself from Yu Ji. The film not only depicts the affection between the characters inside and outside the opera but also emphasizes Chen Dieyi's psychological struggle, insistence on loyalty, and his obsession with the Peking opera.

Since the film *Farewell, My Concubine* was released, many discussions about the director Chen Kaige have been raised. He is one of the representative directors of the Fifth Generation, "[who] were committed to developing a new art cinema that would break free of the generic conventions on both propaganda and commercial

films” (Silvio 186). The film features the traditional culture in China through its focus on Peking opera. This kind of performing style gives a balance of distance and intimacy between the onstage and offstage action (Silvio 186). According to Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, Peking opera is the significant experience shared by characters, which shapes the relationships and emphasizes the connection among the protagonists. Most importantly, "the very attraction/repulsion of these particular characters powerfully determines the course of events in the film" (22). In research on cross-gender performance in Peking opera, Zhou and Shen both offer detailed accounts of how the Peking opera performers are trained, which might affect their psychological development (Zhou, ch.3; Shen 52-54). Based on these studies, as for the gender ambiguity issue, the appearance of Chen Dieyi in Yu Ji's costume and makeup is often considered a disguise for him to convey and experience the love for Duan Xiaolou through the play (Shen 59). Although growing numbers of researchers have considered the plot and symbolism in the film *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), very little attention has been explicitly given to Freudian theories and theatrical theories as keys to understand Chen Dieyi's gender construction.

This paper explores gender ambiguities inside and outside the opera *Farewell, My Concubine* and Chen Dieyi's gender construction using related theories to analyze the factors influencing his gender ambiguity objectively. To begin with, I will apply Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex to identify Chen Dieyi's psychological activities, especially the gender ambiguity shaped from his childhood experience. Moreover, I will analyze the forces that shape the relationship between Chen Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou by using the theory of sociology of gender. Secondly, the Peking opera training process in cross-gender performance, especially in the role of qiandan (乾旦), will be studied to explain how Chen Dieyi misunderstands his gender. Then, Brecht

Bertolt's the Alienation Effect is used to explain not only the distance between performers and audiences that Chen, as an actor, needs to practice but also the reason why Chen Dieyi refuses to separate himself and the character he plays. Therefore, by applying the Freudian psychoanalysis theories, the Peking opera training in cross-gender performance study and Brecht's the Alienation effect theories, I will contend that Chen Dieyi's gender ambiguity is shaped gradually and inevitably.

The Childhood Experience

Chen Dieyi's childhood experience is one of the crucial factors that contribute to his gender ambiguity. I will analyze his childhood by discussing his background and the environment in the troupe.

Chen Dieyi lives with his mother from when he is born, and it is not until he is about nine years old that he separates from his mother. His father leaves him before he is born. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the impact of father loss affects a child's development. In "Assessing the Impact of Father-Absence from a Psychoanalytic Perspective," Kim A. Jones writes that the impact of father loss on males "left them overly dependent upon their mothers" (5). Sigmund Freud, in his *Interpretation of Dreams* writes that "for analysis tells us that the sexual wishes of the child in so far as they deserve this designation in their nascent state awaken at a very early age The earliest infantile desires of the boy are directed upon the mother" (Freud, *Interpretation* 84). Besides, in the book *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, Freud concludes that "in all our male homosexual cases the subjects had had a very intense erotic attachment to a female person, as a rule, their mother, during the first period of childhood" (qtd. in Soreanu). Based on these psychoanalytic theories, at the beginning of his psychosexual development, Chen's mother is the only person who he is able to rely on and imitate from, which results in his femininity. As a

result, after Chen Dieyi's mother abandoned him by sending him to the troupe, he started to find someone to substitute his desire for his mother. Treating Chen Dieyi nicely, Duan Xiaolou seems to be the person who helps him deal with his traumas. Duan Xiaolou has helped Chen Dieyi several times, showing his care to Chen Dieyi. For instance, when Chen Dieyi wet the bed, he took the blame; when Chen Dieyi felt hurt by the bricks during the training, he removed some of those secretly. With time, Chen Dieyi starts to feel affection for Duan Xiaolou.

The Oedipus complex can explain Chen Dieyi's gender ambiguity, which is the phenomenon of “an unconscious feeling of desire for the opposite-sex and jealousy toward the same-sex parent for a child” (McLeod). Based on psychoanalysis, children start to develop a sense of gender by age three, which means a significant influence of gender development will occur in childhood and become mostly established by the age of five (McLeod). According to Freud, in the phallic stage of personality development, the child becomes aware of anatomical sex differences (McLeod). The phallic stage refers to the period between age three and age six, when a child starts to be aware of sex differences. Freud points out that under the Oedipus complex, the young boy develops sexual desires for his mother and envies his father. Moreover, the young boy comes up with feelings of wanting to possess the mother and replace the father. However, the child also fears that the father will punish him for these feelings, causing what Freud terms as “castration anxiety”: fear that the father will “castrate” him. To deal with this anxiety, the boy identifies with the father, that is, imitating the attitudes and characteristics his father holds (McLeod). As Freud states in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, “the ‘castration complex’, [is] the reaction to the threats against the child aimed at putting a stop to his early sexual activities and attributed to his father” (Freud, *Introductory* 3296). The experience of Chen Dieyi’s

father's absence traumatizes him, which may show no signs at first. However, if something oppresses him, the traumatic experience will cause his emotion outburst.

Since Chen Dieyi's father is absent, someone must replace the role. His Peking opera teacher, master Kuan, is the main person who symbolically castrates him, for he assigns Chen Dieyi to perform the female role. When practicing the performance of the Peking opera aria *Si-Fan*, Chen Dieyi keeps saying the wrong lyrics, "I am by nature a boy, not a girl," instead of the correct ones, "I am by nature a girl, not a boy; "as a result, he is always punished. Besides, master Kuan also demands Chen Dieyi to act like a girl and recognize with the female identity. Aside from master Kuan, there are other symbolic castrations that Chen has experienced. For example, in order to send Chen Dieyi to opera school, his mother cut his sixth (exceptional) finger off; Duan Xiaolou also assists master Kuan punishing Chen Dieyi because of saying the wrong line by jamming a tobacco pipe into his mouth until he bleeds. Freud points out that "all objects capable of being lengthened are symbols of the male organ" (Freud, *Introductory* 3282). That is to say, the tobacco pipe symbolizes a penis, and the bleeding is a symbol of sexual intercourse with a man—a sexual theory that counts many believers among immature girls (Freud, *Introductory* 3282). Since then, Chen Dieyi says the line correctly, "I am by nature a girl, not a boy." These scenes symbolize symbolic castration. Chen Dieyi is forced to identify himself "by nature a girl" rather than a boy. Accordingly, Chen Dieyi keeps suffering from castration in his childhood. From this point, it seems that castration severely impacts Chen Dieyi on his gender identity.

The Peking Opera Elements

Many clues suggest that the training process of the male *dan* role in the Peking opera is one of the forces that result in Chen's gender ambiguity. *Dan* is the name for

female roles in the Peking opera, and the male *dan* role refers to the female role played by male actors. Zhou explains that “when a child is forced to play the dan role, as soon as he acquires compliments by performing the role of dan, he will make efforts to exhibit women to show femininity to get more compliments. As a result, this will lead to gender ambiguity. Besides, the performer's state of mind will be affected in their daily lives.” [“若於孩童時期就因外力介入學習「旦」角，當他藉由程式受到認可後，必定加深其揣摩女性型態以求得更大的讚許，必對成年後的心態帶來矛盾，且台上的女性心態與動作也會干擾到演員台下的生活與周遭環境。”] (Zhou 85). In the film, most of the time, Chen is not viewed as a male during his training as a *dan*; instead, his teacher and classmates ask him to be a female by training him rigorously. From this point of view, to be specific, it is the audiences' compliments that make Chen Dieyi enjoy being Yu Ji and a “female.” Based on the social cognitive theory, when people observe a model performing a behavior, and the model is rewarded or punished, the observer may choose to copy behavior modeled (Bandura 1178). Chen is encouraged by the audiences' compliments about his performance, making it even more challenging for him to separate the play and the reality. As long as Chen Dieyi plays Yu Ji, he can be with the King, Duan Xiaolou.

Another vital element of the Peking opera in the film is the opera *Farewell, My Concubine*, which carries through the story in the film. The opera *Farewell, My Concubine* is Chen Dieyi's signature work, and the character he plays, Yu Ji, is the person he has been imitating throughout his life. Chen chooses to end his life on the stage while performing Yu Ji, which symbolizes his loyalty. In the opera, Yu Ji begs to die with the King of Chu, and then she sacrifices herself for him. In the film, Chen Dieyi sacrifices himself for the King, Duan Xiaolou. Chen Dieyi is faithful to himself, to Yu Ji, the character he is playing, to Duan Xiaolou, and to the Peking opera. The

aria “Farewell, My Concubine” is used five times in the film, and the arrangements of this aria are connected tightly with Chen Dieyi as turning points in his life. The first and the second time Chen Dieyi performs the aria, he makes the audience amazed, and they support him. The third time, when Chen performs the aria for the Communist Party, there is something wrong with his voices, showing the effect of taking drugs. The fourth time, Chen is replaced by others to play Yu Ji, suggesting that the only moment to express his affection to Duan Xiaolou is deprived. As a consequence, Chen finally realizes that he could not stay with the King of Chu, Duan, forever. Therefore, during his fifth performance, Chen Dieyi as Yu Ji leaves the King of Chu; he has that only by making the same decision with Yu Ji can he stay loyal to the story.

Throughout the analysis of the use of the aria “Farewell, My Concubine,” it is shown that to some degree, Chen has already turned into Yu Ji; he lives as Yu Ji even offstage: “Yu Ji is the best disguise because Chen experiences the character through not only his life but the costumes and makeups to express his gender identification.” [“虞姬是最佳的偽裝，用生活經歷去體會劇中人物，利用劇場的性別扮演，傳達自己的性別認同訴求。”]” (Shen 60). From the original story *Farewell, My Concubine* to Peking opera, and then to reality, Yu Ji keeps on sacrificing herself: “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” (Lau 22).

The Analysis of Chen’s Gender Ambiguity—Theatrical Theories

Aside from Chen Dieyi's childhood experience and the Peking opera training process that heavily influences his gender construction, the way he adjusts to the role he plays is another vital point that affects his gender ambiguity. To theatre performers, there is a boundary between the onstage and offstage status when

performing as a character in a play . Performers have to divide everything that happens onstage and offstage. When they finish the performance, their mental state should convert from the character into themselves. Duan Xiaolou plays the King of Chu who loves the concubine Yu Ji onstage; yet, he only views Chen Dieyi as his friend offstage. Although the stage has already clarified the difference between the performer and the character, Chen Dieyi, stays loyal to the character offstage. The alienation effect coined by Bertolt Brecht offers insight into the features of the Peking opera.

The alienation effect, abbreviated as A-effect, is a performing arts concept, defined by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht developed the concept in connection with the classical Chinese theatre in the persona of Mei Lanfang, one of the greatest Peking opera actors of the twentieth century. The theory of alienation refers to an actor's techniques of acting and its effects on the audience. Here I will discuss only the A-effect in the Chinese theatre that is achieved by the actor's performance. According to Brecht, the actor does not allow himself to transform entirely on the stage into the character; instead, the actor shows the character by reproducing the character's remarks as authentically as he or she can (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 64). In other words, Brecht's conception of the use of the A-effect in Chinese theatre is that the Chinese performer observes himself. From Brecht's perspective, traditional Chinese acting achieves the alienation effect in several ways, one of which is the strange makeup of the Peking opera. Brecht's essay “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” shows that “the [Chinese] artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience, [and] he achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work” (92). The Chinese artists put on heavy makeup which alienates the actors and the audience; thus, such a distance from the character can be observed. This is “the performer's self-

observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation” that “stopped the spectator from losing himself in character completely. . . and lent a splendid remoteness to the events” (Brecht 93). Therefore, based on the A-effect, Chen Dieyi is an actor who plays *dan*, so he ought to “show” Yu Ji. However, he completely transforms into the character onstage and even offstage. Instead of realizing that it is Chen Dieyi himself who “shows” the character Yu Ji, he confuses himself and Yu Ji.

Chen Dieyi disobeys the A-effect by playing Yu Ji both onstage and offstage. Duan Xiaolou, however, follows the A-effect: The King of Chu has no affection for Yu Ji offstage. Realizing that Duan Xiaolou is dating others, Chen Dieyi feels a sense of betrayal. In Chen's opinion, the King of Chu and Yu Ji are a couple, which means the King cannot betray his concubine. Chen's line—“I want you to be with me. How about we stay together until death It should be a lifetime, one day even one second less make it less than a lifetime”—shows his loyalty and values (*Farewell, My Concubine*). At the end of the film, Duan's line—“I am by nature a boy”—reminds Chen about the past (*Farewell, My Concubine*); Chen replies, “not a girl”; “wrong again” (*Farewell, My Concubine*). Duan corrects him. Meanwhile, the camera takes a close shot of Chen's facial expression as it transitions from joy to melancholy. “I am by nature a boy, not a girl,” Chen repeats. Then he suddenly realizes that he can still be Yu Ji who loves the King of Chu on the stage, but in reality, he is by nature a boy who cannot love Duan. As mentioned above, Chen Dieyi, as the Peking opera actor, does not follow the principle of acting—the A-effect and eventually confuses onstage and offstage. An actor has to understand not only what he is doing but also realize the thing that he is not doing.

Conclusion

Chen Dieyi confuses the story onstage with the reality offstage, and his loyalty to

everything leads to the tragic ending. Chen Dieyi's childhood experience, for example, father's absence, makes his mother the only person to imitate in the phallic stage; repeatedly suffering from castration makes him confused about his gender. According to Freud, these situations will affect one's psychological development. Besides, as a Peking opera performer, the cross-performance training process Chen Dieyi takes to include the aria he sings, and the treatment he receives from others influences his psychological development in shaping his gender identity. Aside from that, Chen Dieyi's gender ambiguity can be attributed to how he views himself and the character he plays as an actor. He loses in the character Yu Ji and disobeys the A-effect which states that performers have to act rather than become the character. While getting lost in the play, Chen Dieyi enjoys the moments he is playing Yu Ji because being Yu Ji brings him happiness. With these reasons, I contend that Chen Dieyi's gender ambiguity shapes inevitably. His personality and insistence on the Peking opera, dependence on Duan Xiaolou, and inability to separate the reality and the play lead him to a tragic ending. (Words: 3298)

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