

## Farewell My Concubine (霸王別姬, *Bawang bie ji*, 1993)

Michael Höckelmann

dir. Chen Kaige; prod. Hsu/Xu Feng; screenplay Lilian Lee (Lee Pik-wah) and Lu Wei; photography Gu Changwei; music Zhao Jiping. 35 mm, color, 171 mins. Beijing Film Studio, distrib. Miramax Films.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

If melodrama, as Christine Gledhill points out, »reveals the work of emotion and personality in social and political processes« (ix), then *Farewell My Concubine* by fifth-generation Chinese filmmaker Chen Kaige is an inverted

melodrama, as the fates of its protagonists are shaped brutally by their social and political environment. *Farewell* shows the »processes of individuation and [pseudo-] democratization« that took place in China during the 20th century, as traditional hierarchies were overturned by an encroaching modernity (x).

According to Zhen Zhang, some tropes of melodrama—such as that of the orphan—have a »global appeal« through synthesizing »existing cultural and aesthetic forms« (83). At the same time, localized forms of melodrama are subject to the »drive of Americanization« (Gledhill xviii). In *Farewell*, which was produced in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan for a Western (Euro-American) market, those tendencies overlap, as it combines Chinese narrative traditions with Western expectations in a global economy of emotions, of which the melodrama is a prime mode of expression.

*Farewell* was released in 1993 and won the Cannes Palme d'Or that same year. It tells the story of two Beijing Opera actors from 1924 to 1977, the year after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76): Cheng Dieyi (»Douzi«), played by late Hong Kong actor and pop idol Leslie (Kwok Wing) Cheung, and Duan Xiaolou (»Shitou«), played by mainland-Chinese actor Zhang Fengyi. They are joined by the former sex worker Juxian (played by Gong Li), Xiaolou's wife. Co-author of the screenplay was Lilian Lee, whose novel served as the basis. Film and novel take the titles of the opera *Bawang bie ji* (»The Hegemon-King Bids Farewell to His Consort«), written by the legendary Beijing Opera singer Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), the model for Cheng Dieyi (in 2008, Chen would release a biographical film about Mei, titled *Forever Enthralled*).

The opera is set in the 3rd century BCE and tells the story of Xiang Yu—the hegemon-king (*bawang*) of the title. Xiang contended with Liu Bang, the founder of the Han (202 BCE–220 CE), for hegemony over the empire. Xiang Yu is valiant and sentimental but also the victim of violent impulses, while Liu Bang is cunning but listens to his advisers, a key virtue of the ruler in Confucian political philosophy. Encircled by the forces of Han, Xiang is left only with his favorite horse and Consort Yu, who, on the eve of the final battle, performs a sword dance and cuts her throat at the end.

In the opera within the film, the foolhardy Xiaolou plays Xiang Yu, while the delicate Dieyi is Consort Yu. In traditional Beijing Opera, male actors performed female roles, which a Chinese audience would not take to be an indication of the actors actually being gay or queer. In the film, however, Dieyi has intense, yet unrequited homosexual desires for Xiaolou, a fact that has earned the film accusations of orientaling or exoticizing Beijing Opera. Dieyi's unfulfilled emotions result in excessive resentment for Juxian, which the film shows through exaggerated, melodramatic *mise-en-scène*—for instance, when Dieyi affectedly drops shoes in passing the barefooted Juxian, who has just left the brothel to marry Xiaolou, in front of the whole opera troupe. The terse, often wordless encounters between Dieyi and Juxian, amplified by the briefness of Chinese syllables and Dieyi's cold and unapproachable behavior, increase the melodramatic effect. Although Dieyi often appears egocentric and ruthless in those scenes, the sentimental depiction of his fate as a boy early in the film rouses the sympathies of the audience.

The film opens with Dieyi and Xiaolou entering a concert hall in full costume in their roles as Xiang Yu and Consort Yu in 1977, one year after the Cultural Revolution. After that, the film flashes back to 1924: A nameless woman brings her son (Douzi) to a Beijing Opera school, but the headmaster rejects the boy on account of the six fingers on his left hand. In an act of symbolic emasculation, the mother cuts off Douzi's extra digit with a cleaver, after which she leaves Douzi in the school. She never returns, thus placing *Farewell* squarely in the category of melodramas of orphanhood in modern China (Zhang).

Upon entering the school, the delicate and sensitive Douzi befriends the strong and boisterous Xiaolou. In depicting their training, the film delights in the violence the pupils have to endure at the school. Douzi's symbolic emasculation is repeated when he keeps inverting the lines of a female part: »I am by nature a girl, not a boy.« Shitou thrusts the headmaster's pipe into his mouth, after which he can recite the line correctly—with blood flowing melodramatically from his mouth. Douzi is also repeatedly abused by wealthy patrons: a former court eunuch and the opera aficionado Master Yuan (Shiqing), played by Ge You.

In the 1930s, Douzi and Shitou, having taken the stage names Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, become stars of Beijing Opera. However, while Xiaolou sees opera simply as a profession and Dieyi as a brother, the traumatized Dieyi escapes reality by merging with his role as Consort Yu and his love for Xiaolou. The conflict boils over when Xiaolou marries Juxian. Dieyi seeks solace in a dependency on Master Yuan, who is infatuated with Dieyi in his role as Consort Yu. Although Dieyi repeatedly threatens Xiaolou with ending their stage collaboration, they continue to perform together even under Japanese occupation (1937–45). However, when Dieyi performs for Japanese officers to free Xiaolou from prison, he is met with disgust and rejection by Xiaolou. Later, when Dieyi is charged as a collaborator after the Nationalists retake the city in 1945, Xiaolou and Juxian call on Master Yuan for help. However, Dieyi thwarts their efforts

by admitting his guilt in court, melodramatically smearing red ink (blood?) onto his lips. Dieyi is rescued last minute by the protection of high-ranking Nationalist officers.

After the Communist takeover in 1949, Dieyi and Xiaolou try to train a new generation of opera singers. However, they increasingly come into conflict with young students over the value of new, revolutionary opera as opposed to traditional opera. When the Cultural Revolution breaks out, all three—Xiaolou and Dieyi as opera performers, Juxian as a former sex worker—become targets of the Red Guards and their campaigns against »monsters and demons« of the »four olds« (old thinking, culture, customs, and habits). In one of the so-called struggle sessions conducted during the Cultural Revolution as public rituals of shaming and torture, Xiaolou denounces Dieyi, which causes Dieyi to turn against Juxian, decrying her as a »prostitute«—using the same expression that a former customer yelled at his mother in one of the first scenes of the film. After Xiaolou, under constant pressure and beating from Red Guards, declares that he does not love Juxian, the latter commits suicide.

The final scene shows Xiaolou and Dieyi performing the climactic scene of *Bawang bie ji* in the concert hall. When Xiaolou pokes fun at Dieyi for inverting his line »I am by nature a girl« again, Dieyi commits suicide with Xiaolou's sword. The suicide itself happens off camera—in a melodramatic *mise-en-scène*, accompanied by the shrieking and ever-growing sound of the *jinghu*, Dieyi draws the sword when Xiaolou turns away. When he turns back upon the clanging of the sword on the floor, and after casting a horrified glance at the scene, yelling »Dieyi!«, his eyes become teary, and in a soothing voice he utters the final words of the film: »Douzi.«

In contrast to more conventional melodramas, *Farewell* leaves many of its emotional and moral issues unresolved—thereby resonating with the history of China in the 20th century. There is no happy ending. Some critics have focused on the questioning of gender roles: As counterparts to the masculine Xiaolou, Dieyi and Juxian are focal points for reflecting the patriarchal structure of Chinese society. While Dieyi possesses male agency only outwardly, in a society that sees him as male, he is denied fulfilment. Likewise, Juxian—although much more strong-headed—lacks agency, highlighted by her loss of a child and a reduction to her previous status as a sex worker. However, the social and political revolutions of the 20th century only serve as accessories to the melodramatic and tragic lives of *Farewell's* protagonists. Even Beijing Opera is only an exotic backdrop, the actual performance only plays a role in the final scene of the film. Other critics have bemoaned the commercialized and »Westernized« style of *Farewell* in comparison to Chen Kaige's earlier films such as *Yellow Earth* (1984). However, as Chen has explained, he used *Farewell* to explore some deeply personal issues: He had criticized his father, a director himself, during struggle sessions of the Cultural Revolution, causing him great harm.

Critics may also take issue with Dieyi's homosexuality as pandering to orientalist stereotypes of »effeminate« Chinese culture. Indeed, the screenplay does seem heavy-handed and over the top for Chinese tastes and aesthetic conventions—which prefer to allude rather than to exhibit. However, rather than being an orientalist depiction of Chinese culture, *Farewell* simply shows three individuals locked in roles prescribed by both tradition and modernity, while trying to make moral sense of a »post-revolutionary world« in which »traditional imperatives of truth and morality« are collapsing (Williams).

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