
Farewell My Concubine clothes the fresh bitterness of China's recent struggles in the dimmer tragedy of its ancient history.

HISTORY LESSONS

by Pauline Chen

Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* has enjoyed critical and popular success in the United States unprecedented among recent Chinese films. Not only has it received almost universal acclaim from American film critics, but it has also won awards for Best Foreign Film from the Los Angeles and New York Film Critics circles and the Golden Globe voters, and is now poised for an Oscar run in the same category.

However, while reviewers have been quick to appreciate the drama of the film's central love triangle and its "epic" presentation of the cultural and historical background, they have mostly failed to perceive the larger issues the film addresses, and to consider the implications of the use of the cultural/historical material. To the extent that U.S. critics have tried to discuss *Farewell's* broader concerns, they have often attributed Western political and philosophical assumptions to the film. Patrick Tyler, in "Who Makes the Rules in Chinese Films?" (*New York Times*, October 17, 1993), asserts that the film "reminds a battered Chinese population that... under Communism ... there is still no system of laws, no guarantee of basic democratic human rights"-assuming that the Chinese, emerging from two millennia of totalitarian rule under the dynastic emperors, even have a conception of individual rights. David Denby's judgment ("A Half-Century at the Opera:" *New York* magazine, October 25, 1993) that the film "celebrates . . . the preeminence of personal destiny" seems inapposite both to the film and to Chinese works in general. Chinese conceptions of "personal destiny" tend to be bleak; even the nation's legendary heroes too often founder in attempts to control their fates. Most egregious is Vincent Canby's assertion that the movie does not really address philosophic themes at all: "*Farewell My Concubine* is not a subtle film. It's a long declarative statement, reporting complexities without in any way reflecting them" (*New York Times*, October 8, 1993).

Such interpretations largely disregard the social and historical context of the film and show little awareness of the cultural import of its central images. The period depicted, from the warlord era of the Twenties to the Cultural Revolution's aftermath in the Seventies, is a source of bewilderment and

regret for the Chinese people. The system of dynastic emperors had collapsed; China was threatened by foreign invasion without and political schism within. At a deeper level, Chinese institutions, unchallenged in haughty isolation for centuries, had already begun to be assaulted by aggressive European and American trade incursions, as well as an influx of Western science and' ideas. " The famous Cultural Revolution, in which cultural relics were destroyed and traditional belief system discredited, was merely the culmination of the attacks on China's traditional heritage. Although the Communists eventually retreated from the extremism of the Cultural Revolution, the China of today is in some ways irreparably cut off from its past by the radical upheavals of this century.

Farewell My Concubine attempts to forge a link between modern China and its ancient history. It repeatedly juxtaposes an Old World scene from Peking Opera with its presentation of 20th century events. This opera piece--the eponymous "Farewell My Concubine"--is performed at pivotal points throughout by the movie's protagonists, two opera stars. The import of this scene is not to convey, as many U.S. critics have suggested, a paradigm of Romeo and Juliet-style eternal fidelity and perfect love in contrast with the mutual betrayals of the film's heroes. Rather, the scene is an elegy to human failure and the inescapability of fate, central themes in both the history and literature of China. As such, it reaffirms rather than contrasts with the tragic events of the movie.

Xiang Yu, the King of Chu, who bids farewell to his concubine Lady Yu, still persists in popular imagination as one of Chinas greatest, yet most problematic heroes. A man of unexalted birth but of extraordinary daring, he set out in the 3rd century B.C. to unify the various kingdoms of China under his own rule. However, as he sings in the opera, although his "strength uprooted mountains and his force covered the world;" the "times were against him:' Despite his superior military might, he is repeatedly thwarted by Liu Bang, the King of Han, a less forceful man marked by omens of heavenly favor. At last, the defeated Xiang Yu finds himself surrounded by the Han armies, accompanied by only a handful of followers, his beloved horse, and his concubine. In the celebrated scene, she dances for him one last time before slitting her own throat. Xiang Yu, after resisting his enemies with a final burst of reckless courage, dies by his own sword.

The story that the film narrates begins more than two thousand years after the events portrayed in the opera. Cheng Dieyi is left at an opera school by his mother, a prostitute who can no longer raise him at the brothel. The timid and sensitive boy is befriended by a more robust schoolmate, Duan Xiaolou, who tries to shield him against some of the brutalities of their training. As they mature, Dieyi is groomed for female parts, while Xiaolou prepares for heroic roles. (In Peking Opera, all roles are played by men.) As adults they achieve celebrity for their performance of "Farewell My Concubine."

Xiaolou (Zhang Fengyi), who plays Xiang Yu, vehemently denies the connection between the opera and reality, between his stage role and private personality. Nevertheless, his stature and strength, his chivalrous defense of the weak, and his straightforward courage manifested in his reckless defiance of the Japanese invaders—invite comparison with the heroic figure of Xiang Yu. Moreover, he likes to use an audacious stunt from his theatrical training, breaking bricks with his head, to play the hero and intimidate his enemies in real life. His seemingly heroic qualities attract the prostitute Juxian (Gong Li), whom he marries. They also command the love of Dieyi (Leslie Cheung) and inspire his wish to live out with Xiaolou the story of lifelong fidelity the two perform on stage.

As in the time of Xiang Yu, China in the mid-20th century was undergoing the upheaval and violence that accompany the forging of centralized power from civil dissent. But where Xiang Yu tilted with blind courage against enemy troops, Xiaolou learns to practice a mixture of accommodation and silence, alien to his nature, as he withstands the radical shifts in regime from Japanese to Nationalist, Nationalist to Communist. Finally, pilloried and tortured in the Cultural Revolution, he is driven to denounce both Dieyi and Juxian to the screaming mob. The dimensions of his failure, the magnitude of his betrayal, are written in the dumb grief on Dieyi's and Juxian's faces. At last it is clear to them: he is no Xiang Yu, no fearless hero. Juxian and later Dieyi commit suicide, and Xiaolou, in his battle costume, is left alone on stage in an empty theater. And it is in this, not his bravado, that he finds common ground with Xiang Yu, brought low by fate, his mighty troops gone, alone with the realization of failure.

The film links Xiang Yu and Xiaolou, 3rd century B.C. and 20th century A.D., with a question that has been for China an eternal one: how can man struggle against the inevitability of fate? Lacking the West's

philosophical tradition of individual choice and personal freedom, China has unquestioningly endured the unbroken absolutist rule of its emperors. Its history does not trumpet the triumph of human will. Instead, it sadly counsels resignation. *Farewell My Concubine*, through its use of the figure of Xiang Yu, clothes the fresh bitterness of China's recent struggles in the dimmer tragedy of its ancient history.

This use of historical material also poses questions of vital interest to present-day China as it looks toward the future. Now that the Cultural Revolution no longer forces the Chinese to repudiate their past, they can weigh its value and, most importantly, consider what of their traditional heritage they should carry over into the present.

Farewell My Concubine is clearly ambivalent. Two parallel scenes shed light on the contrast between the "Old" and "New" societies. The childhood Xiaolou and Dieyi are both punished for a minor offense by a brutal beating at the hands of their old-school opera teacher. The episode ends with a schoolmate guilty of the same offense hanging himself in an adjoining room. Toward the end of the film, Xiaolou and Dieyi are again subjected to violent "correction" in the Cultural Revolution. This time Juxian, exposed to the hostility of the mob by the denunciations of Dieyi and Xiaolou, commits suicide by hanging herself.

There are a number of strong resemblances between the scenes: Dieyi's and Xiaolou's meek acceptance of their penalties, the crowds of excited bystanders, the suicide of a third character implicated in the punishment, the final brief shot of a body dangling from a beam. Most strikingly, unbridled tyranny met by unquestioning submission is revealed to be equally part of both the old and new societies. The film even suggests that the slavish mentality cultivated in their subjects by the earlier rulers simply paved the way for the more brutal oppression of the modern age.

But there is also a fundamental difference between the two scenes. In the childhood episode, each of the two boys hastens to shield the other by bearing the punishment himself. In the later episode, each instead vies to heap blame upon the other. This, then, is the film's indictment against the Cultural Revolution: that it shattered the orderly system of social ties-between sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, between brothers and between friends-that were the cornerstone of Confucian society. Dieyi and Xiaolou, who call each other "stage

brother;" turn against each other; Xiaolou repudiates his wife. (Not coincidentally, *Farewell's* director, Chen Kaige, made accusations against his own father during the Cultural Revolution.)

The film never forgets how fundamentally hostile to tradition China's modern order has proven to be. Numerous scenes show old arts, old institutions, and old ways crumbling in what seems a basic conflict between tradition and modernity. The mob of Cultural Revolutionaries hurl racial epithets before the steps of Beijing's Confucian temple. The erudite opera patron Mr. Yuan, who speaks elegantly archaic Classical Chinese, is publicly disgraced and executed. Most centrally, the institution of Peking Opera itself is repeatedly assailed by the changing times. The opera teacher who trained Dieyi and Xiaolou dies of old age and his opera school is disbanded. Dieyi's protégé Xiao Si rejects the rigors of traditional operatic training and runs off to join the New Society. In the final scene, Dieyi and Xiaolou perform for the first time--and the last--after a hiatus of 21 years.

For itself, *Farewell My Concubine* asserts a strong attachment to Chinese tradition, not only through its use of historical allusion but also through the prominent role it gives to Peking Opera. The Opera both meditates on the past and illuminates the modern love triangle, with its tinges of homosexuality and gender reversal. The underlying emotions of the protagonists, in particular of Dieyi, are projected intensely and brilliantly through performances of the ancient scripts. When Dieyi is replaced in the role of Lady Yu by a conniving rival, Xiaolou reluctantly agrees to continue playing Xiang Yu. As Dieyi wretchedly stands in the wings, he hears Xiaolou, singing Xiang Yu's mournful line: "This time I've caused you so much pain." In the last scene of the film, Dieyi sings the final lines of Lady Yu's plaint, "When my king's spirit has been broken, how can I continue to live?", before slitting his own throat for real.

More than any words he could speak himself, the fantastic makeup, stylized gestures, and archaic lines express all that Dieyi feels. In the context of the movie, the Opera seems both relevant and surprisingly moving. With its idiosyncratic singing and hoary plots, the artform has become increasingly inaccessible even to Chinese audiences; the *film* reminds them that its dramatic force is undiminished. *Farewell My Concubine*, in its rich and nuanced use of history and tradition, also reminds them that China's present still has much to learn from its past.